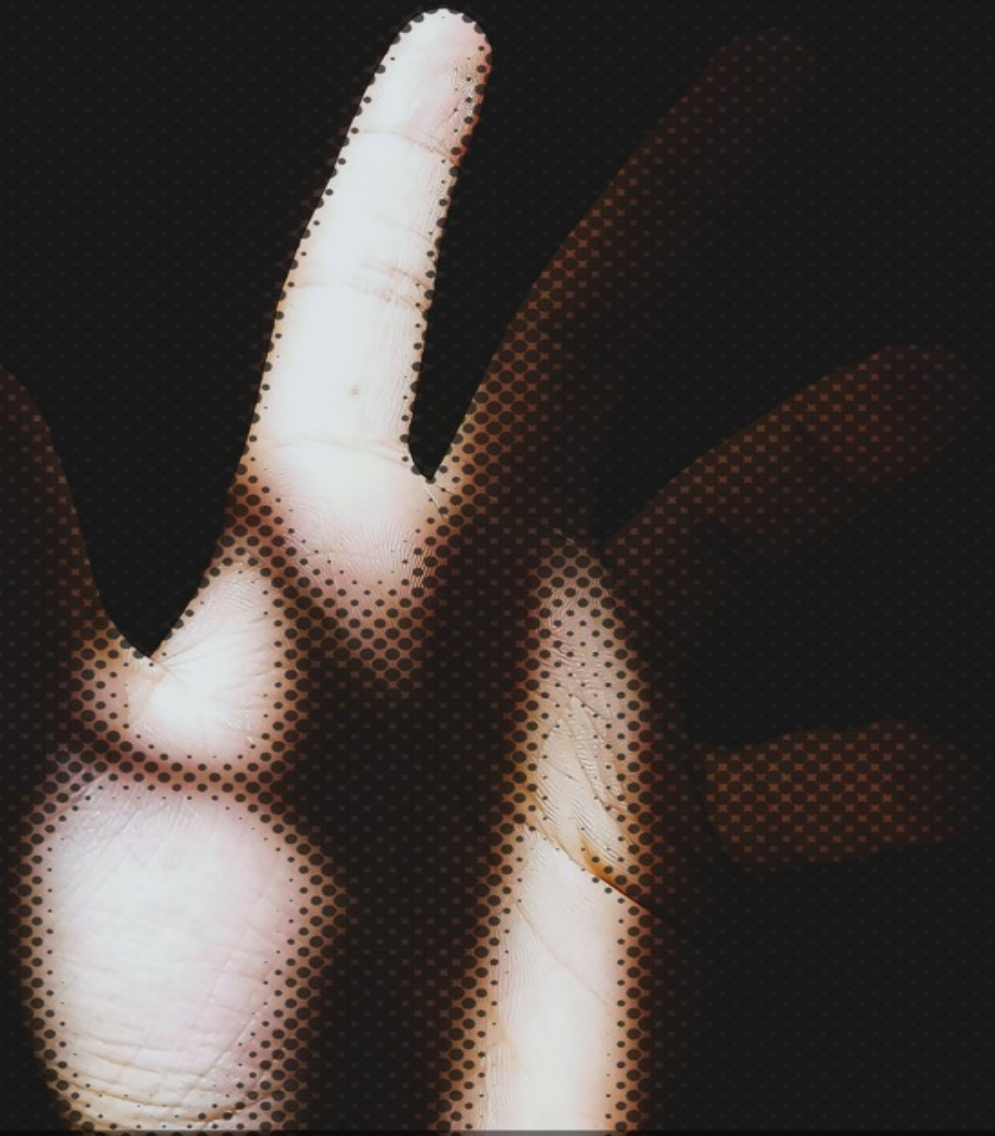


Thorne Smith



*The Night Life
of the Gods*

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The Night Life of the Gods



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CHAPTER I

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Criticizing an Explosion

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THE small family group gathered in the library was only conventionally alarmed by the sound of a violent explosion—a singularly self-centered sort of explosion.

“Well, thank God, that’s over,” said Mrs. Alice Pollard Lambert, swathing her sentence in a sigh intended to convey an impression of hard-pressed fortitude.

With bleak eyes she surveyed the fragments of a shattered vase. Its disastrous dive from the piano as a result of the shock had had in it something of the mad deliberation of a suicide’s plunge. Its hideous days were over now, and Mrs. Lambert was dimly aware of another little familiar something having been withdrawn from her life.

“I hope to high heaven this last one satisfies him for this spring at least,” was the petulant comment of Alfred, the male annex of Alice.

“I’ve been waiting and waiting and waiting,” came a thin disembodied voice from a dark corner. “Night and day I’ve been waiting and expecting——”

“And hoping and praying, no doubt, Grandpa,” interrupted Daphne, idly considering a run in her stocking and wondering what she was going to do about it if anything, and when would be the least boring time to do it if she did, which she doubted.

"Alice," complained Grandpa Lambert from the security of his shadows, "that baggage has no respect for her elders."

Stella, femininely desirable but domestically a washout, made one of her typical off-balance entrances. It started with a sort of scrambled hovering at the door, developed this into a mad dash into the room, and terminated in a tragic example of suspended animation somewhere in the immaculate neighborhood of Mrs. Alice Pollard Lambert.

"Been an explosion, ma'am," announced Stella in a deflated voice. "Mr. Betts says so."

"Now all you need to do is to fall dead at our feet to make the picture complete," remarked Daphne.

"Yes, Miss Daffy," said Stella brightly.

"And if Mr. Betts says there's been an explosion," Daffy continued, "then there must have been an explosion. Betts is never wrong. You go back, Stella dear, and thank him for letting us know so promptly."

"But, Miss Daffy, what shall we do about it?" asked Stella, vainly looking for some light to guide amid the encircling gloom.

"About what, Stella?" asked Daffy.

"This explosion, miss," and Stella extended her hands as if she were offering a young explosion for the inspection of Daphne.

"Stella," that young lady explained with sweet but jaded patience, "one doesn't do things about explosions. Explosions are quite competent to do things for themselves. All sorts of things. The most one can do for an explosion is to leave it entirely alone until it has decided to become a

ruin. Also, you can blink at an explosion respectfully in the news reels and feel good about its ghastly results. You'll probably gasp at this one on your night off next Thursday." She paused, then added, "With that stout fellow Tim breathing heavily in your left ear."

This last realistic observation was enough to effect the untidy departure of Stella.

"Oh, Miss Daffy," was all that maiden said.

"I do wish she would refrain from calling you by that vulgar sobriquet," said Mrs. Lambert.

"Why, Mother?" the daughter asked. "I am. Very. That's why I like myself, and that's why I like him. He's daffy, too."

She pointed in the general direction of the explosion.

"In that you're right, for a change," agreed her father. "He belongs in some institution. What does he mean by getting us here in this house and then having explosions all over the place? I call it downright inconsiderate."

If Mr. Alfred Pollard Lambert had forgotten the small detail that after having lost his wife's fortune in various business misadventures he had sought sanctuary for himself and dependents in his brother-in-law's previously tranquil home, Daffy had not been so remiss. However, out of an innate sense of sportsmanship she rejected the opening her bumptious parent had offered her, merely contenting herself by observing:

"Well, if I had a home of my own I'd explode all over it as much as I jolly well liked. I'd explode from attic to cellar just as long as I felt the least bit explosive."

"I know, my dear," said her mother. "No one is saying your uncle hasn't a perfect right to explode whenever and

wherever he pleases, but you must admit there's a certain limitation, certain restrictions of decency. One explosion, even two, we could understand and condone, but a series, a constant fusillade—it isn't normal. Good taste alone would suggest a little less boisterous avocation and a little less dangerous one."

"But, Mother," protested the girl, "he has never invited any of us to participate in one of his explosions. He's been very decent about it and kept them entirely to himself."

"Most of these scientific johnnies are content with a couple of explosions," said Alfred, "but your uncle is never satisfied. He seems to think that life is just one long Fourth of July."

"The day will come," intoned the devitalized voice from the corner. "Mark the words of an old man. The day will come when we'll find ourselves completely blown to bits."

This dire prediction struck Daphne as funny. She allowed herself several contemplative giggles.

"I can see it all," she said. "A lot of bits rushing busily about in a mad scramble to find one another. Hands collecting feet, legs, livers, and such, and putting them aside in a neat pile until all the bits have been assembled. Well, I hope I don't find some of this," she continued, spanking herself resoundingly. "I'm getting altogether too self-assertive in that quarter."

"Daphne!" Mrs. Lambert exclaimed. "You're positively obscene."

For a moment the young lady stood in rapt contemplation of some inner glory.

"I have it," she said at last. "Listen:

“Said a certain king to his queen:
‘In spots you grow far from lean.’
‘I don’t give a damn,
You’ve always loved ham,’
She replied, and he said, ‘How obscene!’ ”

From the dark corner inhabited by Grandpa Lambert issued a strange and unexpected sound, a sound which partook of the nature of both a cough and a cackle, such a sound as might clatter from the lipless mouth of a skull well pleased by some macabre memory.

“Why, Father!” exclaimed Alfred Lambert. “You’re laughing, actually laughing.”

“And at such a thing,” added Mrs. Lambert with deep disapproval.

“Can’t help it,” wheezed the old gentleman. “Always had a weakness for limericks. Got a few of my own if I could only remember them.”

He promptly fell to brooding not uncheerfully over those lost limericks of other years.

“You old darling,” said Daffy, going over to the thin, crouched figure. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

“Disgraceful,” sniffed Alice Pollard Lambert. “Demoralizing.”

Alfred made no further comment. He had a well defined suspicion that the old chap was holding out on him something far more desirable than limericks. If he could only lay his hands on his father’s bank book. For some years now an inspection of that little book had been one of Alfred Lambert’s chief aims in life. Just one little peek was all he asked. After that he could order his conduct according to the

size of the figures in the book. As things stood now he was being in all likelihood dutifully and enduringly filial without any assurance of adequate compensation. Yet there was always that chance, that slim but not impossible chance. Hellishly tantalizing for an acquisitive nature. Alfred's was such a nature.

"There's one about the Persians," the old man was saying to his granddaughter. "Oh, a delightful thing, my dear child, an exquisite bit of vulgarity. Of course, I couldn't repeat it to you. Maybe after you're married. I'll tell your husband, and he'll tell you—if he's the right sort of a husband."

"I'm sure Alfred never sullies my ears with such indecencies," said Mrs. Lambert with a rising inflection in her overcultured voice.

"He doesn't get out enough," grated the old man. "Do you both good."

"Your suggestion, Grandpa, is the greatest inducement to matrimony I've ever had," said Daphne, patting the old man's shoulder. "I'll look for a victim immediately."

"A full-legged girl like yourself shouldn't have far to look," the old man said with an unedifying chuckle. "In my day young men had to depend almost entirely on the sense of touch in such matters. Nowadays the sense of sight seems to play a more important part. It simplifies things, perhaps, but robs courtship of a lot of adventure."

"Disgusting!" pronounced Mrs. Lambert, then added with a view to changing the subject, "Don't you think, Alfred, that Stella was right? Shouldn't we do something about this explosion?"

"Perhaps," agreed Alfred. "He usually comes out after he's had one."

"Rather rapidly," remarked Daffy. "The last time he came out through the side of the house with a couple of bricks in his pants."

"But he hates to be disturbed," went on Mrs. Lambert. "You know how he is."

"I know how he was," replied Daffy. "How he is now, God only knows."

"Perhaps it got him this time," suggested Grandpa Lambert, not without a touch of complacency.

"Think we should go, Alfred?" asked his wife.

"Well, if that explosion failed to disturb him," Mr. Lambert observed, "I don't see how the intervention of mere mortals could make much of an impression. But why ask me? You're his sister. You should know best what to do about his explosive highness."

At this stage in the deliberations Alfred, Junior, age seventeen, lolled into the room. He tossed his hat at a chair with which it failed to connect. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and looked ugly. He confronted his mother and began to speak in one of those voices which had it been a face one could have instinctively slapped.

"How long am I going to be made a laughing stock out of?" he demanded. "How long, I ask you?"

"If you asked me," put in his sister, "I'd say as long as a suffering world allows you to live."

"What is it now, darling?" Mrs. Lambert asked with cloying solicitude.

The youth laughed unpleasantly.

"You ask me that?" he exclaimed. "Does another explosion mean nothing to you? Am I to have my friends saying, 'That loony uncle of yours has blown up his house again'? Am I to be made the butt of all the humor and wisecracks of the community? Do you know what all my friends are saying? Would you like to know?"

"No," said Daffy. "Emphatically not."

"Shut up, you," snapped her brother. "They're saying that they wouldn't be caught dead in this house. That's what they're saying."

"If they're caught in this house they will be dead," remarked Daffy with great decision. "I'll jolly well blow the whole kit and boodle of 'em to smithereens."

"Children, children," Mrs. Lambert protested.

"We've got to put a stop to it, Mother," announced Junior. "We've got to have a talk with him. I can't afford to be saddled with the stigma of a mad uncle."

"Yes, darling," his mother agreed. "I know how you must feel."

"Why don't you go yourself, dearie, and have a talk with him now?" asked his sister. "Lace it into him good and proper. Give him what for. Also, a microscopic portion of your infinitesimal mind."

"Think you're funny, don't you?" retorted the hope of the Lamberts.

"I do," replied Daffy. "I am."

"What I want to know is why does he have all these explosions?" Alfred Lambert inquired in an injured voice. "Are they essential to his happiness? What is he trying to prove, anyway?"

“Cellular petrification through atomic combustion,” quoted Daphne weightily, “and vice versa. It’s highly electrical and can be, when it feels like it, no end smelly.”

“And noisy,” came from the corner.

“I’ll tell you what let’s do,” suggested Mr. Lambert with the verve of one who has just conceived a bright and original idea. “Let’s all go see him.”

“Why not?” replied Daffy with a slight shrug.

“All but me,” amended Grandpa Lambert. “I’ll sit here and think up limericks. It’s safer.”

“And naughtier,” said Daffy as she led the way from the room. “Horrid old man.”

“Wanton,” he retorted.

CHAPTER II

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Blotto's Tail Astounds

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FROM the method of progress employed by the Lambert family, one would have gained the impression that the correct way to approach an explosion was on tiptoe. There was something reverential yet subduedly daring about the small procession as it silently moved down the long hallway leading to the laboratory. It was as if its members were preparing themselves to gaze upon the face of an important but erratic corpse.

Daphne alone of the expedition's personnel was sincerely concerned about the safety of her uncle. She had no desire to find him scattered all over the place. Daphne was fond of her uncle. He constituted the larger part of her world—the more inhabitable part. Without him she would be thrust back into the narrow confines of her immediate family. Under such circumstances, she felt, life would hardly be worth the effort. Hunter Hawk was for her an escape and a revelation. He appealed to her imagination and added a small dash of color to her rather empty days. She entertained for him the healthily selfish devotion of her twenty-one years, the majority of which, she decided, had been shamefully wasted—the years before she had been brought to live in Hunter Hawk's home. Yet she was well aware of the fact that he was not much of an uncle. He was

neither whimsical, dashing, nor debauched, one of which, at least, she had gained from her voracious reading, an uncle had to be, or else he was hardly any sort of an uncle at all. It was only on rare occasions that this uncle of hers realized she was alive. For the most part he went silently about his wondering way and did strange and mysterious things with impossible-looking instruments in the privacy of his laboratory. Occasionally he indulged in an explosion. Daphne had come to believe that what a periodical binge meant to some men these explosions meant to her uncle. They served to relieve his feelings, and she was surprised at his moderation in confining them to only one section of the house. Quite frequently Daphne Lambert felt like blowing up the entire neighborhood, especially that part of it which at the time chanced to be inhabited by her mother, father, and brother.

Sometimes she would catch her uncle looking at her with an expression of mild astonishment in his dark, biting, and invariably delving eyes. Whenever this occurred, the girl for some inexplicable reason experienced a sensation of inner elation. There was always something maliciously challenging in his gaze, some derogatory reservation. She more than a little suspected that since the ruthless incursion of her family he had dimly felt that his home had been more or less taken away from him and that this side of bloodshed he was unable to figure out just what to do about it. Also she suspected that Hunter Hawks almost constantly carried about with him great quantities of violent yet unexpressed exasperation engendered by his sister, her husband, and

their son. The three of them were enough to do terrible things to the most loosely constructed system of nerves.

Between her grandfather and her uncle there seemed to exist a sort of acrimonious bond of sympathy. True enough, the old man would have gladly seen him dead and welcomed the occasion as a pleasant interlude in the monotonous march of time. However, this meant nothing. The old man would have welcomed virtually anyone's death with the exception of his own. His son, his daughter-in-law, and the horrid results of their combined efforts to create an heir in the semblance of man he heartily detested. He had been forced to listen to their conversation for too many years. For Daphne he entertained the envious regard of the unregenerate and senile male.

This young lady now paused with her hand on the knob of the laboratory door.

"Perhaps we should have brought a basket," she suggested as she grimly surveyed the expectant faces.

"How can you!" exclaimed her mother in a tremulous voice.

The girl threw open the door, and the four of them stood gazing in upon the wreck of the laboratory. It was a long, high raftered apartment filled with more than enough instruments and paraphernalia to satiate the lust for descriptive detail of an avalanche of Sinclair Lewises.

There were several long tables supporting innumerable objects only remotely connected with life. Much of the equipment Hunter Hawk had been forced to devise himself. There were test tubes, Bunsen burners, pressure tanks, dynamos, mixing slabs, and all sorts of electrical appliances.

In fact, almost everything seemed to be in that laboratory except a vacuum cleaner and Hunter Hawk himself. Most of the objects now lay smashed and twisted on the floor. It was like the disintegration of a bad dream. All of the windows were shattered, and innumerable jars and bottles carpeted the floor with their fragments. Heavy, evil-smelling clouds of gaseous vapor drifted casually about the room, while through these clouds from time to time appeared various bits of wreckage.

At the far end of the room a small but intense white light streaming from a huge wire-filled glass tube was splashing its rays against a silver ball about the size of an adult pea. From the other end of this tube a green light of equal intensity was treating another little silver ball in a like manner. These balls were poised about one foot from the floor at the ends of two thin rods. How they retained their positions during the violence of the explosion remains one of the many mysteries that Hunter Hawk never saw any occasion to elucidate.

"It must have blown the poor chap clean through one of the windows," remarked Mr. Lambert at last, in an awed but hopeful voice. "No man could have lived through such a shock as that must have been."

"Poor, poor Hunter," murmured the exploded one's sister. "We did everything we could to discourage him, but he would persist. I knew this would happen some day."

She hesitated and looked appraisingly about the long room. An acquisitive light was growing in her eyes.

"This place could easily be made into a perfectly charming lounge and breakfast room," she unconsciously

mused aloud. "Long yellow drapes and the right sort of furniture. We might even try this modern stuff for a change."

"Make a bang-up billiard room," commented Alfred Lambert with a trace of wistfulness in his voice. "I could entertain my friends here."

"Say, Mom," demanded Junior, his tongue growing thick with anticipation, "does it all come to us—the house and the money and everything?"

"Everything," replied Mrs. Lambert with crisp finality. "All. I am his next of kin."

"You're his only of kin, aren't you?" her husband demanded in sudden alarm.

"I am," said Mrs. Lambert complacently. "The poor boy's only sister. Of course, there's Daphne and Junior."

"Then that settles that," said Mr. Lambert with obvious relief. "No legal complications. Lucky for us he never married, eh, my boy?"

Mr. Lambert slapped his son jovially on the back.

"Lucky for some poor girl," was Junior's bright reply.

A sound like a strangled sob, only more frustrated and inarticulate, drifted weirdly through the room.

"Did anyone hear that?" Alice Lambert demanded with a startled light in her eyes.

Apparently no one had.

"Must have been the wind," replied her husband impatiently. "Now what about the size of his estate, roughly speaking?"

Daphne had been peering through the various broken windows in the hope of finding her uncle or some part of her

uncle.

"Of course," she remarked, sensing the drift of the conversation as she approached the self-congratulatory little group, "it will be necessary for you to produce the body before you can claim the estate. Anyone who knows his R. Austin Freeman even sketchily must realize that *corpus delicti* is one of the first essentials."

"My God!" Alfred exclaimed. "Daphne's right. We've forgotten all about the body."

"And perhaps there still flickers within it a small glimmer of life," said Daffy. "What then?"

At this uncongenial suggestion Alfred's cheerful face darkened perceptibly.

"He couldn't possibly have lived through this," he replied, as if striving to reassure himself. "It wouldn't be normal."

"He never was normal," Mrs. Lambert observed gloomily.

A furious chattering sound suddenly broke out somewhere above in the smoke-draped rafters. It was almost animal in its inability to express the full burden of its emotions.

Daphne's heart skidded round several sharp corners and came up with a thump against her ribs. A triumphant smile lighted up her face as she gazed aloft. Her mother, father, and brother stood looking at one another in guilty desolation. Each was trying to recall exactly what had been said and exactly who had said it. A heavy reluctance now weighted their tongues which only a moment ago had wagged so glibly. With an effort they brought themselves to follow the direction of Daffy's delighted gaze. A gas cloud drifted away revealing the long, lean, angular body of

Hunter Hawk precariously draped on a rafter. It was like the unveiling of a statue of impotent rage. The man's mouth was opening and shutting without any apparent reason. Every time he endeavored to bring gesticulation to the aid of speech he lost his balance and nearly fell from his perch. The frantic clutching necessary to restore his equilibrium served only to increase the violence of his anger. Exhausted at last by the uselessness of his efforts he fell face forward on the rafter and lay there panting.

His straight black hair fell in a dank shingle over his left eye. He made no effort to remove the obstruction but gazed balefully down at them with his free one. It was big, black, and smoldering. An expression of utter weariness lay across his tanned, deeply lined face. Sweat beaded his forehead. His hollow cheeks were unbecomingly dappled with dark smudges. There was a large rent in the right sleeve of his jacket. It hung down over his hand and interfered with his grip on the rafter. This had added to his irritation. He had now abandoned all effort to keep the sleeve up and was grasping the rafter through it. His large, ungainly nose showed evidence of having recently bled. In his present state of disrepair he looked many years over the thirty-seven that rightfully belonged to him.

"Oh, Hunter," his sister began with a desperate rush. "You've made us all so anxious. We were just——"

"Yellow drapes," he gritted.

"Yes, my boy," Alfred cut in throatily. "Thank God you're alive and safe. I was beginning to fear——"

"Billiards! Billiards!" Hawk spluttered. "Ha!"

He fixed Junior with his one clear eye and proceeded to bore into the very marrow of that uneasy youth.

"Go on!" he said in a dead voice. "Go on, you little nit. Make your speech. It's your turn. Tell me some more about that lucky girl I didn't marry."

Junior dropped his gaze and became absorbed in contemplating the extreme tips of his collegiate sport shoes.

"Don't know what you're driving at," he mumbled.

"I'll drive at you if I ever get down from this rafter," said his uncle.

Daffy grinned her appreciation. Her uncle darted a one-eyed glance at her, then disconcertingly closed that eye. It immediately snapped open again and came to rest on his sister.

"Now don't start in on Junior," she began defensively. "You've upset us enough as it is for one day—you and your silly explosions. The whole neighborhood is talking about it. Isn't it about time you gave up this sort of thing?"

"Yes, Hunter," spoke up Alfred, emboldened by his wife's words. "You're subjecting us all to danger, you know. My boy here says his friends are laughing at him now—the nephew of a mad uncle."

"Oh-o-o-o-o," mouthed Mr. Hawk, unable to form words, "Oh-o-o-o—down—down—I wanna—at him."

His poorly expressed wish was almost granted. Mrs. Lambert uttered a little cry as he swayed perilously on his rafter. Junior placed a hand on his father's arm and tried to strike an attitude of outraged youth. The room became quiet save for the gasping of its presiding deity on the rafter. He

rallied gamely, however, and made an effort to pull himself together.

"Oh, shut up," he said at last, somewhat inanely inasmuch as no one was saying a thing at the moment. "Shut up and go away somewhere. Go soak your heads. Get the hell out of here, or I'll blow the whole damn house up. Daffy, you stay with me."

"Well, I must say this is hardly the treatment one would expect after all our trouble and anxiety," Mrs. Lambert announced huffily.

"Yellow drapes," shouted her brother. "Modern furniture. Bah! Nothing goes to you. Not a plugged nickel."

His sister hastily swallowed a projected retort and, closely accompanied by her son and husband, sailed majestically from the room. They were altogether too wise in the ways of life to attempt to enroll the sympathies of Daphne or to coerce her to join the ranks of the insulted and injured. After all, Hunter Hawk was tremendously wealthy in his own name, and he did seem to be rather fond of his niece, the least lovable member of the family. It was just like him. Now, if only it had been Junior ...

"Hello, aloft," called Daffy as soon as the door was closed, "do you want me to get you a ladder? I know where one lives. A long one. Betts could help."

"A ladder," repeated Mr. Hawk, blinking down at her. "I don't like ladders. I don't trust ladders. And if Betts gets a look at this room he'll make remarks. I can stand no more remarks. No. No ladder. Don't need one."

"Would you care to have some dinner flung up at you and a couple of sheets for to-night?"

"I'm coming down directly."

"How, down?"

"Listen," said the scientist ingratiatingly. "It's all very simple. There's no occasion for any excitement or rushing about. I hate excitement and rushing about."

"I suppose being blown about is an entirely different matter?"

"It is. I don't choose to be blown about, you know. In spite of what the rest of your family says, I really have no fondness for explosions. They are merely the less agreeable results of scientific research."

"Don't be an old hypocrite. You know perfectly well you couldn't get along without your explosions."

"I'm afraid I won't be able to get along very much longer with them. But, listen. I've figured it all out. It's simplicity itself. All you have to do is to come over here and stand directly beneath this rafter. Then I'll drop my feet down to your shoulders ..."

"And then?" inquired Daffy.

"And then?" here a rather vague, covering note crept into his voice. "And then we'll manage to get down the rest of the way without the aid of the ladder."

"What do you mean by 'we'? You're the one on a rafter, not I."

"I realize that," said her uncle amicably. "And I'm depending on you to do something constructive about it. Come on over here, Daffy. You're a great, strong, strapping young girl. You can get me down somehow. Come on over."

Daffy, with the resignation of one accustomed to temporize with inebriates, children, and maniacs, placed

herself beneath the rafter occupied by her uncle.

"I hope to God your divine confidence isn't misplaced," she remarked.

"Everything will be all right," Mr. Hawk assured her as, with the reckless abandon of a man who has little left to live for, he heavily dropped his large feet upon Daphne's shrinking shoulders and released his hold on the rafter. The celerity with which this maneuver was performed took the girl entirely by surprise.

"What goes on? What goes on?" she managed to get out as she strove to keep her knees from buckling beneath her.

"Stop prancing about like that," the man of science complained. "This is no time for larking."

"Larking," came painfully from between the girl's clenched teeth. "Lolling about, why don't you say?"

After this there was no more conversation for some moments, packed with intense anxiety for the fluctuating Mr. Hawk. The silence of the room was broken only by the sound of unsteadily shuffling feet, a flight of staccato grunts, and several long, tremulous sighs.

"Well," gasped Daffy bitterly. "What are you going to do, live there?"

"Damn it all, what can I do? You've got a strangle hold on both my ankles." Hawk's voice was equally bitter. "Can't you crouch down gradually?"

"Oh, God, what a man," groaned his niece and collapsed unconditionally to the wreck-strewn floor of the laboratory beneath yard after yard of unupholstered uncle.

"Didn't hurt me at all," he announced triumphantly as he uncoiled great lengths of himself from the small of Daffy's

back. "How did you make out?"

"Not at all well," replied Daffy. "Rather poorly, if you must know. But I'm glad it didn't hurt you. Would you like to try it again?"

"It saved all the bother of getting the ladder, anyway."

"You certainly must loathe ladders to subject another human being to such brutal punishment," replied the girl.

"Did you ever get into any trouble with a ladder?"

With another unladylike grunt she rolled over and struggled to a sitting position beside her uncle.

"Well," she observed, surveying him critically, "you must be a tough son of a gun to have come through that alive."

"Do I look all mussed?" asked Mr. Hawk.

"You're not quite at your best," she replied.

"I'd like to see you after an explosion," said Hawk.

"You see enough of me as it is," answered Daffy. "After a thing like that you'd see too much."

Hunter Hawk gazed about the laboratory with professional interest.

"This is about the best yet," he remarked philosophically.

"It is, Hunter. It is. You should feel greatly encouraged. This is about the biggest thing you've done so far in the way of explosions."

"Thanks, Daffy. Wonder what became of Blotto? The poor beast was here when the thing happened."

"If it blew you up to the rafters, Blotto must be well on his way to Mars."

"Hate to have anything happen to Blotto," said Hunter. "Here, boy, where are you? Blotto, you dumb clown!"

From a corner of the room came the sound of diligent scraping. Presently the head of an animal not totally unlike a dog, yet far from being the living image of one, cautiously appeared above the rim of a table. With deep suspicion two black beady eyes studied the pair on the floor. A moist nose quivered delicately as it sniffed the malodorous air. One tan ear pointed starchily aloft. The other, a soiled white, was not doing nearly so well. The farthest north it was able to achieve was a rakishly tilted flop. As the dog shifted his gaze and looked about the laboratory something like an expression of dismay came into its eyes.

“He doesn’t like it at all,” commented Hunter. “Come here, Blotto, for a minute.”

Blotto placed two putty-like paws on the edge of the table, let go of them, and allowed their weight to drag his rump into view. It was a most disreputable-looking rump, shaggy, unenterprising, and hurriedly patched here and there with odd scraps of black and tan. There was a large tail on the extreme end of it, a willowy object composed chiefly of hair and burrs. Originally it had been white.

When Blotto had finally surmounted the obstruction he undulated across the room and stood looking inquiringly into his master’s face. Hunter took the dog in his arms and felt him carefully, while Blotto, with his tongue sprawling out, gazed from his inverted position at Daffy, the whites of his eyes unpleasantly displayed. Releasing the low-gearred, supine creature, Hawk arose and stretched his long legs.

“No bones broken,” he announced.

“All bones broken,” said Daffy, “and flesh bruised.”

She followed his example.

Blotto, as if trying to satisfy himself as to exactly what had happened, ranged busily about the room. His tour of inspection completed, he stood at the far end of the laboratory and wagged his tail in appreciation of the fact that he was still alive. Suddenly and most disconcertingly for everybody concerned, but much more so for Blotto, of course, the mop-like appendage refused to wag. For one brief moment it had dipped its extreme tip into the rays of the white light on its blinding passage to the little silver ball.

“Look!” exclaimed Daffy, pointing at the dog. “Something has happened to Blotto.”

Something had happened to Blotto. To be exact, something had happened to Blotto’s tail, but just what it was the astounded dog was unable to figure out. Concentrating what little power he had on this recalcitrant member, he strove desperately to make it perform its proper functions. Not a wag. Not even a quiver. An expression of sharp anxiety sprang into Blotto’s eyes. He cocked his head over his shoulder and thoughtfully scrutinized his tail. Yes. He could tell at a glance that there was something radically wrong with it. It neither looked the same nor felt the same. Instead of the white, fluffy brush in which he was wont to take so much pride, the tail was now a formidable, implacable looking club. Not one hair that contributed its quota of glory to the *tout ensemble* even so much as stirred. It might as well have been a thing of stone, bereft of life and purpose. And the affair was heavy, decidedly heavier than could be conveniently managed. Obviously it was no sort of tail to go carrying about with one. Apart from the ill conceived merriment it would evoke,

there was the question of fatigue. Would he be forced to remain in one place because of an abnormal tail? Were his amorous excursions at an end? Competition, God knows, was close enough, but with such a tail—impossible!

Unwilling to entertain this tragic thought, the overwrought Blotto made a final effort. This time he completely reversed the familiar order of the operation. Instead of wagging his tail he violently wagged himself. Behind him the tail swung ponderously, so ponderously in fact, that Blotto was thrown off his balance and was forced to do some pretty clever footwork to keep from falling over. This was just a little too much for the dog. He sat down heavily and washed his hands of the tail. But Blotto was to discover that no dog can completely wash its hands of its tail. His, for example, clattered noisily on the floor behind him. The dog looked seriously disturbed. He stealthily curved his head back over his shoulder and approached his shrinking nose to the tail. Then with a great effort he touched it with the extreme tip of his tongue. To his horror he discovered that it was as cold and unresponsive as a stone. He suspected it was a stone.

It speaks well for the dog's strength of character that in spite of his obvious disinclination to have anything further to do with that tail he pursued his investigations to the end. With a tentative paw he reached back and gently pushed the unnatural manifestation. The noise it made as it scraped across the floor caused him hurriedly to avert his eyes. Blotto was sweating. His gaze sought his master. If he wanted a dog with a stone tail it was up to him to do

something about it—put it on wheels or something. Blotto could do no more.

“By all the gods,” said Hawk in a hushed voice, “I believe I’ve done it at last, Daffy.”

“What have you done now?”

“Turned that dog’s tail into a statue, or at least, a part of a statue.”

“I never knew that turning the tails of dogs into statues was one of your aims in life.”

“You don’t quite understand. I have succeeded in achieving complete cellular petrification through atomic disintegration.”

“You mean Blotto has.”

“Observe,” continued Hawk, seizing the outraged dog and holding him upside down. “Isn’t it a beauty? Regard that tail. As if carved by a sculptor’s hand. The white ray turns it to stone. The green one changes it back to its normal state. I can now make both rays invisible and retain the same action.”

“I think Blotto would appreciate a slight dash of green,” said Daffy. “I know I would, under the circumstances.”

“I’ll fix him up in a minute,” said Hawk enthusiastically.

He turned and dipped the dog’s tail into the green ray. Instantly, and to Blotto’s intense relief, the tail returned to its former unlovely state. Hawk then set the dog on its legs. For a moment Blotto regarded his restored member reproachfully. What had the damn thing been doing with itself anyway—trying to make its owner look foolish? Then Blotto did a very silly thing. He viciously bit his tail. The sudden yelp of pain and indignation arising from this

shortsighted attempt at retaliation eloquently testified to the complete success of the restoration. Then, with a sudden revulsion of spirit for which he was noted, Blotto bounded to his feet and performed hitherto unachieved altitudes in the line of wagging. It would be just as well, he decided, to register his satisfaction with his tail as it was, or else the same misfortune might overtake it again.

Thus did Blotto, a dog of low and irregular birth, contribute to one of the most spectacular discoveries of modern science.

"I hate to seem to fly so unceremoniously into your ointment," remarked Daffy, "but now that you've got it what are you going to do with it?"

For a moment Hunter Hawk's face went perfectly blank.

"What am I going to do with it?" he repeated slowly. "Why, I hadn't thought about that."

"Well, you'd better begin to think about it."

"Right off, for one thing," he said, his face clearing and a malicious light gleaming in his dark eyes, "we can have a bit of fun with it."

"Nice man," remarked Daffy, for the first time permitting herself to smile. "Lovely character. And just for a bit of fun you've been cheerfully blowing yourself to pieces for God knows how many years."

Mr. Hawk looked at her broodingly.

"You know what happened to Blotto's tail?" he asked her.

"I'll never quite forget," replied Daffy. "Neither will Blotto."

"Well," continued Hawk, looking warningly at what he was thinking about, "if you don't want to chip when you sit