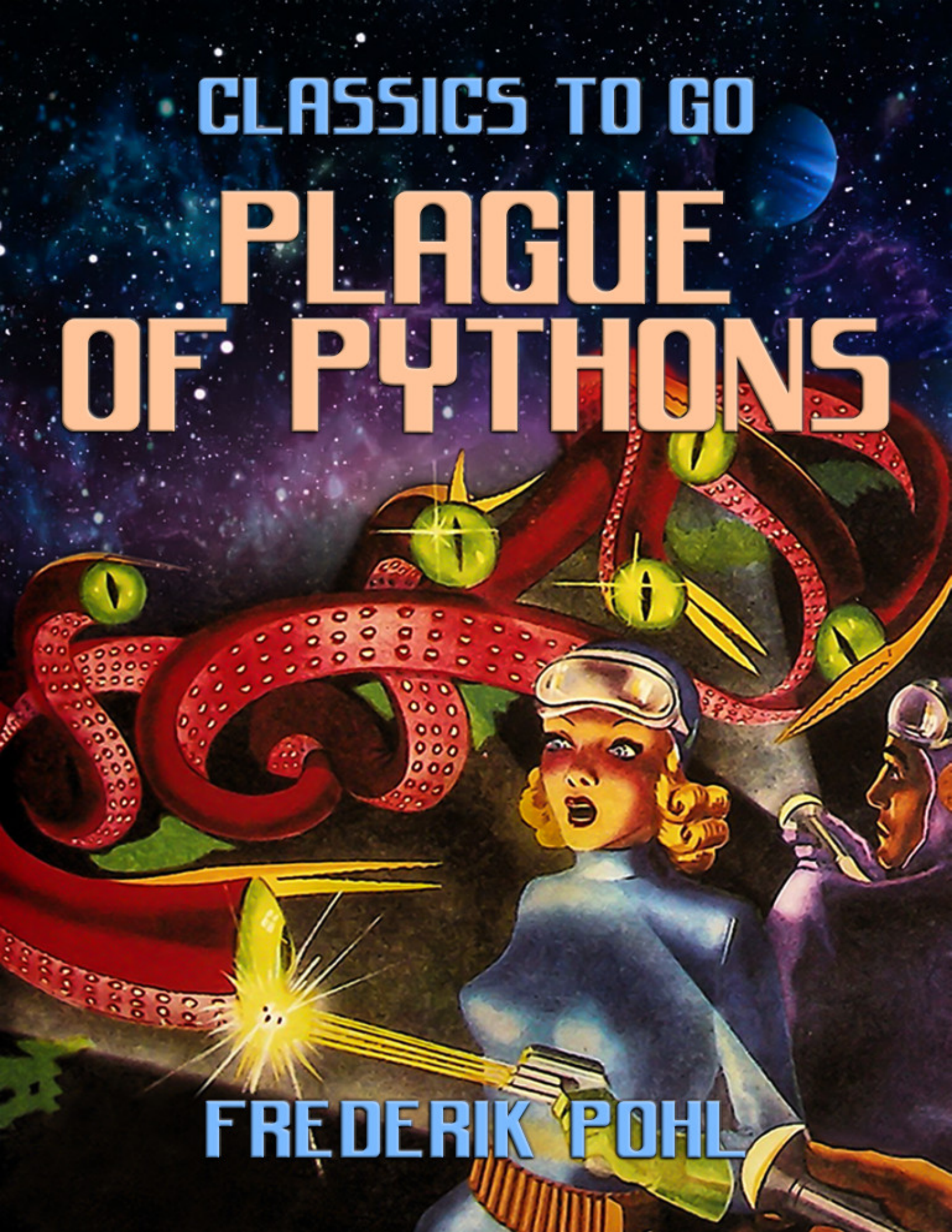
CLASSICS TO GO

PLAGUE OF PYTHONS



FREDERIK POHL

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I

The pythons had entered into Mankind. No man knew at what moment he might be Possessed!

Because of the crowd they held Chandler's trial in the all-purpose room of the high school. It smelled of leather and stale sweat. He walked up the three steps to the stage, with the bailiff's hand on his elbow, and took his place at the defendant's table.

Chandler's lawyer looked at him without emotion. He was appointed by the court. He was willing to do his job, but his job didn't require him to like his client. All he said was, "Stand up. The judge is coming in."

Chandler got to his feet and leaned on the table while the bailiff chanted his call and the chaplain read some verses from John. He did not listen. The Bible verse came too late to help him, and besides he ached.

When the police arrested him they had not been gentle. There were four of them. They were from the plant's own security force and carried no guns. They didn't need any; Chandler had put up no resistance after the first few moments—that is, he stopped as soon as he could stop—but the police hadn't stopped. He remembered that very clearly. He remembered the nightstick across the side of his head that left his ear squashed and puffy, he remembered the kick in the gut that still made walking painful. He even remembered the series of blows about the skull that had knocked him out.

The bruises along his rib cage and left arm, though, he did not remember getting. Obviously the police had been mad enough to keep right on subduing him after he was already unconscious.

Chandler did not blame them—exactly. He supposed he would have done the same thing.

The judge was having a long mumble with the court stenographer apparently about something which had happened in the Union House the night before. Chandler knew Judge Ellithorp slightly. He did not expect to get a fair trial. The previous December the judge himself, while possessed, had smashed the transmitter of the town's radio station, which he owned, and set fire to the building it occupied. His son-in-law had been killed in the fire.

Laughing, the judge waved the reporter back to his seat and glanced around the courtroom. His gaze touched Chandler lightly, like the flick of the hanging strands of cord that precede a railroad tunnel. The touch carried the same warning. What lay ahead for Chandler was destruction.

"Read the charge," ordered Judge Ellithorp. He spoke very loudly. There were more than six hundred persons in the auditorium; the judge didn't want any of them to miss a word.

The bailiff ordered Chandler to stand and informed him that he was accused of having, on the seventeenth day of June last, committed on the person of Margaret Flershem, a minor, an act of rape—"Louder!" ordered the judge testily.

"Yes, Your Honor," said the bailiff, and inflated his chest. "An Act of Rape under Threat of Bodily Violence," he cried; "and Did Further Commit on the Person of Said Margaret Flershem an Act of Aggravated Assault—"

Chandler rubbed his aching side, looking at the ceiling. He remembered the look in Peggy Flershem's eyes as he forced himself on her. She was only sixteen years old, and at that time he hadn't even known her name.

The bailiff boomed on: "—and Did Further Commit on that Same Seventeenth Day of June Last on the Person of

Ingovar Porter an Act of Assault with Intent to Rape, the Foregoing Being a True Bill Handed Down by the Grand Jury of Sepulpas County in Extraordinary Session Assembled, the Eighteenth Day of June Last."

Judge Ellithorp looked satisfied as the bailiff sat down, quite winded. While the judge hunted through the papers on his desk the crowd in the auditorium stirred and murmured.

A child began to cry.

The judge stood up and pounded his gavel. "What is it? What's the matter with him? You, Dundon!" The court attendant the judge was looking at hurried over and spoke to the child's mother, then reported to the judge.

"I dunno, Your Honor. All he says is something scared him."

The judge was enraged. "Well, that's just fine! Now we have to take up the time of all these good people, probably for no reason, and hold up the business of this court, just because of a child. Bailiff! I want you to clear this courtroom of all children under—" he hesitated, calculating voting blocks in his head—"all children under the age of six. Dr. Palmer, are you there? Well, you better go ahead with the—prayer." The judge could not make himself say "the exorcism."

"I'm sorry, madam," he added to the mother of the crying two-year-old. "If you have someone to leave the child with, I'll instruct the attendants to save your place for you." She was also a voter.

Dr. Palmer rose, very grave, as he was embarrassed. He glared around the all-purpose room, defying anyone to smile, as he chanted: "Domina Pythonis, I command you, leave! Leave, Hel! Leave, Heloym! Leave, Sother and Thetragrammaton, leave, all unclean ones! I command you! In the name of God, in all of His manifestations!" He sat down again, still very grave. He knew that he did not make nearly as fine a showing as Father Lon, with his resonant *in*

nomina Jesu Christi et Sancti Ubaldi and his censer, but the post of exorcist was filled in strict rotation, one month to a denomination, ever since the troubles started. Dr. Palmer was a Unitarian. Exorcisms had not been in the curriculum at the seminary and he had been forced to invent his own.

Chandler's lawyer tapped him on the shoulder. "Last chance to change your mind," he said.

"No. I'm not guilty, and that's the way I want to plead."

The lawyer shrugged and stood up, waiting for the judge to notice him.

Chandler, for the first time, allowed himself to meet the eyes of the crowd.

He studied the jury first. He knew some of them casually—it was not a big enough town to command a jury of total strangers for any defendant, and Chandler had lived there most of his life. He recognized Pop Matheson, old and very stiff, who ran the railroad station cigar stand. Two of the other men were familiar as faces passed in the street. The forewoman, though, was a stranger. She sat there very composed and frowning, and all he knew about her was that she wore funny hats. Yesterday's had been red roses when she was selected from the panel; today's was, of all things, a stuffed bird.

He did not think that any of them were possessed. He was not so sure of the audience.

He saw girls he had dated in high school, long before he met Margot; men he worked with at the plant. They all glanced at him, but he was not sure who was looking out through some of those familiar eyes. The visitors reliably watched all large gatherings, at least momentarily; it would be surprising if none of them were here.

"All right, how do you plead," said Judge Ellithorp at last.

Chandler's lawyer straightened up. "Not guilty, Your Honor, by reason of temporary pandemic insanity."

The judge looked pleased. The crowd murmured, but they were pleased too. They had him dead to rights and it would have been a disappointment if Chandler had pleaded guilty. They wanted to see one of the vilest criminals in contemporary human society caught, exposed, convicted and punished; they did not want to miss a step of the process. Already in the playground behind the school three deputies from the sheriff's office were loading their rifles, while the school janitor chalked lines around the handball court to mark where the crowd witnessing the execution would be permitted to stand.

The prosecution made its case very quickly. Mrs. Porter testified that she worked at McKelvey Bros., the antibiotics plant, where the defendant also worked. Yes, that was him. She had been attracted by the noise from the culture room last—let's see—"Was it the seventeenth day of June last?" prompted the prosecutor, and Chandler's attorney instinctively gathered his muscles to rise, hesitated, glanced at his client and shrugged. That was right, it was the seventeenth. Incautiously she went right into the room. She should have known better, she admitted. She should have called the plant police right away, but, well, they hadn't had any trouble at the plant, you know, and—well, she didn't. She was a stupid woman, for all that she was rather good-looking, and insatiably curious. She had seen Peggy Flershem on the floor. "She was all *blood*. And her clothes were—And she was, I mean her—her body was—" With relentless tact the prosecutor allowed her to stammer out her observation that the girl had clearly been raped. And she had seen Chandler laughing and breaking up the place, throwing racks of cultures through the windows, upsetting trays. Of course she had crossed herself and tried a quick exorcism but there was no visible effect; then Chandler had

leaped at her. "He was *hateful*! He was just *foul*!" But as he began to attack her the plant police came, drawn by her screams.

Chandler's attorney did not question.

Peggy Flershem's deposition was introduced without objection from the defense. But she had little to say anyway, having been dazed at first and unconscious later. The plant police testified to having arrested Chandler; a doctor described in chaste medical words the derangements Chandler had worked on Peggy Flershem's virgin anatomy. There was no question from Chandler's lawyer—and, for that matter, nothing to question. Chandler did not hope to pretend that he had not ravished and nearly killed one girl, then done his best to repeat the process on another. Sitting there as the doctor testified, Chandler was able to tally every break and bruise against the memory of what his own body had done. He had been a spectator then, too, as remote from the event as he was now; but that was why they had him on trial. That was what they did not believe.

At twelve-thirty the prosecution rested its case, Judge Ellithorp looking very pleased. He recessed the court for one hour for lunch, and the guards took Chandler back to the detention cell in the basement of the school.

Two Swiss cheese sandwiches and a wax-paper carton of chocolate milk were on the desk. They were Chandler's lunch. As they had been standing, the sandwiches were crusty and the milk lukewarm. He ate them anyway. He knew what the judge looked pleased about. At one-thirty Chandler's lawyer would put him on the stand, and no one would pay very much attention to what he had to say, and the jury would be out at most twenty minutes, and the verdict would be guilty. The judge was pleased because he would be able to pronounce sentence no later than four o'clock, no matter what. They had formed the habit of

holding the executions at sundown. As, at that time of year, sundown was after seven, it would all go very well—for everyone but Chandler. For Chandler it would be the end.

II

The odd thing about Chandler's dilemma was not merely that he was innocent—in a way, that is—but that many who were guilty (in a way; as guilty as he himself, at any rate) were free and honored citizens. Chandler himself was a widower because his own wife had been murdered. He had seen the murderer leaving the scene of the crime, and the man he had seen was in the courtroom today, watching Chandler's own trial. Of the six hundred or so in the court, at least fifty were known to have taken part in one or more provable acts of murder, rape, arson, theft, sodomy, vandalism, assault and battery or a dozen other offenses indictable under the laws of the state. Of course, that could be said of almost any community in the world in those years; Chandler's was not unique. What had put Chandler in the dock was not what his body had been seen to do, but the place in which it had been seen to do it. For everybody knew that medicine and agriculture were never molested by the demons.

Chandler's own lawyer had pointed that out to him the day before the trial. "If it was anywhere but at the McKelvey plant, all right, but there's never been any trouble there. You know that. The trouble with you laymen is you think of lawyers in terms of Perry Mason, right? Rabbit out of the hat stuff. Well, I can't do that. I can only present your case, whatever it is, the best way possible. And the best thing I can do for your case right now is tell you you haven't got one." At that time the lawyer was still trying to be fair. He was even casting around for some thought he could use to convince himself that his client was innocent, though he had frankly admitted as soon as he introduced himself that he didn't have much hope there.

Chandler protested that he didn't have to commit rape. He'd been a widower for a year, but—

"Wait a minute," said the lawyer. "Listen. You can't make an ordinary claim of possession stick, but what about good old-fashioned insanity?" Chandler looked puzzled, so the lawyer explained. Wasn't it possible that Chandler was—consciously, subconsciously, unconsciously, call it what you will—trying to get revenge for what had happened to his own wife?

No, said Chandler, certainly not! But then he had to stop and think. After all, he had never been possessed before; in fact, he had always retained a certain skepticism about "possession"—it seemed like such a convenient way for anyone to do any illicit thing he chose—until the moment when he looked up to see Peggy Flershem walking into the culture room with a tray of agar disks, and was astonished to find himself striking her with the wrench in his hand and ripping at her absurdly floral-printed slacks. Maybe his case was different. Maybe it wasn't the sort of possession that struck at random; maybe he was just off his rocker.

Margot, his wife, had been cut up cruelly. He had seen his friend, Jack Souther, leaving his home hurriedly as he approached; and although he had thought that the stains on his clothes looked queerly like blood, nothing in that prepared him for what he found in the rumpus room. It had taken him some time to identify the spread-out dissection on the floor with his wife Margot.... "No," he told his lawyer, "I was shaken up, of course. The worst time was the next night, when there was a knock on the door and I opened it and it was Jack. He'd come to apologize. I—fell apart; but I got over it. I tell you I was possessed, that's all."

"And I tell you that defense will put you right in front of a firing squad," said his lawyer. "And *that's* all."

Five or six others had been executed for hoaxing; Chandler was familiar with the ritual. He even understood it, in a way. The world had gone to pot in the previous two years. The real enemy was out of reach; when any citizen might run wild and, when caught, relapse into his own self, terrified and sick, there was a need to strike back. But the enemy was invisible. The hoaxers were only whipping boys—but they were the only targets vengeance had.

The real enemy had struck the entire world in a single night. One day the people of the world went about their business in the gloomy knowledge that they were likely to make mistakes but with, at least, the comfort that the mistakes would be their own. The next day had no such comfort. The next day anyone, anywhere, was likely to find himself seized, possessed, working evil or whimsy without intention and helplessly.

Chandler stood up, kicked the balled-up wax paper from his sandwiches across the floor and swore violently.

He was beginning to wake from the shock that had gripped him. "Damn fool," he said to himself. He had no particular reason. Like the world, he needed a whipping boy too, if only himself. "Damn fool, you know they're going to shoot you!"

He stretched and twisted his body violently, alone in the middle of the room, in silence. He *had* to wake up. He *had* to start thinking. In a quarter of an hour or less the court would reconvene, and from then it was only a steady, quick slide to the grave.

It was better to do anything than to do nothing. He examined the windows of his improvised cell. They were above his head and barred; standing on the table, he could see feet walking outside, in the paved play-yard of the school. He discarded the thought of escaping that way;

there was no one to smuggle him a file, and there was no time. He studied the door to the hall. It was not impossible that when the guard opened it he could jump him, knock him out, run ... run where? The room had been a storage place for athletic equipment at the end of a hall; the hall led only to the stairs and the stairs emerged into the courtroom. It was quite likely, he thought, that the hall had another flight of stairs somewhere farther along, or through another room. What had he spent his taxes on these years, if not for schools designed with more than one exit in case of fire? But as he had not thought to mark an escape route when he was brought in, it did him no good.

The guard, however, had a gun. Chandler lifted up an edge of the table and tried to shake one of the legs. They did not shake; that part of his taxes had been well enough spent, he thought wryly. The chair? Could he smash the chair to get a club, which would give him a weapon to get the guard's gun?...

Before he reached the chair the door opened and his lawyer came in.

"Sorry I'm late," he said briskly. "Well. As your attorney I have to tell you they've presented a damaging case. As I see it—"

"What case?" Chandler demanded. "I never denied the acts. What else did they prove?"

"Oh, God!" said his lawyer, not quite loudly enough to be insulting. "Do we have to go over that again? Your claim of possession would make a defense if it had happened anywhere else. We know that these cases exist, but we also know that they follow a pattern. Some areas seem to be immune—medical establishments, pharmaceutical plants among them. So they proved that all this happened in a pharmaceutical plant. I advise you to plead guilty."

Chandler sat down on the edge of the table, controlling himself very well, he thought. He only asked: "Would that do me any good at all?"

The lawyer reflected, gazing at the ceiling. "... No. I guess it wouldn't."

Chandler nodded. "So what else shall we talk about? Want to compare notes about where you were and I was the night the President went possessed?"

The lawyer was irritated. He kept his mouth shut for a moment until he thought he could keep from showing it. Outside a vendor was hawking amulets: "St. Ann beads! Witch knots! Fresh garlic, local grown, best in town!" The lawyer shook his head.

"All right," he said, "it's your life. We'll do it your way. Anyway, time's up; Sergeant Grantz will be banging on the door any minute."

He zipped up his briefcase. Chandler did not move. "They don't give us much time anyway," the lawyer added, angry at Chandler and at hoaxers in general but not willing to say so. "Grantz is a stickler for promptness."

Chandler found a crumb of cheese by his hand and absently ate it. The lawyer watched him and glanced at his watch. "Oh, hell," he said, picked up his briefcase and kicked the base of the door. "Grantz! What's the matter with you? You asleep out there?"

Chandler was sworn, gave his name, admitted the truth of everything the previous witnesses had said. The faces were still aimed at him, every one. He could not read them at all any more, could not tell if they were friendly or hating, there were too many and they all had eyes. The jurors sat on their funeral-parlor chairs like cadavers, embalmed and propped, the dead witnessing a wake for the living. Only the forewoman in the funny hat showed signs of life, looking