

Skeleton



IT was past time for him to see the doctor again. Mr. Harris turned palely in at the stairwell, and on his way up the flight he saw Dr. Burleigh's name gilded over a pointing arrow. Would Dr. Burleigh sigh when he walked in? After all, this would make the tenth trip so far this year. But Burleigh shouldn't complain; after all, he was paid for the examinations!

The nurse looked Mr. Harris over and smiled, a bit amusedly, as she tiptoed to the glazed glass door, opened it, and put her head in. Harris thought he heard her say, 'Guess who's here, Doctor?' And didn't the doctor's acid voice reply, faintly, 'Oh, my God, *again?*' Harris swallowed uneasily.

When Harris walked in, Dr. Burleigh snorted thinly. 'Aches in your bones again! Ah!!' He scowled at Harris and adjusted his glasses. 'My dear Harris, you've been curried with the finest tooth combs and bacteria-brushes known to science. You're only nervous. Let's see your fingers. Too many cigarettes. Let me smell your breath. Too much protein. Let's see your eyes. Not enough sleep. My response? Go to bed, stop the protein, no smoking. Ten dollars, please.'

Harris stood there, sulking.

The doctor glanced up from his papers. '*You* still here? You're a hypochondriac! That's *eleven* dollars, now.'

'But why should my bones ache?' asked Harris.

Dr. Burleigh addressed him like a child. 'You ever had a sore muscle, and kept at it, irritating it, fussing with it, rubbing it? It gets worse, the more you bother it. Then you leave it alone and the pain vanishes. You realize you caused most of the soreness, yourself. Well, son, that's what's with you. Leave yourself alone. Take a dose of salts. Get out of here and take that trip to Phoenix you've stewed about for months. Do you good to travel!'

Five minutes later, Mr. Harris riffled through a classified phone directory at the corner druggist's. A fine lot of sympathy one got from blind fools like Burleigh! He passed his finger down a list of BONE SPECIALISTS, found one named M. Munigant. Munigant lacked an M.D., or any other academical lettering behind his name, but his office was conveniently near. Three blocks down, one block over. . .

M. Munigant, like his office, was small and dark. Like his office, he smelled of iodoform, iodine, and other odd things. He was a good listener, though, and listened with eager, shiny moves of his eyes, and when he talked to Harris, he had an accent and seemed to whistle every word, undoubtedly due to imperfect dentures. Harris told all.

M. Munigant nodded. He had seen cases like this before. The bones of the body. Man was not aware of his bones. Ah, yes, the bones. The skeleton. Most difficult. Something concerning an imbalance, an unsympathetic co-ordination between soul, flesh and bone. Very complicated,

softly whistled M. Munigant. Harris listened, fascinated. Now, *here* was a doctor who understood his illness! Psychological, said M. Munigant. He moved swiftly, delicately to a dingy wall and rattled down half a dozen X-rays and paintings of the human skeleton. He pointed at these. Mr. Harris must become aware of his problem, yes. He pointed at this and that bone, and these and those, and some others.

The pictures were quite awful. They had something of the grotesquerie and off-bounds horror of a Dali painting. Harris shivered.

M. Munigant talked on. Did Mr. Harris desire treatment for his bones?

'That all depends,' said Harris.

M. Munigant could not help Harris unless Harris was in the proper mood. Psychologically, one had to *need* help, or the doctor was of no use. But (shrugging) Mr. Munigant would 'try.'

Harris lay on a table with his mouth open. The lights were switched off, the shades drawn. M. Munigant approached his patient.

Something touched Harris's tongue.

He felt his jawbones forced out. They cracked and made noises. One of those pictures on the dim wall seemed to leap. A violent shivering went through Harris and, involuntarily, his mouth snapped shut.

M. Munigant cried out. He had almost had his nose bitten off! It was no use. Now was not the time. M. Munigant raised the shades. He looked dreadfully disappointed. When Mr. Harris felt he could co-operate psychologically, when Mr. Harris really *needed* help and trusted M. Munigant to help him, then maybe something could be done. M. Munigant held out his little hand. In the meantime, the fee was only two dollars. Mr. Harris must begin to think. Here was a sketch for Mr. Harris to take home and study. It would acquaint him with his body. He must be aware of himself. He must be careful. Skeletons were strange, unwieldy things. M. Munigant's eyes glittered. Good day to Mr. Harris. Oh, and would he have a breadstick? He proffered a jar of long hard salty breadsticks to Harris, taking one himself to chew on, and saying that chewing breadsticks kept him in — ah — practice. See you soon, Mr. Harris. Mr. Harris went home.

The next day was Sunday. Mr. Harris started the morning by feeling all sorts of new aches and pains in his body. He spent some time glancing at the funny papers and then looking with new interest at the little painting, anatomically perfect, of a skeleton M. Munigant had given him.

His wife, Clarisse, startled him at dinner when she cracked her exquisitely thin knuckles, one by one, until he clapped his hands to his ears and cried, 'Don't do that!'

The remainder of the day he quarantined himself in his room. Clarisse was seated at bridge in the living-room with three other ladies, laughing and conversing. Harris himself spent his time fingering and weighing the limbs of his body with growing curiosity. After an hour of this he suddenly stood up and called: 'Clarisse!'

She had a way of dancing into any room, her body doing all sorts of soft, agreeable things to keep her feet from ever quite touching the nap of a rug. She excused herself from her friends and came to see him now, brightly. She found him re-seated in a far corner and she saw that he was staring at that anatomical sketch. 'Are you still brooding, darling?' she asked. 'Please don't.' She sat upon his knees.

Her beauty could not distract him now in his absorption. He juggled her lightness, he touched her knee-cap, suspiciously. It seemed to move under her pale, glowing skin. 'Is it supposed to do that?' he asked, sucking in his breath.

'Is what supposed to do what?' she laughed. 'You mean my knee-cap?'

'Is it supposed to run around on top your knee that way?'

She experimented. 'So it *does*,' she marvelled. 'Well, now, so it does. Icky.' She pondered. 'No. On the other hand — it doesn't. It's only an optical illusion. I think. The skin moves over the bone; not vice-versa. See?' she demonstrated.

'I'm glad yours slithers, too,' he sighed. 'I was beginning to worry.'

'About what?'

He patted his ribs. 'My ribs don't go all the way down, they stop *here*. And I found some confounded ones that dangle in mid-air!'

Beneath the curve of her small breasts, Clarisse clasped her hands.

'Of course, silly, everybody's ribs stop at a given point. And those funny little short ones are floating ribs.'

'I just hope they don't float around too much,' he said, making an uneasy joke. Now, he desired that his wife leave him, he had some important discovering to do with his own body and he didn't want her laughing at him.

'I'll feel all right,' he said. 'Thanks for coming in, dear.'

'Any time,' she said, kissing him, rubbing her small pink nose warm against his.

'I'll be damned!' He touched his nose with his fingers, then hers. 'Did you ever realize that the nose bone only comes down so far and a lot of gristly tissue takes up from there on?'

She wrinkled hers. 'So what?' And, dancing, she exited.

He felt the sweat rise from the pools and hollows of his face, forming a salten tide to flow down his cheeks. Next on the agenda was his spinal cord and column. He examined it in the same manner as he operated the numerous push-buttons in his office, pushing them to summon the messenger boys. But, in these pushings of his spinal column, fears and terrors answered, rushed from a million doors in Mr. Harris's mind to confront and shake him. His spine felt awfully — bony. Like a fish, freshly eaten and skeletonized, on a china platter. He fingered the little rounded knobins. 'My God.'

His teeth began to chatter. 'God All-Mighty,' he thought, 'why haven't I realized it all these years? All these years I've gone around with a — SKELETON — inside me!' He saw his fingers blur before him, like motion films triply speeded in their quaking apprehension. 'How is it that we take ourselves so much for granted? How is it we never question our bodies and our being?'

A skeleton. One of those jointed, snowy, hard things, one of those foul, dry, brittle, gouge-eyed, skull-faced, shake-fingered, rattling things that sway from neck-chains in abandoned webbed closets, one of those things found on the desert all long and scattered like dice!

He stood upright, because he could not bear to remain seated. Inside me now, he grasped his stomach, his head, inside my head is a — skull. One of those curved carapaces which holds my brain like an electrical jelly, one of those cracked shells with the holes in front like two holes shot through it by a double-barrelled shot-gun! With its grottoes and caverns of bone, its revetments and placements for my flesh, my smelling, my seeing, my hearing, my thinking! A skull, encompassing my brain, allowing it exit through its brittle windows to see the outside world!

He wanted to dash into the bridge party, upset it, a fox in a chickenyard, the cards fluttering all around like chicken feathers burst upwards in clouds! He stopped himself only with a violent, trembling effort. Now, now, man, control yourself. This is a revelation, take it for what it's worth, understand it, savour it. But a *SKELETON!* screamed his subconscious. I won't stand for it. It's vulgar, it's terrible, it's frightening. Skeletons are horrors; they clink and tinkle and rattle in old castles, hung from oaken beams, making long, indolently rustling pendulums on the wind. . .

'Darling, will you come in and meet the ladies?' called his wife's sweet, clear voice.

Mr. Harris stood up, His SKELETON was holding him up. This thing inside him, this invader, this horror, was supporting his arms, legs and head. It was like feeling someone just behind you who shouldn't be there. With every step he took he realized how dependent he was upon this other Thing.

'Darling, I'll be with you in a moment,' he called weakly. To himself he said, 'Come on, now, brace up. You've got to go back to work tomorrow. And Friday you've got to make that trip to Phoenix. It's a long drive. Hundreds of miles. Got to be in shape for that trip or you won't get Mr. Creldon to put his money into your ceramics business. Chin up, now.'

Five minutes later he stood among the ladies being introduced to Mrs. Withers, Mrs. Abblematt, and Miss Kirthy, all of whom had skeletons inside them but took it very calmly, because nature had carefully clothed the bare nudity of clavicle, tibia and femur with breasts, thighs, calves, with coiffure and eyebrow satanic, with bee-stung lips and — LORD! shouted Mr. Harris inwardly — when they talk or eat, part of their skeleton shows — their *teeth!* I never thought of that.

'Excuse me,' he said, and ran from the room only in time to drop his lunch among the petunias over the garden balustrade.

That night, seated on the bed as his wife undressed, he pared his toenails and fingernails scrupulously. These parts, too, were where his skeleton was shoving, indignantly growing out. He must have muttered something concerning this theory, because next thing he knew his wife, in negligee, slithered on the bed in animal cuddlesomeness, yawning, 'Oh, my darling, fingernails are *not* bone, they're only hardened skin-growths.'

He threw the scissors away with relief. 'Glad to hear that. Feel better.' He looked at the ripe curves of her body, marvelling. 'I hope all people are made the same way.'

'If you aren't the darndest hypochondriac I ever saw,' she said. She snuggled to him. 'Come on. What's wrong? Tell, mamma.'

'Something inside me,' he said. 'Something — I ate.'

The next morning and all afternoon at his down-town office, Mr. Harris found that the sizes, shapes and constructions of various bones in his body displeased him. At ten a.m. he asked to feel Mr. Smith's elbow one moment. Mr. Smith obliged, but scowled suspiciously. And after lunch Mr. Harris asked to touch Miss Laurel's shoulderblade and she immediately pushed herself back against him, purring like a kitten, shutting her eyes in the mistaken belief that he wished to examine a few other anatomical delicacies. 'Miss Laurel!' he snapped. 'Stop that!'

Alone, he pondered his neuroses. The war just over, the pressure of his work, the uncertainty of the future, probably had much to do with his mental outlook. He wanted to leave the office, get into his own business, for himself. He had more than a little talent at artistic things, had dabbled in ceramics and sculpture. As soon as possible he'd get over into Arizona and borrow that money from Mr. Creldon. It would build him his kiln and set up his own shop. It was a worry. What a case he was. But it was a good thing he had contacted M. Munigant, who had seemed to be eager to understand and help him. He would fight it out with himself, not go back to either Munigant or Dr. Burleigh unless he was forced to. The alien feeling would pass. He sat staring into nothing.

The alien feeling did not pass. It grew.

On Tuesday and Wednesday it bothered him terrifically that his outer dermis, epidermis, hair and other appendages were of a high disorder, while the integumented skeleton of himself was a slick clean structure of efficient organization. Sometimes, in certain lights while his lips were drawn morosely downwards, weighted with melancholy, he imagined he saw his skull grinning at him behind the flesh. *It had its nerve, it did!*

'Let go of me!' he cried. 'Let go of me! You've caught me, you've captured me! My lungs, you've got them in a vice! Release them!'

He experienced violent gasps as if his ribs were pressing in, choking the breath from him.

'My brain; stop *squeezing* it!'

And terrible hot headaches caught his brain like a bivalve in the compressed clamp of skull-bones.

'My vitals! All my organs, let them be, for God's sake! Stay away from my heart!' His heart seemed to cringe from the fanning nearness of his ribs. Ribs like pale spiders crouched and fiddling with their prey.

Drenched with sweat, he lay upon the bed one night while Clarisse was out attending a Red Cross meeting. He tried to gather his wits again, and always the conflict of his disorderly exterior and this cool calciumed thing inside him with all its exact symmetry.

His complexion: wasn't it oily and lined with worry?

Observe the flawless, snow-white perfection of the skull.

His nose: wasn't it too large?

Then observe the small tiny bones of the skull's nose before that monstrous nasal cartilage begins forming Harris's lopsided proboscis.

His body: wasn't it a bit plump?

Well, then, consider the skeleton; so slender, so svelte, so economical of line and contour. Like exquisitely carved oriental ivory it is, perfected and thin as a reed.

His eyes: weren't they protuberant and ordinary and numb-looking?

Be so kind as to note the eye-sockets of the skeleton's skull; so deep and rounded, sombre, quiet, dark pools, all knowing, eternal. Gaze deeply into skull sockets and you never touch the bottom of their dark understanding with any plumb line. All irony, all sadism, all life, all everything is there in the cupped darkness.

Compare. Compare. Compare.

He raged for hours, glib and explosive. And the skeleton, ever the frail and solemn philosopher, quietly hung inside of Harris, saying not a word, quietly suspended like a delicate insect within a chrysalis, waiting and waiting.

Then it came to Harris.

'Wait a minute. Hold on a minute,' he exclaimed. 'You're helpless, too. I've got you, too. I can make you do anything I want you to! And you can't prevent it! I say put up your carpals, metacarpals, and phalanges and — sswtt — up they go, as I wave to someone!' He giggled.

'I order the fibula and femur to locomote and *Hunn* two three four, *Hunn* two three four — we walk around the block. There.'

Harris grinned.

'It's a fifty-fifty fight. Even steven. And we'll fight it out, we two, we shall. After all, I'm the part that *thinks!*' That was good, it was a triumph, he'd remember that. 'Yes, by God, yes. I'm the part that thinks. If I didn't have you, even then I could still think!'

Instantly, he felt a pain strike his head. His cranium, crowding in slowly, began giving him some of his own treatment back.

At the end of the week he had postponed the Phoenix trip because of his health. Weighing himself on a penny scales he saw the slow glide of the red arrow as it pointed to: 164.

He groaned. 'Why, I've weighed 175 for ten years. I can't have lost ten pounds.' He examined his cheeks in the fly-dotted mirror. Cold primitive fear rushed over him in odd little shivers. 'Hold on! I know what you're about, *you*.'

He shook his finger at his bony face, particularly addressing his remarks to his superior maxillary, his inferior maxillary, to his cranium and to his cervical vertebrae.

'You rum thing, you. Think you can starve me off, make me lose weight, eh? A victory for you, is that it? Peel the flesh off, leave nothing but skin on bone. Trying to ditch me, so you can be supreme, ah? No, no!'

He fled into a cafeteria.

Ordering turkey, dressing, creamed potatoes, four vegetables, three desserts, he soon found he could not eat it, he was sick to his stomach. He forced himself. His teeth began to ache. 'Bad teeth, is it?' he wanted to know, angrily. 'I'll eat in spite of every tooth clanging and banging and rattling so they fall in my gravy.'

His head ached, his breathing came hard from a constricted chest, his teeth pulsed with pain, but he had one small victory. He was about to drink milk when he stopped and poured it into a vase of nasturtiums. 'No calcium for you, my boy, no more calcium for you. Never again shall I eat foods with calcium or other bone-fortifying minerals. I'll eat for one of us, not both, my lad.'

'One hundred and fifty pounds,' he said, the following week to his wife. 'Do you see how I've changed?'

'For the better,' said Clarisse. 'You were always a little plump for your height, darling.' She stroked his chin. 'I like your face, it's so much nicer, the lines of it are so firm and strong now.'

'They're not *my* lines, they're his, damn him! You mean to say you like him better than you like me?' he demanded indignantly.

'Him? Who's *him*'?

In the parlour mirror, beyond Clarisse, his skull smiled back at him behind his fleshy grimace of hatred and despair.

Fuming, he popped malt tablets into his mouth. This was one way of gaining weight when you couldn't keep other foods down. Clarisse noticed the malt pellets. 'But, darling, really, you don't have to regain the weight for me,' she said.

'Oh, shut up!' he felt like saying.

She came to him and sat down and made him lie so his head was in her lap. 'Darling,' she said. 'I've watched you lately. You're so — badly off. You don't say anything, but you look — hunted. You toss in bed at night. Maybe you should go to a psychiatrist. But I think I can tell you everything he would say. I've put it all together, from hints you've let escape you. I can tell you that you and your skeleton are one and the same, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. United you stand, divided you fall. If you two fellows can't get along like an old married couple in the future, go back and see Dr. Burleigh. But *first*, relax. You're in a vicious circle, the more you worry, the more your bones stick out, the more your bones stick out, the more you worry. After all, now, who picked this fight — you or that anonymous entity you claim is lurking around behind your alimentary canal?'

He closed his eyes. 'I did. I guess I did. Oh, my darling, I love you so.'

'You rest now,' she said softly. 'Rest and forget.'

Mr. Harris felt buoyed up for half a day, then he began to sag again. It was all very well to say everything was imagination, but this particular skeleton, by God, was fighting back.

Harris set out for M. Munigant's office late in the day. Walking for half an hour until he found the address, he caught sight of the name Mr. Munigant initialled in ancient, flaking gold on a glass plate outside the building. Then, his bones seemed to explode from their moorings, blasted and erupted with pain. He could hardly see in his wet, pain-filled eyes. So violent were the pains that he staggered away. When he opened his eyes again he had rounded a corner. M. Munigant's office was out of sight.

The pains ceased.

M. Munigant was the man to help him. He *must* be! If the sight of his gilt-lettered name could cause so titanic a reaction in the deepness of Harris's body, why, of course M. Munigant *must* be just the man.

But, not today. Each time he tried to return to that office, the terrible pains laid him low. Perspiring, he had to give up, and stagger into a cocktail bar for respite.

Moving across the dim room of the cocktail lounge, he wondered briefly if a lot of blame couldn't be put on M. Munigant's shoulders; after all, it was Munigant who'd first drawn such specific attention to his skeleton, and brought home the entire psychological impact of it! Could M. Munigant be using him for some nefarious purpose? But what purpose? Silly to even suspect him. Just a little doctor. Trying to be helpful. Munigant and his jar of breadsticks. Ridiculous. M. Munigant was okay, okay.

There was a sight within the cocktail lounge to give him hope. A large fat man, round as a butterball, stood drinking consecutive beers at the bar. Now *there* was a successful man. Harris repressed a desire to go up, clap the fat man's shoulder, and inquire as to how he'd gone about impounding his bones. Yes, the fat man's skeleton was luxuriously closeted. There were pillows of fat here, resilient bulges of it there, with several round chandeliers of fat under his chin. The poor skeleton was lost, it could never fight clear of *that* blubber; it may have tried once — but now, overwhelmed, not a bony echo of the fat man's supporter remained.

Not without envy, Harris approached the fat man as one might cut across the bow of an ocean liner. Harris ordered a drink, drank it, and then dared to address the fat man:

'Glands?'

'You talking to me?' asked the fat man.

'Or is there a special diet?' wondered Harris. 'I beg your pardon, but, as you see, I'm down. Can't seem to put on any weight. I'd like a stomach like that one of yours. Did you grow it because you were afraid of something?'

'You,' announced the fat man, 'are drunk. But — I like drunkards.' He ordered more drinks. 'Listen close. I'll tell you —'

'Layer by layer,' said the fat man, 'twenty years, man and boy, I built this.' He held his vast stomach like a globe of the world, teaching his audience its gastronomical geography. 'It was no overnight circus. The tent was not raised before dawn on the wonders installed within. I have cultivated my inner organs as if they were thoroughbred dogs, cats and other animals. My stomach is a fat pink Persian tom slumbering, rousing at intervals to purr, mew, growl, and cry for chocolate titbits. I feed it well, it will almost sit up for me. And, my dear fellow, my

intestines are the rarest pure-bred Indian anacondas you ever viewed in the sleekest, coiled, fine and ruddy health. Keep 'em in prime, I do, all my pets. For fear of something? Perhaps.'

This called for another drink for everybody.

'Gain weight?' The fat man savoured the words on his tongue. 'Here's what you do; get yourself a quarrelling bird of a wife, a baker's dozen of relatives who can flush a covey of troubles out from behind the veriest molehill. Add to these a sprinkling of business associates whose prime motivation is snatching your last lonely quid, and you are well on your way to getting fat. How so? In no time you'll begin subconsciously building fat betwixt yourself and them. A buffer epidermal state, a cellular wall. You'll soon find that eating is the only fun on earth. But one needs to be bothered by outside sources. Too many people in this world haven't enough to worry about, then they begin picking on *themselves*, and they lose weight. Meet all of the vile, terrible people you can possibly meet, and pretty soon you'll be adding the good old fat!'

And with that advice, the fat man launched himself out into the dark tide of night, swaying mightily and wheezing.

'That's exactly what Dr. Burleigh told me, slightly changed,' said Harris thoughtfully. 'Perhaps that trip to Phoenix, now, at this time — '

The trip from Los Angeles to Phoenix was a sweltering one, crossing, as it did, the Mojave desert on a broiling yellow day. Traffic was thin and inconstant, and for long stretches there would not be a car on the road for miles ahead or behind. Harris twitched his fingers on the steering-wheel. Whether or not Creldon, in Phoenix, lent him the money he needed to start his business, it was still a good thing to get away, to put distance behind.

The car moved in the hot sluice of desert wind. The one Mr. H. sat inside the other Mr. H. Perhaps both perspired. Perhaps both were miserable.

On a curve, the inside Mr. H. suddenly constricted the outer flesh, causing him to jerk forward on the hot steering wheel.

The car plunged off the road into deepest sand. It turned half over.

Night came on, a wind rose, the road was lonely and silent with little traffic. Those few cars that passed went swiftly on their way, their view obstructed. Mr. Harris lay unconscious until very late he heard a wind rising out of the desert, felt the sting of little sand needles on his cheeks, and opened his eyes.

Morning found him gritty-eyed and wandering in thoughtless, senseless circles, having, in his delirium, gotten away from the road. At noon he sprawled in the poor shade of a bush. The sun struck into him with a keen sword edge, cutting through to his — bones. A vulture circled.

Harris's parched lips cracked open, weakly. 'So that's it?' he whimpered, red-eyed, bristle-cheeked. 'One way or another you'll wreck me, walk me, starve me, thirst me, kill me.' He swallowed dry burrs of dust. 'Sun cook off my flesh so you can peek forth. Vultures lunch and breakfast from me, and then there you'll lie, grinning. Grinning with victory. Like a bleached xylophone strewn and played by vultures with an ear for odd music. You'd like that. Freedom.'

He walked on through a landscape that shivered and bubbled in the direct pour of sunlight; stumbling, falling flat, lying to feed himself little mouths of flame. The air was blue alcohol flame, and vultures roasted and steamed and glittered as they flew in glides and circles. Phoenix. The road. Car. Water. Safety.

'Hey!'

Somebody called from way off in the blue alcohol flame.

Mr. Harris propped himself up.

'Hey!'

The call was repeated. A crunching of footsteps, quick.

With a cry of unbelievable relief, Harris rose, only to collapse again into the arms of someone in a uniform with a badge. . .

The car tediously hauled, repaired, Phoenix reached, Harris found himself in such an unholy state of mind that the business transaction was more a numb pantomime than anything else. Even when he got the loan and held the money in his hand it meant nothing. This Thing within him like a hard white sword in a scabbard tainted his business, his eating, coloured his love for Clarisse, made it unsafe to trust an automobile; all in all this Thing had to be put in its place before he could have love for business or anything. That desert incident had brushed too closely. Too near the bone, one might say with an ironic twist of one's mouth. Harris heard himself thanking Mr. Creldon, dimly, for the money. Then he turned his car and motored back across the long miles, this time cutting across to San Diego, so that he would miss that desert stretch between El Centro and Beaumont. He drove north along the coast. He didn't trust that desert. But — careful! Salt waves boomed, hissing on the beach outside Laguna. Sand, fish and crustacea would cleanse his bones as swiftly as vultures. Slow down on the curves over the surf.

If anything happened, he wanted cremation. The two of them'd burn together that way. None of this graveyard burial stuff where little crawling things eat and leave nothing but unmantled bone! No, they'd burn. Damn Him! He was sick. Where could he turn? Clarisse? Burleigh? Munigant, Bone specialist? Munigant. Well?

'Darling!' trilled Clarisse, kissing him, so he winced at the solidness of her teeth and jaw behind the passionate exchange. 'Darling,' he said, slowly, wiping his lips with his wrist, trembling.

'You look thinner; oh, darling, the business deal — ?'

'It went through. Yeah, it went through. I guess. Yeah, it did,' he said.

She enthused. She kissed him again. Lord, he couldn't even enjoy kisses any more because of this obsession. They ate a slow, falsely cheerful dinner, with Clarisse laughing and encouraging him. He studied the phone, several times he picked it up indecisively, then laid it down. His wife walked in, putting on her coat and hat. 'Well, sorry, but I have to leave now,' she laughed, and pinched him lightly on the cheek. 'Come on now, cheer up! I'll be back from Red Cross in three hours. You lie around and snooze. I simply *have* to go.'

When Clarisse was gone, Harris dialled the phone, nervously.

'M. Munigant?'

The explosions and the sickness in his body after he set the phone down were unbelievable. His bones were racked with every kind of pain, cold and hot, he had ever thought of or experienced in wildest nightmare. He swallowed all the aspirin he could find in an effort to stave off the assault; but when the doorbell finally rang an hour later, he could not move, he lay weak and exhausted, panting, tears streaming down his cheeks, like a man on a torture rack. Would M. Munigant go away if the door was not answered?

'Come in!' he tried to gasp it out. 'Come in, for God's sake!'

M. Munigant came in. Thank God the door had been unlocked.

Oh, but Mr. Harris looked terrible. M. Munigant stood in the centre of the living-room, small and dark. Harris nodded at him. The pains rushed through him, hitting him with large iron hammers and hooks. M. Munigant's eyes glittered as he saw Harris's protuberant bones. Ah, he

saw that Mr. Harris was now psychologically prepared for aid. Was it not so? Harris nodded again, feebly, sobbing. M. Munigant still whistled when he talked; something about his tongue and the whistling. No matter. Through his shimmering eyes Harris seemed to see M. Munigant shrink, get smaller. Imagination, of course. Harris sobbed out his story of the Phoenix trip. M. Munigant sympathized. This skeleton was a — a traitor! They would *fix* him for once and for all! 'Mr. Munigant,' sighed Harris, faintly. 'I — I never noticed before. You have such an odd, odd tongue. Round. Tube-like. Hollow? Guess it's my eyes. Don't mind me. Delirious. I'm ready. What do I do?'

M. Munigant whistled softly, appreciatively, coming closer. If Mr. Harris would relax in his chair, and open his mouth? The lights were switched off. M. Munigant peered into Harris's dropped jaw. Wider, please? It had been so hard, that first visit, to help Harris, with both body and bone in rebellion. Now, he had co-operation from the flesh of the man anyway, even if the skeleton was acting up somewhat. In the darkness, M. Munigant's voice got small, small, tiny, tiny. The whistling became high and shrill. Now. Relax. Mr. Harris. NOW!

Harris felt his jaw pressed violently in all directions, his tongue depressed as with a spoon, his throat clogged. He gasped for breath. Whistle. He couldn't breathe! He was corked. Something squirmed, cork-screwed his cheeks out, bursting his jaws. Like a hot water douche, something squirted into his sinuses, his ears clanged! 'Ahhh!' shrieked Harris, gagging. His head, its carapaces riven, shattered, hung loose. Agony shot into his lungs, around.

Harris could breathe again, momentarily. His watery eyes sprang wide. He shouted. His ribs, like sticks picked up and bundled, were loosened in him. Pain! He fell to the floor, rocking, rolling, wheezing out his hot breath.

Lights flickered in his senseless eyeballs, he felt his limbs swiftly cast loose and free, expertly. Through streaming eyes he saw the parlour.

The room was empty.

'M. Munigant? Where are you? In God's name, where are you, M. Munigant? Come help me!'

M. Munigant was gone.

'Help!'

Then he heard it.

Deep down in the subterranean fissures of his bodily well, he heard the minute, unbelievable noises; little smackings and twistings and little dry chippings and grindings and nuzzling sounds — like a tiny hungry mouse down in the red-blooded dimness, gnawing ever so earnestly and expertly at what may have been, but was not, a submerged timber. . .!

Clarisse, walking along the sidewalk, held her head high and marched straight towards her house on Saint James Place. She was thinking of the Red Cross and a thousand other things as she turned the corner and almost ran into this little dark man who smelled of iodine.

Clarisse would have ignored him if it were not for the fact that as she passed he took something long, white and oddly familiar from his coat and proceeded to chew on it, as on a peppermint stick. Its end devoured, his extraordinary tongue darted within the white confection, sucking out the filling, making contented noises. He was still crunching his goodie as she proceeded up the sidewalk to her house, turned the doorknob and walked in.

'Darling?' she called, smiling around. 'Darling, where are you?'

She shut the door, walked down the hall and into the living-room.

'Darling. . .'

She stared at the floor for twenty seconds, trying to understand.

She screamed.

Outside in the sycamore darkness, the little man pierced a long white stick with intermittent holes; then, softly, sighing, lips puckered, played a little sad tune upon the improvised instrument to accompany the shrill and awful singing of Clarisse's voice as she stood in the living-room.

Many times as a little girl Clarisse had run on the beach sands, stepped on a jelly fish and screamed. It was not so bad, finding an intact, gelatine-skinned jelly-fish in one's living-room. One could step back from it.

It was when the jelly-fish *called you by name*. . .