

RON GOULART

THE CURSE OF THE DEMON

IT WASN'T REALLY AN earthquake that caused the ground to open up and swallow the second most popular child star in Hollywood. But during the period of national mourning that followed the incident, Dan Barner didn't feel it would be wise, or in any way helpful' to his screen writing career, to speak out and explain what actually had taken place. The notion that the cute, freckle-faced twelve-year-old that they knew and loved as Kenny McNulty was a complete and total fraud wouldn't have set well with the movie-going public.

Besides which, if Dan had mentioned that he'd precipitated the whole business by releasing a demonic spirit from an ancient bronze chest, it would most certainly have given rise to serious doubt as to his sanity. And while being considered eccentric can sometimes help forward a career in movies, a reputation for being totally bonkers is almost always a handicap.

Dan had come into possession of the venerable casket, which was about the size of a shoe box and etched all over with blurred mystical symbols, on a chill, rainy evening early last year. He hadn't the slightest premonition that it would lead him to fame and fortune or that the battered old metal box would cause the disruption of the Oscar award ceremonies this year.

He was residing in a ramshackle cottage in a weedy cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Westwood at the time the fateful chest entered his life. The cottage, which was surfaced with stucco the color of peach yogurt, was all his second wife had left him after she'd divorced him a year and a half ago and he still had sixteen more years of mortgage payments to go. The lawn had long since died.

Dan was close to being forty-one, although he still wrote thirty-eight on any form that asked for his age. That particular stormy night he was sitting at his desk in his narrow den, hunched, scowling at his portable electric typewriter. For several weeks now it had refused to print the letter B. The lopsided desk was piled high with the various versions of the opening scenes of the new screenplay he was working on.

Last autumn, during a 6.3 quake, all the books had come tumbling down off the shelves. Dan, who'd been in an emotional slump for quite some time, had left the two hundred some books, mostly old paperbacks, sprawled exactly where they'd landed.

Tonight, as the heavy rain slammed down on the imitation thatch roof, tiny pearls of water were dripping down through the crack in the peach colored ceiling and hitting at a pile of old Cold War spy thrillers. The only things on the warped wooden book shelves were a framed photo of his first wife in her high school graduation robe and a bunch of dusty wax grapes.

The phone rang.

Jerking upright out of the slight doze he'd been nodding into, Dan grabbed up the phone. "Yeah, hello."

"This is a very complex and stressful town, Danny. I don't like to return to my palatial office after a grueling day on the show business barricades, you understand, and find cryptic messages on my tape. Brain teasers that deflect me from concentrating."

"Scotty, the message I left was, and I quote, 'What did Gonzer say about The Carioca Backlog?'"

"See what I mean? What in the name of Billy Budd is The Carioca Backlog? And who in the hell is Gonzer?"

"Well, Gonzer, according to you, is the new head of Firebrand Pictures and, Jesus, Scotty, The Carioca Backlog is the spec script you're supposed to be peddling for me. It's the thriller, remember, with the perfect part for Jessica Lange."

"Oh, that's right. I remember the script now. Terrific story arc. And the setting is terrific, too -- Norway during the last days of the Cold War, Jessica'll look marvelous in a parka and --"

"It takes place in Brazil during World War II."

"Right, even better," said Scotty Blackett. "Now give me another helpful hint: Who's Gonzer again?"

"He runs Firebrand."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"From you," he told his agent.

Blackett produced a perplexed noise. "Nope, I think the actual head of Firebrand is Hugo Washburn. Yeah, right, I saw his damned name in Variety only yesterday."

"Then why the hell did you tell me somebody named Gonzer was hot for my script?"

"Yelling at the top of your lungs, Danny, is also something I don't need at the end of a day during which I've been busting my backside to sell a script by a fellow who possesses no screen credits to his name."

"That wasn't anywhere near the top," he assured the agent. "And I wrote, remember, Birdbath III?"

"They only made two of those before calling it quits."

"Three."

"People aren't interested in animal pictures anymore."

"Birdbath III was a horror movie."

"Worse, horror's dead in the water. I'd do a lot better with an animal script. I was telling Gonzer only this morning that --"

"Gonzer! Who is he then?"

"Oh, that's right -- my barber," remembered the agent. "Anyhow, Danny, it is looking really good on The Tapioca Backlash. Don't despair. I'll be talking to Medium at Firebrand again in the morning and he --"

"Who exactly is Medium?"

"He's -- Oops. Got another call. Keep that fiery temper of yours under control. Bye."

Hanging up the phone, forlornly, Dan returned to contemplating his ailing typewriter.

He was still in that hunched, slightly squinting position when the doorbell made that harsh raspberry sound it produced instead of chimes these days.

As Dan made his way across the sprawls of books, an anxious thumping commenced on the front door.

Nancy Quillen was a slim, pretty, redheaded young woman. Bundled in a lime green raincoat, she remained on Dan's doorstep and refused his invitation to cross the threshold. "Can't, I'm late for an audition," she explained, holding out a heavy cloth shopping bag in both hands. "Could you take this, keep it for a while, maybe open what's inside. But, please, do that after I've left."

"What exactly is in it?"

She glanced back over her shoulder. Behind her the heavy night rain was pounding at his small patch of dead lawn and a mournful wind was moving through the weeds. "Oh, just an old metal box," she said, pushing the bag, held at arm's length, closer to him.

He didn't immediately accept it. "Is there something wrong with this box?"

Nancy bent, setting the heavy gray bag on his threadbare doormat. "Probably not, no. But you're just about the only level-headed friend I have and that's why I made up my mind you're the perfect person to...um ...investigate."

He squatted, started to reach into the shadowy interior of the cloth shopping bag. "Might as well take a --"

"Don't!" suggested the red-haired actress, taking a step back. "What I mean is, Dan, why not do that after I've gotten a few blocks away --okay?"

"A bomb?"

"No, no, nothing like that, no." She gave a very unconvincing laugh. "It's, actually, a legacy.' Something I inherited. Just, in fact, this afternoon."

He stood up, watching the bag. "Somebody left you what's in there in a will?"

"Not to me exactly." She took another careful step backward. "Apparently, according to the attorney who delivered it -- a very nice old gentleman named Chester A. Tripple. He was ninety-three."

"Was?"

"Well, yes. He died in my living room shortly after stopping by. On that Morris chair we got at the garage sale in Glendale last summer. Ruined the darn chair."

"How did he ruin it, Nancy?"

"He didn't, poor old fellow. It was the flames that did most of the damage."

"This venerable old attorney caught fire, did he?"

"The chair caught fire after the lightning bolt hit Mr. Tripple. Funny thing about that. What I mean is, it is a stormy day and all but there hadn't been any thunder or lightning to speak of. Then -- wham! -- this huge bolt of sizzling blue lightning seemed to come in under my front door and hit old Mr. Tripple smack in the chest. He said, 'Good gracious, the curse of the demon!' and that was it for him. Some lightning spilled over and smacked my chair." Nancy paused, taking a slow deep breath. "I've really, Dan, had one heck of an afternoon. Did you ever try to explain to 911 that you had an old gentleman struck by lightning in your living room? I put the fire out myself with that little extinguisher we bought at the flea market that time, but then the landlady came up just as the ambulance and the police got there and she complained about the damage to her rug."

Dan requested, "Explain to me about how you came to inherit this thing."

"Well, according to poor old Mr. Tripple -- he was very spry and lucid for someone so along in years -- at least in the five or six minutes before the lightning got him -- according to this lawyer, who'd journeyed all the way from the Midwest to track me down and present me with the chest, a distant cousin of mine died about eight or nine years ago. He left his various belongings to his next of kin. The thing is, Mr. Tripple had been having a heck of a rough time getting any of the heirs to accept things. It seems this Elijah Higgardy -- that's my cousin and I never heard of him until today -- it seems he had a reputation for being...um...eccentric."

"Eccentric how?"

"Mr. Tripple was about to go into details when the lighting bolt struck," replied Nancy. "I think, however, that he must have dabbled in sorcery and black magic." Reaching inside her raincoat, she produced a wrinkled, dirt-smearred envelope. "There's a note from Cousin Elijah in here -- and a page torn out of a very old book. It sort of explains the chest."

"And what exactly do you want me to do, Nancy?"

"All you really have to do, if you would, is keep the darn thing for me for a while." She took two steps back. "But, listen, if you'd like to read over this material and then take a crack at opening the chest --well, I'd really appreciate that." She thrust the envelope at him.

Gingerly, he accepted it. "You're expecting me to be whapped by lightning."

"No, of course not. We've been close friends for over a year," she reminded. "I wouldn't put you in jeopardy. No, what I thought was, since you're the only brave and stalwart person I know at present -- Well, I hoped you could find out if what the letter says is true. I'm sort of scared to try myself."

He fluttered the envelope. "What does the letter say?"

"That whoever uses what's inside the chest will find fame and fortune."

"That can't be what frightens you."

"No, it's the part where he warns about dire peril and the risk of eternal damnation."

INDOOR LIGHTNING can be unnerving, especially when it comes in a variety of colors. Dan discovered that fact about a half hour after Nancy had entrusted the bronze chest to him.

Initially he had, handling it very cautiously, picked up the cloth shopping bag by the handles and lugged it into his small disorderly living room. It made a deep hollow thunk when he dropped it down near the door.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop suddenly, though that may have been because the door had been standing open while Nancy worked at persuading him to become the guardian of the possibly cursed object.

"Yeah, what did that expiring lawyer mean by 'the curse of the demon?'" he asked himself as he perched on the edge of his worn sofa, several feet from the bag, to watch it for a while. "I should've asked her. And also why all those other heirs refused to touch her cousin's bequest with a barge pole."

Noticing the dirty envelope he was clutching -- the name of the law firm,

Tripple, DeHaven &, Worth, was printed in the left-hand corner Dan placed it on his knee. After a moment, he opened it and fished out the two pieces of paper it held.

The note from Elijah Higgardy was written in faded fountain pen ink on a sheet of lined notebook paper. The book page was printed on heavy paper, much foxed and stained by time. Across the top of the pages was the title of the book it had been torn from -- The Most Dark & Evil Life of the Notorious Count Monstrodamus, Vile Black Sorcerer & Degenerate Villain.

"Not a puff bio apparently." Setting the page on the cushion next to him, he returned his attention to the note.

To whomsoever inherits this miraculous chest from me (it said), I assure you that the entity contained within it can bring you, as it did me, great wealth and, should such be your desire, considerable fame. It so I was reliably informed, belonged to the notorious seventeenthcentury mystic and magus known as Count Monstrodamus. There are some who say he came to a bad end as a result of tampering with such entities as that contained in this cask. Others, however, contend the count was torn limb from limb not by demons but by irate townspeople who believed him to be in cahoots with the devil.

To enlist the aid of the entity, you are to say, very slowly and clearly and paying close attention to your diction, "I summon you, O dark presence, to enter my world and do my bidding."

You must be careful to take the upper hand at all times, otherwise there is a possibility of dire peril and even eternal damnation. Good luck to you.

Dan read the letter through a second time, saying the dire peril and eternal damnation part aloud and scowling. Then he set the note aside and picked up the book page. It contained a brief account, in what sounded like 19th Century prose, of the box, referred to as the Accursed Cask of Hell, and the many uses the count was alleged to have had for it. One sentence especially impressed Dan. "This most evil and perfidious person," wrote the unknown biographer, "entertained within his demented heart vain pretensions to be a successful playwright, and to that end, it is reliably stated, he did use the creature of the casket to persuade a respected theater owner of his day to produce his loathsome and blasphemous five-act tragedy, The Bride of the Evil One; or, All for Satan."

Standing, taking up the note again, Dan, moving slowly, approached the bag. "Would that work today on movie producers? The Carioca Backlog sure isn't loathsome or blasphemous, so it should be even easier for this entity to sell," he said thoughtfully. "Be great if it could work on Medium, or whoever's in charge at Firebrand, and get him to buy my script."

Kneeling beside the cloth bag, he carefully dipped a hand inside.

"Yow!"

A shock had come snaking up his arm when his fingers touched the casket.

Dan yanked his hand free, backed off.

He sighed, inhaled, sighed. Kneeling again, he thrust both hands inside and took hold of the chest. This time he felt only a mild electrical tingle.

He hefted the chest out -- it felt as though it weighed thirty pounds or thereabouts -- and placed it on the rug. He consulted the note. "Okay, I open this thing and read the spell. Sounds simple enough."

He kept the note in his left hand and took hold of the circular handle atop the lid with his right. The metal box had a deep greenish tinge and its sides were scrawled with blurred symbols and some kind of strange writing. Dan thought it might be runic script, although he couldn't recall having seen runic script before.

He tugged at the lid, but the box didn't open.

Setting the note on the floor, he took hold of the handle with both hands.

The lid popped open. Next an enormous amount of intensely bright light came exploding out of the casket. Red flashes of lightning, blue flashes, yellow.

And a tremendous foul-smelling gust of wind came spilling out as well. It hit Dan hard in the midsection, sending him tumbling backward.

He sat down on the rug, hard, tipped over a stack of last week's newspapers, and went toppling back into unconsciousness.

"It is indeed most incredible that anyone might live in such a squalid and slovenly manner."

Dan became aware of a somewhat nasal voice muttering, along with a crisp brushing sound. He realized he was stretched out on his sofa, face up.

"There is, I swear, dust on every possible surface. It is no wonder that I have sneezed thrice since my arrival."

Dan, very tentatively, opened his eyes.

Lying on the rug just in front of the sofa he'd awakened on was his seven-year-old vacuum cleaner. The bag had been ripped asunder and the handle was twisted and scorched black.

He sat up, feeling briefly woozy. "What the hell happened to my vacuum?"

"The same thing, my lad, that shall befall you, unless you cease this unseemly caterwauling."

Dan blinked at the figure across the living room. "Mr. Bismarck? What are you doing in my living room -- and sweeping the floor?"

"I had to resort to the broom, since that infernal engine refused to perform properly." A thin, balding man of fifty, dressed in a wrinkled gray suit, was sweeping dust and lint from the rug into a dustpan. He sneezed once, set the dented dustpan aside.

"Yeah, but why is my tenth-grade guidance counselor doing my housecleaning?"

"Someone most assuredly needs must tackle the chore, my lad. You have neglected the task for many a --"

"I've been working on a new screenplay, which takes up most of my time." He got up, finding that he was wobbly on his feet. "But the point is --why are you here at all?"

"Because you set me free from the dread casket, wherein I was imprisoned for a tediously lengthy stretch of time." Bismarck straightened up, still holding the broom.

Dan sat down, eyeing him. "You were what was in that box?" He noticed now that the inscribed casket was sitting on his lopsided coffee table, wide open and empty.

"Imprisoned by a vicious spell put upon me by that dimwitted kinsman of your slatternly mistress," he answered. "I have assumed this bland and more palatable shape so as not to cause you unease."

"I was never, actually, that fond of Mr. Bismarck."

Bismarck carefully placed the broom against the wall. "You must take my word for it, young master, that what you see before you is a more acceptable form than my true one," he assured Dan. "Mortals, it has been my experience over the years, do not, alas, take kindly to creatures who loom ten feet high and are encrusted with large, scabby scales and happen to be sickly green in color. If, however, you would prefer to continue our discourse with me in my true --"

"No, we can settle for Mr. Bismarck." He made another attempt to stand. "How'd you know what he looked like?"

"Whilst you dozed, I shifted through your memories, which are, I might add, even more disordered than your pigsty of a domicile."

"You can do that?"

"Obviously." Bismarck, his conservative gray necktie dangling, bent and began stacking up scattered newspapers. "Is there any rational reason, my lad, for keeping these fugitive periodicals about?"

"Well, I like to read the funnies a week at a time."

"I thought not." Bismarck pointed his left hand, palm up, at the gathered papers.

The stack shimmered for a few bright seconds before disappearing completely.

Dan took a few careful steps away from where the newspapers had been. "Besides doing parlor tricks -- can you do what Elijah Higgardy says in the note?"

"I would have obliged you in any way, bringing you untold wealth and worldwide notoriety." Bismarck shook his head sadly. "That is, had you followed the protocol and recited the proper incantation at the proper time. I fear, however, that you did not fulfill the requirements of the ancient spell."

"How the hell could I? I was out cold and you probably had something to do with that, too."

"When one's vital essence has been imprisoned within a cramped little chest for endless years, my lad, a certain amount of pressure needs must build up."

"So -- what are you saying? You're backing out? Seems to me, as a demonic entity, that you should be required by cosmic law, or whatever, to do what you're supposed to do."

Bismarck laughed. It wasn't, exactly, the laugh of the real Mr. Bismarck as Dan recalled it from high school days. "You know precious little about the arcane laws of black sorcery, my lad."

"I did a Twilight Zone script when they revived the show a few seasons ago."

"It may be possible, since, I acknowledge, you did do me a very great favor in freeing me from my enforced durance, to do you a small favor." He smiled, making an unsettling chuckling noise. "What, pray tell, do you most desire?"

"Well, for starters I'd like --"

"I regret, young sir, that one favor, a solitary boon, is all that I feel in the mood to perform for you." He held up one finger and for a few seconds it looked green and scaly.

Dan sighed, resigned. "Well, I have a script -- a motion picture screenplay-- over with the Firebrand people. Could you work some magic to guarantee they'd buy it?"

Bismarck snapped his fingers, causing sparks to fly. "A simple task, to be sure," he replied. "What sort of money would such a transaction bring into your coffers?"

"A million bucks, if we're lucky."

"I note, from scanning your disordered thoughts, that with such a sum one might live quite comfortably hereabouts. At the very least, one might begin to exist in a most comfortable and sybaritic fashion."

"You're not interested in money for yourself, are you?"

"Throughout untold centuries, I must confess, the acquiring of lucre has been a major hobbyhorse of mine."

"But you're an all-powerful demonic entity. Can't you, say, just manufacture gold?"

"Most assuredly, but where, may I ask, is the fun in that?" He seated himself, very stiff and upright, upon an armchair. "You might reflect, my lad, on the fact that, when you were offered anything, you asked not for gold but for the success of this play script of yours. That most certainly indicates, I surmise, that ego is what is driving you. That and the spur of fame."

"Yeah, I suppose that's so. Do demons have egos?"

"Some have egos even larger than mine. I have a particular enemy who...Ah, but that's neither here nor there."

"Is your enemy a demon, too? Is he the one who sent the lightning bolt that -- "

"Now that I'm up and around again, we need not be concerned with that," said Bismarck.

"Now then, young Master Daniel, ere I embark on the task of persuading these moguls to purchase your script, I needs must familiarize myself much more thoroughly with this community. Hollywood has no doubt changed much since I was last out of the cask."

"How do you figure to fill yourself in?"

"I shall begin by a course of reading and studying. Then we shall embark on a few illuminating tours of the enclave and study its present natives."

"That's going to take time."

"I have, being immortal, an infinite supply."

"I don't. Besides which, this guy Medlum or Washburn may not be in charge of Firebrand all that long. Executives have a high turnover in this town, so we really have to hit while --"

"Variety. The Hollywood Reporter."

"Hum?"

"I have procured those names from your tangled thoughts. You seem to think those journals will provide me background on the motion picture business as well as the present folkways and mores of this benighted community."

"I suppose so, sure. I have a big stack of -- Shit, did you zap those, too?"

"You needn't fret, my lad." Bismarck etched a small circle in the air with his left thumb.

There followed a loud crackling, popping sound. A pile of trade dailies appeared on the throw rug in front of the tiny imitation fireplace.

"That's very impressive," observed Dan. "If you did a trick like that in front of Washburn, he'd be eager to sign."

"No, I intend to work much more subtly and cunningly than that," the demon assured him. "Am I correct in assuming that you are not equipped to provide me with a cup of mulled wine?"

"No, but I could send out for --"

"We will let it pass." Bismarck caused the top copies of the trades to float over to his lap. "I shall commence my studies at once."

THE NEXT DAY was filled with sun and wind. When Nancy showed up at Dan's humble cottage early in the afternoon, her long red hair was windblown. "You were extremely cryptic over the phone," she accused in a whisper as she lingered on his welcome mat.

"Lots of people have told me that lately," he replied, also in a whisper. "Thing is, it's difficult talking about a demon when he's 'sitting in the same room with you.

"Is he extremely awful looking?"

"Not at the moment, no.

She straightened her shoulders. "Well, I'd better go in and have a look at him. After all, he is, you know, my demon."

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean? My cousin left him to me."

"True, except I didn't quite follow all those instructions perfectly and...all he's agreed to is one favor."

"That's okay. If I think about it carefully, with maybe some input from you, I

can ask for' something that'll help my acting career or guarantee me a --"

"One favor for me, Nancy."

"For you? Hey, that's awfully darn selfish of you, Dan. I mean, poor old Mr. Tripple risked death and possibly eternal damnation to see that the ancient chest was delivered to --"

"Did you or did you not, Nancy, drop that thing off on me last night? Didn't you say I was to experiment with the chest? Risk my life, in fact, face a little eternal damnation of my own because you were afraid to mess with it?"

"That's so, yes. Still, though, I assumed you were one of my few honest and upright friends, that you wouldn't pull a Hollywood shuffle on me."

"Hiya, sweetheart! How's tricks?" Bismarck appeared in the doorway beside Dan. He was clad now in prewashed jeans, a designer paisley shirt, Italian boots and skier sunglasses.

Nancy's forehead wrinkled. "This isn't your agent, is it?"

"No, it's your demon. Bismarck, Nancy Quillen. Nancy, Bismarck."

"I thought he'd been bottled up for decades or something. How come he talks like that?"

"Relax, hon. I got hip since I popped out of the box."

Dan shook his head. "He reads a lot," he explained. "He found some old Hollywood novels in my office and he thinks --"

"I read through all the trades, too, sis." Pushing Dan back inside, Bismarck advanced and kissed the actress on the cheek. "You got a whole lot of class, hon."

"Thanks, but I --"

"C'mon inside and let me explain what I got in mind for you two kiddies."

Very reluctantly, Nancy entered Dan's small living room. "It's much neater in here," she observed.

"That was Bismarck." Dan retreated over to his sofa and sat. "What plans are you alluding to?" he asked the demon.

Bismarck perched on the arm of an armchair, swinging one snakeskin boot slowly to and fro. "Like I said, Danny Boy, I have been eyeballing the trade sheets, soaking up the info, and I --"

"What about old Mr. Tripple?" Nancy wanted to know. "Did you do that to him A

and my best chair?"

The demon held up both hands in an I'm-as-innocent-as-a-lamb gesture. "I've got some powerful ancient enemies," he explained. "Especially an uncouth demon who calls himself Shug Nrgyzb. The old coot got himself tangled up with a long-running feud and --"

"Enemies who can throw lightning bolts under doors?" she asked, hands on hips.

"Everything is under control, babe."

She said, "Are we, Dan and I, likely to get caught in the crossfire or whatever?"

"Cool it, sis. Not to worry. Now that I'm up and around and looking good, everything will be okay," he assured her. "If you bozos are through heckling, I can get down to brass tacks." Bismarck snapped his fingers, producing red and yellow sparks, and a page tom from The Hollywood Reporter appeared in his hand. "What I've decided, kids, is to make us all rich. Get me? So what we are going to do is --"

"Hey, what about my screenplay? You promised you'd --"

"Oh, your screenplay, huh?" Nancy seated herself beside Dan and gave him a sharp poke in the ribs. "This guy promises only one darn single favor and you, instead of asking him to free me from a career where I mostly do commercials devoted to products that people use exclusively in the toilet, you selfishly think only of --"

"Whoa, Nance," suggested the demon. "Hear me out, okay? In yesterday's rags there was this yam about a hotshot kid named Dinky Macmillan. Seems the little toad just walked off the set of the remake of Bomba the Jungle Boy, a \$74,000,000 flick lensing over at Firebrand."

"His father is who actually runs his career," Nancy told the demon. "He decided the \$13,000,000 salary they're paying his boy isn't sufficient. Considering that Dinky has to run around wearing nothing but an animal skin and thereby risk sunburn, skin rash, and prickly heat."

"Thirteen million smackers for a whelp who ain't even old enough to shave," said Bismarck, his eyes glowing redly behind the tinted lenses. "Now suppose, gang, that you walk into this goniff's office -- Washburn is his name -- you stroll into his office and you inform the gink that you've got a boy who can act rings around Dinky? He's perfect for Bomba and, the beauty part is, the kid'll do the gig for a measly ten million bucks."

Dan held up his left hand and started ticking off fingers. "Firstly, by now every kid star in town, male and female, has been offered to Firebrand to take over the role. Secondly, Dinky Macmillan's dad is noted for this kind of maneuver. By Monday, Washburn and his partners will be begging Dinky to come

back and they'll up the salary a couple million dollars."

"Dinky won't be able to play Bomba." Bismarck grinned.

"Sure, he will. Once they promise him, say, \$15,000,000, he'll jump into that leopard skin and risk poison ivy, poison oak, and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. There is no --"

"The poor little bugger broke his leg this morning. In three places. Won't be able to cinemact for several months. Real pity.

"Nancy asked, "Where'd you hear that?"

"Trust me, darling, it's true." Bismarck checked his gold wristwatch. "Dinky took a serious fall down the stairs in his posh Bel Air mansion about sixteen minutes ago. Make that seventeen."

Nancy grabbed hold of Dan's arm, squeezing hard. "Can you make things like that happen?" she asked the demon in a faint voice.

Bismarck merely chuckled in reply. "Continue, Dano. You were, helpfully, pointing out the flaws in my plan. Pray, go on."

After swallowing twice, Dan said, "Well, thirdly then. Thirdly, Washburn won't see us. We don't have sufficient clout."

"You'll have clout. I'll manufacture that."

"Possibly, but we also lack a child actor."

"On the contrary, pal." The demon stood up and spread his arms wide. "You got me, yours truly."

"It won't work," said Nancy. "There is no possible way that a demon from the fiery pits of --"

"Listen up, sister. I been studying this Dinky." Bismarck sat again, leaned back in the armchair. "I perused the trades, media mags, newspaper interviews. The kid is cute, for one thing. He's got a sweet innocent face, but with a touch of mischief. He's got just the right amount of the right kind of freckles and he's got that appealing, politely unkempt blond hair. Mothers in the audience would just love to mother the little bastard, fathers would be proud to sire a kid like that. He's independent but not defiant, gentle but no sissy. He gets good grades but he's one of the boys and no kissass. Little girls sitting there in the movie palaces and the multiplexes have got the hots for him, boys pretend to loathe him but secretly every blessed one of them would like to be just like him. He's got the appeal of a puppy and the soul of a midget conman. You can't beat that."

"Maybe so, but how do --"

"Do you believe that Dinky sprang in that form out of his mom's loins? Naw, nope, his pappy, a showbiz-crazed goon, worked for years molding him into what he is today. It's like developing a new kind of rose or a new cough medicine." Bismarck rose up again. "But what mortals can do over a period of years, any self-respecting demon can bring off in a couple weeks tops. I can change my looks and persona and become a kid star."

And he was right.

It was a little over three months later that Dan moved into his mansion in Bel Air. Originally built by a silent movie cowboy and more recently resided in by an extremely, though briefly, successful rock group, a multimillionaire from some Arab country Dan wasn't previously aware existed and a conservative radio talk show host, the huge house was a mix of Moroccan, Gothic and imitation Frank Lloyd Wright. It sat on an acre and a half of land that was mostly covered with trees and foliage uprooted in Brazil and transplanted here back in the early 1980s. There was also a miniature railroad, large enough for small people to ride in, curving through the tropical jungle and circling the miniature golf course.

On the afternoon his agent fell dead, Dan, wearing sky blue shorts, was sprawled out on a canvas chair by his Olympic-size pool. He was staring, somewhat morosely, into the flickering blue water. Nancy was sitting, somewhat morosely, on the turquoise tiles at the edge of the pool. Dressed in a minimal crimson swimsuit, she was dangling her long tan legs in the water at the deep end.

"Look on the bright side," she was advising.

"Which is?"

"We're all rich now."

"Money isn't everything."

The red-haired actress gestured at the mansion that loomed up behind them, its slanting red tile roof glowing in the bright sunny haze. "Isn't this a dream house we're living in?"

"Three or four dreams, actually, jammed together."

"Washburn probably would have liked your script." She got up, started drying her legs with an enormous orange towel. "It was, after all, purely by chance that the poor man died just as he sat down to read it."

"People don't often spontaneously combust," he pointed out. "I looked up the statistics. Washburn of Firebrand Pictures was only the fourth such case in the United States this year."

"Three other cases, Dan, mean it isn't unique."

"Those three all took place here in Southern California- since Bismarck popped out of his box."

She walked, barefooted, over to where he was stretched out in the afternoon sun. Leaning forward, she said quietly, "He doesn't want you to call him that anymore, remember?"

"He's over at the studio. So why whisper?" He shook his head. "Kenny McNulty. What a nitwit name he picked for himself."

"The name was Washburn's idea, rest his soul," she said as she toweled her back. "I happen to think it's a really cute name for a kid."

Shrugging, Dan said, "Another thing I'm not pleased about is our posing as Bismarck's guardians."

"Well, we are his guardians. And acting as such made it very much easier to get Washburn to take a look at your script. There's nothing wrong with a little dishonesty if it furthers our careers."

"Yeah, I don't mind dishonesty that gets me another screen credit or you a part in a picture. But dishonesty that turns Bismarck into the second most popular kid actor in Hollywood in just three months is unsettling."

"It is fascinating, though, how that little dickens became a major star, got the lead in the remake of Bomba the Jungle Boy and has already brought in over \$5,000,000."

"Little dickens? Nancy, he may look like the second cutest twelve-year-old in America now, but he's really a huge scabrous monster."

"You really, Dan, don't know that for certain."

"Sure, I do. He told me."

"That could be an exaggeration. There's an awful lot of bullshit handed out in this town."

"Why would anybody pretend to be a disgusting, loathsome creature?"

"He probably wanted to impress you. I mean, he was closed in that casket all that time, scrunched up in there feeling bad. It's simply an ego thing, is my guess."

"I know all about his damned ego. That's why I'm Kenny McNulty's guardian rather than the second most popular screenwriter in Hollywood."

"He promises you'll write his next movie, the remake of Little Miss Marker," she reminded. "And you're supposed to write a good, attentiongetting part for me."

"Nobody's going to want him to be in that. A cute little girl is what's called for. Shirley Temple was the first one."

"He says the switch is what'll make it a hit. Kenny starring as Little Mister Marker. It's going to be a terrific family picture for the Christmas season."

Dan, gathering up his yellow robe, got up off the chair. "You talk to him when I'm not around, huh? You seem to know a hell of a lot about what he has in mind."

"Granted he's a demon inside," conceded the actress, settling into the canvas chair he'd abandoned. "But he's an awfully cute kid. Bright, too. And when he smiles with that little freckled face of his, it's ... heartwarming."

"206."

"What?"

"Freckles. Bismarck has exactly 9.06 freckles. He worked that out on our computer, using data gathered in several national surveys about cuteness and likability among preteens."

"Well, even if it is calculated, it works." She gestured again at the mansion. "His cuteness brought us this."

The phone sitting on the poolside drink table beeped sedately.

Squatting gracefully, Nancy answered. "McNulty residence."

"McNulty residence? What I'm looking for, dear, is the Danny Barner residence. Has that little schmuck forced Dan to change his name to his?"

"Oh, hi, Scotty, how're you doing? This is Nancy." She clamped her hand over the mouthpiece. "It's your sleazy erstwhile agent. He sounds annoyed."

"Tell him to go -- Nope, wait." He took the phone from her. "Scotty, old buddy, been a long time. How are you?"

"I'm livid, enraged, incensed and about to turn vindictive, Danny."

"Don't call me Danny. It --"

"My lawyers will be descending on you shortly, pal. Letting that goniff Lanzer at Lanzer-Brightside Talent represent you and that odious kid is a breach of your agreement with me."

"We never had anything but a verbal contract, Scotty."

"Not so, Daniel, and like hell. I dug out my copy this very morning."

"Bullshit. There is no such thing."

"I've got one. I faxed a copy over to my attorneys, three of the nastiest bastards in the West. They started chuckling with glee before half the damned thing had come oozing out of the fax at their end. To put it in layman's terms, Danny, we have got you by the goonies. I am going to get half of what you earn managing this waif. Plus a goodly piece of what darling little Kenny himself earns. So don't try to --that's funny."

"What's funny?"

"It's really very odd, Danny, but my skin seems to have started giving off smoke," said his former agent, sounding perplexed. "Wisps of smoke are spilling out through my shirt front and from my collar. Hey, my ankles are blowing smoke rings. Listen, I don't have a medical book handy. Can you look up these symptoms and tell --"

"Sounds like spontaneous combustion, Scotty. Quick, dive in the shower and turn on the cold water!"

"Oh, god! I'm turning into a flaming--"

A huge whooshing sound followed, then a harsh crackling. Scotty screamed once and the phone went dead.

Dan looked at the phone in his hand, shuddered, and flung it into the pool. "He killed Scotty."

"Who killed Scotty?"

"Bismarck. Kenny. Set him on fire."

"Really, Dan, the little guy is over at the Firebrand studio right now looping dialogue on Bomba. There's no possibility he could be over on Rodeo Drive setting fire to your old agent."

When Dan shook his head, he found his whole body started shaking along with it. "Demons can get you from a distance. That's what sorcery and black magic is all about, Nancy."

"I can't really believe he'd do anything like that. He's really become such a cute little kid."

"He's killing people," shouted Dan, taking hold of both her bare arms. "We've got to control him."

She pulled free of him. "That won't be at all easy," she warned.

A sneak preview of Bomba the Jungle Boy was held on a warm, windy night late

last year. Bodnoff, age twenty-six, the man who had headed Firebrand since Washburn's fiery demise, was there with Nina Vertigo, the blonde former fashion model who'd made her screen debut in Birdbath III. This time, unlike numerous prior occasions, she recognized Dan. In fact, she bestowed an impressive bear hug on him in the lobby of the Westwood theater and kissed him fervently in the ear. All the movie industry and media people who were there had no trouble in recognizing Dan and Nancy, who had a new shade of red hair just for tonight. Even Haskell & Delbert, the noted television movie reviewers, were friendly, both pretending that they hadn't actually given Dan's Birdbath III their lowest rating, four thumbs down.

Bismarck was in an especially good mood and evidenced none of the nasty side he sometimes showed on the sound stage. He made cute, sly remarks to the Firebrand executives, their spouses and dates. He playfully patted Nina Vertigo on the backside, pretended to drop popcorn down Trina Boop's cleavage. For a quiet midweek screening in Westwood, this one drew quite a crowd of important people. As Trina mentioned, "I really, you know, felt that I absolutely must attend." She was, some noted, looking even more glassy-eyed than usual.

Bismarck, in his appealing Kenny McNulty persona, was a very charming young man. He had all the charisma of Dinky Macmillan-- who didn't attend because a second fall in his mansion had broken three of his ribs -- plus a special something of his own. Several grandmothers in the preview audience sighed as he strolled down the aisle with Dan and Nancy. "Cute as a bug's ear," was the general opinion among them. Kenny was a slim, healthy-looking lad with good posture. His fresh-scrubbed face, dotted with its 206 freckles, had an enormous appeal.

He passed the wheelchair of a Vietnam veteran that was parked in the aisle midway. Crouching, he carried on a brief conversation with the vet and they both laughed a lot. Photographers from three newspapers and a news service got shots of that, video cameras from two local channels and one national news show got footage. For a preview on a Week night in Westwood, there was an impressive media turnout. As Billi Jean Nolan of KTLA-TV remarked, "I just felt that I had to attend this one and cover it for the station."

"Did you do that?" Dan asked in a whisper as the lights started to go dim.

"Do what," asked the guileless Bismarck, "dim the lights?"

"Compel all these halfwits to come here tonight?"

Bismarck shrugged, giving Dan one of his most winning grins. "Gee, Unca Dan, how the heck could I, golly, do that? You think I cast a magical spell or something that compelled 'em to come trooping here like mindless zombies or somethin'?" He laughed ingratiatingly. "Gosh, the next thing you'll be sayin' is that I'm gonna use some kinds mind control to make sure they all fill out their darned preview cards the right way."

Nancy, sitting on the other side of the demon, gave him a small nudge in the side. "Too much, soft-pedal it," she advised.

"You think so, Auntie Nance?" he asked in a low voice.

"Too many gee whiz touches, yes. And, Kenny, please, don't roll your cute little eyes so much. They're going to think you're on drugs."

"Thanks for the tip." He patted her on the arm. "Now what say we settle down and enjoy my debut flicker?"

The reaction to Bombs was astounding. It drew a standing ovation from the 300 people in the small theater before the second reel had finished. After the film there was another standing ovation during which almost everyone yelled, "Bravo!" enthusiastically and several of the seats got busted from people jumping up and down on them in their fervor. The opinion cards carried opinions that ranged from "Marvelous" and "Absolutely magnificent" to "Earthshaking" and "I have never been so moved by a motion picture."

There were no incidents, or so Dan thought. Next morning, however, he found out from an account in the paper that an elderly woman had succumbed to a heart attack during the final minutes of the showing.

He confronted Bismarck on that at the breakfast table out on the mosaic patio. "Haven't I been warning you about this sort of stuff? You promised to cease destroying people, Bismarck."

Bismarck smiled his best Kenny smile and looked up from his bowl of oatmeal. "A very stubborn old broad, Uncle Dan," he said, reaching for his orange juice. "I simply couldn't get sufficient control of her disordered mind. Can you believe she was going to write down that my maiden flick was 'Putrid?'" He gave a boyish laugh. "You'll note, by the way, we got a nice mention of the film in her obit. You can't have too much publicity."

When the Academy Award nominations came out early this year, there was Kenny McNulty among the five nominated for the Best Actor Award. The demon was elated, but it didn't improve his disposition a great deal. In fact, during the next few months Bismarck added nearly a dozen names to his shitlist and also succeeded in crossing off over half of them. He refrained, probably because Dan had accused him of using the method inordinately, from causing any further spontaneous combustions among the residents of Greater Los Angeles who'd annoyed him, insulted him, or stood too determinedly in the way of his burgeoning career as a child star or in the way of either Dan or Nancy. The secretary of the LanzerBrightside Talent Agency, who'd spoken of him as a "lousy spoiled brat" behind his back, drowned in very shallow water during an impulsive midnight swim in the surf off Malibu; a sweet, curly-haired ten-year-old girl, who was rumored to be a strong contender for the leading role in the remake of Little Miss Marker, was arrested for selling cocaine to a plainclothes cop; a two-time Oscar-winning screenwriter, who'd just about persuaded Bodnoff at Firebrand to let him write the next Kenny McNulty script instead of Dan, was killed in a runaway forest fire that hit only his neighborhood out in one of the canyons.

Bismarck's most flamboyant attack, though again uncredited, took place in the spring in front of an audience of several million television viewers. The Haskell & Delbert Movie Time show' was going out live that week. Haskell, the fat one, was arguing with Delbert about the merits of Bomba the Jungle Boy. He disagreed, quite sarcastically, with his partner's enthusiastic approval of the film and his praise for what he termed Kenny McNulty's "deft debut performance."

After referring to Kenny as "a knock-kneed underage Tarzan wannabe with less than ten percent of the charm of Dinky Macmillan," Haskell began to render one of his famous two-thumbs-down verdicts, when suddenly he brought both hands up to his chest, muttered something in what scholars later identified as Ancient Persian -- a language he had no knowledge of -- and toppled out of his chair, dead from a massive heart attack.

The fat private detective showed up at the mansion the day of Haskell's funeral. Bismarck had insisted on attending and Nancy, who had somewhat more control over him than Dan, went along to make sure he didn't dance on the departed film critic's grave or cause the coffin to go up in a burst of sulfurous flames. The demon had threatened to do both. Dan remained home, struggling with the latest revisions of his Little Mister Marker script.

Bismarck had insisted on, and persuaded Bodnoff to go along with, a scene wherein Kenny taps the legs of a crippled Vietnam veteran and causes him to rise up and walk. Dan had maintained that it would be a hard scene to get much comedy out of, but Bodnoff pointed out that all the great Hollywood comedies, such as It's A Wonderful Life, mixed in a little sentiment with the laughs.

LITTLE MR. MARKER: Heck, things ain't anywhere near as bad as they seem, fella.

VET: They're worse, you little dork. You weren't in 'Nam, so --

The front door chimes sounded.

On the wall of Dan's large den one of the security system screens clicked to life and showed him the slightly distorted image of a chubby, rumped man of about forty who was standing on the red tile front porch. He held a scruffy hand-tooled briefcase to his chest.

Dan got up and walked over to the mike. "Yeah, what?"

"Mr. Barner, is it?" The pudgy man had a European accent and he looked familiar.

"That's right. So?"

"I'm Ernie Medium and --"

"Do I know you?" The name seemed vaguely familiar.

"I'm a private investigator. I was working for your agent, Scotty Blackett."

"Former agent," corrected Dan. "What's the problem?"

"There's something important I think we must discuss," said the plump detective.

"Does it involve money?"

"In a way, yes."

After hesitating for a few seconds, Dan reached out and flipped a toggle on the wall panel. "Come on in, Mr. Medium," he invited. "I'll meet you in the front parlor, on your left as you enter. By the way, I'm sure I've seen you before."

"Walter Slezak."

"Beg pardon?"

"People tell me I look a good deal like Walter Slezak."

"Him I never heard of"

"A character actor, back in the 1940s."

"Before my time. I'll see you in the front parlor"

"Thank you," said the detective. "I'm sure this will prove interesting to you."

And it did.

"That's a very impressive take," said Dan.

"Don't tease him," said Nancy.

Bismarck was standing in the middle of the vast twilight living room of the mansion. His fists were clenched, his freckles were glowing bright red, and greenish smoke was swirling out of his ears. "Assassin," he said in a voice that was much deeper than the one he used as Kenny McNulty. "Viper, Judas!"

"Me or the private eye?"

"You, you snake!" Bismarck pointed an accusing finger at him.

A thin beam of sizzling blue lightning came shooting forth.

Dan managed to dodge it and it incinerated a potted rubber plant to his right.

"Kenny, don't lose your temper," cried Nancy as she took a step in his direction.

"Are you in on this too, sweetheart?"

Regaining his balance, Dan said, "Look, all I did was talk to a sleazy private eye who's trying to blackmail us. Why are you --"

"Don't you know who that was you let into our house?" The smoke coming out of Bismarck's ears was purplish now.

"Ernie Medlum. He was a friend of Scotty, who hired him to look into your background. When he discovered you didn't have any background, he --"

"You should have recognized him."

"I did, but that was only because he looks a lot like Walter Brennan," said Dan. "No, Walter Slezak."

"The traces are all around," said Bismarck, angrily sniffing at the air. "That was him!"

"Who?" asked Nancy. "Really, Kenny, you have to try to be calm. I don't know a heck of a lot about demonic medicine, but it can't be good for you to be spouting smoke out of your ears, hon."

"That was Shug Nrgyzb, you dimwits! He assumed human form to sneak into my stronghold while I was away."

He turned green and scaly for near to five seconds and then was the regular Kenny again.

Dan said, "Your age-old enemy and nemesis, the powerful demon who's vowed to destroy you?"

"That Shug Nrgyzb, yeah."

Nancy took a few more very slow steps toward him. "You told us you were far more powerful than he is. So if he shows up while you're here, you can merely --"

"I fudged a little on the facts," admitted the demon. "He's about twice as powerful as I am, were the truth known. Now that he's had a looksee at my lair, he's in a better position to come back inside and destroy me." He started to point at Dan again. "And it was you who let him in. Had you not, the rules of the netherworld specify that --"

"Can't you do anything to keep him away?" Dan had dropped to the floor when the finger started to swing in his direction.

Bismarck forgot about pointing at him and rubbed at his chin instead. "I might be able to fortify this place with sufficient spells and charms," he said finally, glancing uneasily around. "But I don't know what my chances would be out in the open."

"Kenny," reminded Nancy, "you have to go outside sometimes. I mean, for

instance, day after tomorrow the Mature Women Reporters' League is going to give you the Golden Bosko Award at that luncheon in --"

"Tell those old skwacks I've come down with the pip," he said. "Dan, you go in my place and accept that stupid dornick. Whip up about 500 words of crap and tell those old broads I dictated it to you."

"That's not going to help your image any," warned Nancy, frowning at him.

"Screw my image," he told her. "For now I'm concentrating on survival."

After a few days had passed Bismarck began to relax and became more like the old Kenny McNulty. He had spent long hours incanting and spell casting. Odd, musty-smelling mystical volumes materialized in the living room and he enlisted Dan and Nancy in photocopying pertinent passages from them. He turned green three times, a reddish purple once. At one point the demon had the ten volume set of the works of Count Monstrodamus piled up on the butcher block kitchen table. He was using the infamous Prague edition of 1813, the one rumored to be bound in human skin. All the research and black magic, according to Bismarck, had succeeded in fortifying the mansion against demonic attack.

He still refused to leave the grounds, not even when Show Biz Tonite! begged him to come in and tape a seven-minute interview. He also refused to allow Lori Pike from Interview! into the house to do a segment with him. "You can't tell what shape Shug Nrgyzb might assume," he pointed out.

Bodnoff at Firebrand was incensed and ticked off because Kenny McNulty wouldn't do any public appearances to promote his Oscar nomination, but Dan was able to convince him that under-saturation was building up suspense and that, very soon, Kenny was going to emerge from seclusion.

During the third week of his withdrawal from public life Bismarck slipped into Dan's den late one afternoon. He straddled a straight-back wooden chair, gave one of his rueful Kenny McNulty smiles and said, "We got a problem."

"You mean in addition to your being besieged by a rival demon and our alienating Bodnoff and a multitude of lesser Firebrand-moguls since you've become a hermit?"

"I admire the way stress doesn't diminish your wiseass capabilities," said the demon. "What I've been brooding about, Daniel, is the Academy Award."

"You probably won't win. So if you're not at the ceremonies next week, it won't --"

"I'm going to win."

"Bomba was your first picture and you're up against two dying oldtimers, a reigning hunk and a guy making a comeback after a long slump. The odds are against you."

"It's too late to reverse the spell. I'm a shoo in."

"Spell?" Dan pushed back from his desk and slowly stood. "You used black magic and sorcery to assure that all the members of the Academy will vote for you?"

"Well, that's more certain than full-page ads in the trades, bribery, or coercion."

"But it isn't honest."

"Hey, this is Hollywood. What's honesty got to do with anything?"

Dan sat again, slumping. "You really can cast a spell that makes all those people vote for you?"

"A cinch, piece of cake," answered Bismarck. "The problem is that I can't turn it off now."

"I can accept for you or Nancy can. Yeah, she'd be better. A pretty redhead in a striking gown will distract them from the fact that you're hiding under the bed. You're absolutely certain about winning?"

"Didn't I rig the damned nomination in the first place?"

"You did?"

"I don't take anything for granted."

Slumping further, Dan said, "Okay, so we get Nancy to accept your Oscar. I'll write the acceptance speech. You'll say how humbly grateful you are and that you expect to be back in the public eye very soon -- You are, you know, going to have to resurface pretty soon. We'll make up some excuse that sounds okay but doesn't imply you've gone goofy, are taking a drug cure, or have a serious social disease."

Bismarck frowned deeply. "But, hey, this is a major event in my life."

"You've been a demon for untold centuries," Dan reminded. "In all that time you must have done something more important than winning a statuette."

"But I happen to be Kenny McNulty at the moment. I want, naturally, to savor the award. When your peers single you out for praise, that means something."

"Your peers are only honoring you, Bismarck, because you worked a supernatural hoodoo on them."

"Are you saying that I'm not gifted and charming? That millions of movie-goers don't love and adore me?"

"You're okay as a kid actor."

"What about the lunch boxes?"

"Okay, the lunch boxes with your Kenny McNulty face on them are selling very well nationwide. What sort of spell did you use for that?"

Jumping up, he spread his little arms wide. "None," said the demon. "I didn't use a bit of magic or sorcery on any of our merchandising stuff. Not on the lunch boxes, the stupid toys, the comic book, the underwear or the CD-ROM games. I wanted to test my appeal, my charisma."

"Actually, though, it isn't you they're buying," he pointed out. "It's Kenny, a concoction."

"My concoction," he said. "And those millions who idolize me are expecting me to be there in person to accept that Oscar next week."

"Vanity."

"I'm not vain," insisted the demon. "Besides, if I do a no-show it'll probably affect the video cassette sales on Bomba as well as the box office for Little Mister Marker come next Christmas."

"What about Shrub Nurgrub -- won't he pounce if you go out in public?"

"Shug Nrgyzb," corrected Bismarck. "Don't let him catch you mispronouncing his name."

"Well -- won't you be in danger if you step off the estate?"

"I've been thinking about some counterspells. Very powerful stuff that ought to keep him off me," said the demon. "I think I'll be able to keep him at bay long enough to pick up the Oscar and maybe go to a couple of parties afterward. And if that works, then I'll probably be able to work out spells to keep him off for longer periods. That way my blossoming career won't go down the old toilet."

"It's worth trying then."

Bismarck moved to the doorway. "I want you in a traditional tux and I'll design Nancy's dress myself and materialize it. Simple, emerald green to flatter her red hair and cut down to about here in front." He tapped his sternum. "Get in touch with that halfwit Bodnoff and tell him to start his publicity mills grinding. I'm going to be there on Oscar night."

The evening of the Academy Awards was hot and unsettlingly clear. There was a harsh, bristly wind blowing in from the ocean. When the studio-provided pale gold limo carrying Dan, Nancy, and Bismarck pulled up in front of the Marion Davies Memorial Pavilion in Santa Monica, the demon said, "You kiddies hop out first."

Frowning, Nancy asked, "What's wrong?"

"Not a blessed thing, kiddo."

"All your freckles have turned pale."

"Well, I'm picking up a few negative vibrations is all. Nothing serious," he told her. "Shoo. I'll follow."

"Is he out there?" asked Dan as the chauffeur opened the rear door "Do you sense him."

"Listen to that crowd of nitwits," said the demon as he smiled a wide Kenny McNulty smile. He gave Dan a propelling shove in the small of his back.

Dan bumped into Nancy and she went stumbling out of the car and onto the sidewalk. "Thanks for helping me make a graceful entrance," she said over her shoulder as she straightened up.

"Nobody's paying any attention to us."

There were hundreds of enthusiastic fans on each side of the wide walkway leading to the entrance of the immense rose-colored pavilion, held back by red velvet ropes and uniformed guards.

After Dan and Nancy had walked a few steps along the pathway, a large blonde woman in a leather jacket spotted Kenny McNulty in the open doorway of the limo.

"It's little Kenny! Hi, sweetheart!"

Dan took hold of Nancy's arm. "Let's move out of the way in case they try to charge him."

"I feel extremely uneasy."

They took a few more steps and Dan suddenly halted. "There's Ernie Medium," he said, noticing the fat private detective in the front row of fans on their right, pressed tight between a gray-haired woman and a teenager with a green crewcut.

"The one Kenny thinks is Shug Nrgyzb?"

"Him." Turning, Dan waved at Bismarck, who had one small foot out of the car. "Stay back in there. It's him!"

All sound seemed suddenly to be siphoned away. A sharp, absolute silence closed in and held on for several seconds. The clarity of the waning day intensified.

Then the palm trees that lined the street started to rattle and clatter. The

ground began to shudder violently and the pavilion made huge rumbling groans.

Dan put an arm around Nancy. "Quake!"

"Holy Christ!" She hugged him, shutting her eyes.

The pavement all around them started cracking and bouncing.

Dan saw Medium again. Standing apart from the frightened crowd, arms folded, a quirky smile touching his plump face. He was staring directly at the limo.

The fans were screaming, shouting, cursing.

A large jagged crack came sluicing along the street, heading toward the car that Bismarck was still sitting in. It grew wider and wider.

Bismarck thrust himself half out of the car, eyes narrowed, both hands, fingers spread wide, pointing at Medlum. He was chanting something that Dan couldn't hear.

The crack became suddenly as wide as the street and the limo, Bismarck and the driver who'd been huddling beside it all fell into the opening chasm.

Dan saw harsh yellowish flames come whooshing up from below the ground. Then the car vanished and the ground shut with a tremendous slamming bang.

The pavilion shivered five more times, a life-sized statue of Marion Davies swayed, teetered, and fell off the roof. Then the quake was over.

Dan scanned the crowds but there was no sign of Ernie Medium. "He did this," he said. "Made the damned earth open up and swallow Bismarck."

Nancy started to cry. "Shit," she said, sobbing against his chest. "Just when I was starting to get someplace in this town, this had to happen."