

The Tenants

William Tenn

When Miss Kerstenberg, his secretary, informed Sydney Blake over the interoffice communicator that two gentlemen had just entered and expressed a desire to rent space in the building, Blake's "Well, show them in, Esther, show them right in," was bland enough to have loosened the cap on a jar of Vaseline. It had been only two days since Wellington Jimm & Sons, Inc., Real Estate, had appointed him resident agent in the McGowan Building, and the prospect of unloading an office or two in Old Unrentable this early in his assignment was mightily pleasing.

Once, however, he had seen the tenants-to-be, he felt much less certain. About practically everything.

They were exactly alike in every respect but one: size. The first was tall, very, *very* tall—close to seven feet, Blake estimated as he rose to welcome them. The man was bent in two places: forward at the hips and backward at the shoulders, giving the impression of being hinged instead of jointed. Behind him rolled a tiny button of a man, a midget's midget, but except for that the tall man's twin. They both wore starched, white shirts and black hats, black coats, black ties, black suits, black socks, and shoes of such incredible blackness as almost to drown the light waves that blundered into them.

They took seats and smiled at Blake—in unison.

"Uh, Miss Kerstenberg," he said to his secretary, who still stood in the doorway.

"Yes, Mr. Blake?" she asked briskly.

"Uh, nothing, Miss Kerstenberg. Nothing at all." Regretfully, he watched her shut the door and heard her swivel chair squeak as she went back to work in the outer office. It was distinctly unfortunate that, not being telepathic, she had been unable to receive his urgent thought message to stay and lend some useful moral support.

Oh, well. You couldn't expect Dun & Bradstreet's best to be renting offices in the McGowan. He sat down and offered them cigarettes from his brand-new humidior. They declined.

"We would like," the tall man said in a voice composed of many heavy breaths, "to rent a floor in your building."

"The thirteenth floor," said the tiny man in exactly the same voice.

Sydney Blake lit a cigarette and drew on it carefully. A whole floor! You certainly couldn't judge by appearances.

"I'm sorry," he told them. "You can't have the thirteenth floor. But—"

"Why not?" the tall man breathed. He looked angry.

"Chiefly because there isn't any thirteenth floor. Many buildings don't have one. Since tenants consider them unlucky, we call the floor above the twelfth the fourteenth. If you gentlemen will look at our directory, you will see that there are no offices listed beginning with the number 13. However, if you're interested in that much space, I believe we can accommodate you on the sixth—"

"It seems to me," the tall man said very mournfully, "that if someone wants to rent a *particular* floor, the least a renting agent can do is let him have it."

"The very least," the tiny man agreed. "Especially since no complicated mathematical questions are being asked in the first place."

Blake held on to his temper with difficulty and let out a friendly chuckle instead. "I would be very happy to rent the thirteenth floor to you—if we had one. But I can't very well rent something to you that doesn't exist, now can I?" He held his hands out, palms up, and gave them another we-are-three-intelligent-gentlemen-who-are-quite-close-in-spirit chuckle. "The twelfth and fourteenth

floors both have very little unoccupied space, I am happy to say. But I'm certain that another part of the McGowan Building will do you very nicely." Abruptly he remembered that protocol had almost been violated. "My name," he told them, touching the desk plate lightly with a mani-cured forefinger, "is Sydney Blake. And who, might I—"

"Tohu and Bohu," the tall man said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Tohu, I said, and Bohu. I'm Tohu." He pointed at his minuscule twin. "He's Bohu. Or, as a matter of occasional fact, vice versa."

Sydney Blake considered that until some ash broke off his cigarette and splattered grayly on his well-pressed pants. Foreigners. He should have known from their olive skins and slight, unfamiliar accents. Not that it made any difference in the McGowan. Or in any building managed by Wellington Jimm & Sons, Inc., Real Estate. But he couldn't help wondering where in the world people had such names and such disparate sizes.

"Very well, Mr. Tohu. And—er, Mr. Bohu. Now, the problem as I see it—"

"There really isn't any problem," the tall man told him, slowly, emphatically, reasonably, "except for the fuss you keep kicking up, young man. You have a building with floors from one to twenty-four. We want to rent the thirteenth, which is apparently vacant. Now if you were as businesslike as you should be and rented this floor to us without further argument—"

"Or logical hairsplitting," the tiny man inserted.

"—why then, we could be happy, your employers would be happy, and you *should* be happy. It's really a very simple transaction and one which a man in your position should be able to manage with ease."

"How the hell can I—" Blake began yelling before he remembered Professor Scoggins in Advanced Realty Seminar II ("Remember, gentlemen, a lost temper means a lost tenant. If the retailer's customer is always right, the realtor's client is never wrong. Somehow, somewhere, you must find a cure for their little commercial illnesses, no matter how imaginary. The realtor must take his professional place beside the doctor, the dentist, and the pharmacist and make his motto, like theirs, *unselfish service, always available, forever dependable.*") Blake bent his head to get a renewed grip on professional responsibility before going on.

"Look here," he said at last, with a smile he desperately hoped was winning. "I'll put it in the terms that you just did. You, for reasons best known to yourselves, want to rent a thirteenth floor. This building, for reasons best known to its architect—who, I am certain, was a foolish, eccentric man whom none of *us* would respect *at all*—this building has no thirteenth floor. Therefore, I can't rent it to you. Now, superficially, I'll admit, this might seem like a difficulty, it might seem as if you can't get exactly what you want here in the McGowan Building. But what happens if we examine the situation carefully? First of all, we find that there are several other truly *magnificent* floors—"

He broke off as he realized he was alone. His visitors had risen in the same incredibly rapid movement and gone out the door.

"Most unfortunate," he heard the tall man say as they walked through the outer office. "The location would have been perfect. So far from the center of things."

"Not to mention," the tiny man added, "the building's appearance. So very unpresentable. Too bad."

He raced after them, catching up in the corridor that opened into the lobby. Two things brought him to a dead stop. One was the strong feeling that it was beneath a newly appointed resident agent's dignity to haul prospective customers back into an office which they had just quit so abruptly. After all, this was no cut-rate clothing shop—it was the McGowan Building.

The other was the sudden realization that the tall man was alone. There was no sign of the tiny man.

Except—possibly—for the substantial bulge in the right-hand pocket of the tall man's overcoat...

"A pair of cranks," he told himself as he swung around and walked back to the office. "Not legitimate clients at all."

He insisted on Miss Kerstenberg's listening to the entire story, despite Professor Scoggins's stern injunctions against overfraternization with the minor clerical help. She cluck-clucked and tsk-tsked and stared earnestly at him through her thick glasses.

"Crank, wouldn't you say, Miss Kerstenberg?" he asked her when he'd finished. "Hardly legitimate clients, eh?"

"I wouldn't know, Mr. Blake," she replied, inflexibly unpretentious. She rolled a sheet of letterhead stationery into her typewriter. "Do you want the Hopkinson mailing to go out this afternoon?"

"What? Oh, I guess so. I mean, of course. By all means this afternoon, Miss Kerstenberg. And I want to see it for a double-check before you mail it."

He strode into his own office and huddled behind the desk. The whole business had upset him very much. His first big rental possibility. And that little man—Bohu was his name?—and that bulging pocket—

Not until quite late in the afternoon was he able to concentrate on his work. And that was when he got the phone call.

"Blake?" the voice crackled. "This is Gladstone Jimm."

"Yes, Mr. Jimm." Blake sat up stiffly in his swivel chair. Gladstone was the oldest of the Sons.

"Blake, what's this about your refusing to rent space?"

"My *what*? I beg your pardon, Mr. Jimm, but I—"

"Blake, two gentlemen just walked into the home office. Their names are Tooley and Booley. They tell me they tried unsuccessfully to rent the thirteenth floor of the McGowan Building from you. They tell me that you admitted the space was vacant, but that you consistently refused to let them have it. What's this all about, Blake? Why do you think the firm appointed you resident agent, Blake, to turn away prospective tenants? I might as well let you know that none of us up here in the home office like this one little bit, Blake."

"I'd have been very happy to rent the thirteenth floor to them," Blake wailed. "Only trouble, sir, you see, there's—"

"What trouble are you referring to, Blake? Spit it out, man, spit it *out*."

"There *is* no thirteenth floor, Mr. Jimm."

"What?"

"The McGowan Building is one of those buildings that has no thirteenth floor." Laboriously, carefully, he went through the whole thing again. He even drew an out-line picture of the building on his desk pad as he spoke.

"Hum," said Gladstone Jimm when he'd finished. "Well, I'll say this, Blake. The explanation, at least, is in your favor." And he hung up.

Blake found himself quivering. "Crank," he muttered fiercely. "Definitely cranks. Definitely not legitimate tenants."

When he arrived at his office door early next morning, he found Mr. Tohu and Mr. Bohu waiting for him. The tall man held out a key.

"Under the terms of our lease, Mr. Blake, a key to our main office must be in the possession of the resident agent for the building. We just had our locksmith make up this copy. I trust it is satisfactory?"

Sydney Blake leaned against the wall, waiting for his bones to reacquire marrow. "Lease?" he whispered. "Did the home office give you a lease?"

"Yes," said the tall man. "Without much trouble, we were able to achieve a what-do-you-call-it."

"A meeting of minds," the tiny man supplied from the region of his companion's knees. "A feast of reason. A flow of soul. There are no sticklers for numerical subtle-ties in your home office, young man."

"May I see the lease?" Blake managed to get out.

The tall man reached into his right-hand overcoat pocket and brought up a familiar-looking folded piece of paper.

It was the regulation lease. For the thirteenth floor in the McGowan Building. But there was one small difference.

Gladstone Jimm had inserted a rider:...the landlord is renting a floor that both the tenant and landlord know does not exist, but the title to which has an intrinsic value to the tenant; which value is equal to the rent he will pay...

Blake sighed with relief. "That's different. Why didn't you tell me that all you wanted was the title to the floor? I was under the impression that you intended to occupy the premises."

"We do intend to occupy the premises." The tall man pocketed the lease. "We've paid a month's rent in advance for them."

"And," added the tiny man, "a month's security."

"And," finished the tall man, "an extra month's rent as fee to the agent. We most certainly do intend to occupy the premises."

"But how—" Blake giggled a little hysterically "—are you going to occupy pre-mises that aren't even—"

"Good morning, young man," they said in unison and moved toward the elevators.

He watched them enter one.

"Thirteen, please," they told the elevator operator. The elevator door closed. Miss Kerstenberg walked past him and into the office, chirping a dutiful "Good morning, Mr. Blake." Blake barely nodded at her. He kept his eyes on the elevator door. After a while it opened again, and the fat little operator lounged out and began a conversation with the starter.

Blake couldn't help himself. He ran to the elevator. He stared inside. It was empty.

"Listen," he said, grabbing the fat little operator by one sleeve of his dingy uniform. "Those two men you just took up, what floor did they get off at?"

"The one they wanted. Thirteen. Why?"

"There isn't any thirteenth floor. No thirteenth floor at all!"

The fat little elevator operator shrugged. "Look, Mr. Blake, I do my job. Someone says 'thirteenth floor,' I take 'em to the thirteenth floor. Someone says 'twenty-first floor,' I take 'em—"

Blake walked into the elevator. "Take me there," he ordered.

"The twenty-first floor? Sure."

"No, you—you—" Blake realized that the starter and the elevator operator were grinning at each other sympathetically. "Not the twenty-first floor," he went on more calmly, "the thirteenth. Take me to the thirteenth floor."

The operator worked his switch and the door moaned itself shut. They went up. All of the McGowan Building elevators were very slow, and Blake had no trouble reading the floor numbers through the little window in the elevator door.

...ten...eleven...twelve...fourteen...fifteen...sixteen...

They stopped. The elevator operator scratched his head with his visored cap. Blake glared at him triumphantly. They went down.

...fifteen...fourteen...twelve...eleven...ten...nine...

"Well?" Blake asked him.

The man shrugged. "It don't seem to be there now."

"Now? Now? It's *never* been there. So where did you take those men?"

"Oh, them, I told you: the thirteenth floor."

"But I just proved to you there is *no thirteenth floor!*"

"So what? You got the college education, Mr. Blake, not me. I just do my job. If you don't like it, all I can say is I just do my job. Someone gets in the elevator and says 'thirteenth floor,' I take—"

"I know! You take them to the thirteenth floor. But there is *no* thirteenth floor, you idiot! I can show you the blueprints of the building, the original blueprints, and I dare you, I defy you to show me a thirteenth floor. If you can show me a thirteenth floor..."

His voice trailed off as he realized they were back in the lobby and had attracted a small crowd.

"Look, Mr. Blake," the elevator man suggested. "If you're not satisfied, how's about I call up the delegate from the union and you and him have a talk? How's about that, huh?"

Blake threw up his arms helplessly and stamped back to his office. Behind him he heard the starter ask the elevator operator, "What was he getting in such an uproar about, Barney?"

"Aa-aah, that guy," the operator said. "He was blaming me for the blueprints of the building. If you ask me, he's got too much college education. What have I got to do with the blueprints?"

"I don't know," the starter sighed. "I sure as hell don't know."

"I'll ask you another question," the operator went on, with a little more certainty, now that he saw his oratorical way, so to speak. "What have the building blueprints got to do with *me*?"

Blake closed the office door and leaned against it. He ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

"Miss Kerstenberg," he said at last in a strangled voice. "What do you think? Those cranks that were here yesterday—those two crazy old men—the home office went and rented the thirteenth floor to them!"

She looked up from her typewriter. "It *did*?"

"And believe it or not, they just went upstairs and took possession of their offices."

She smiled at him, a rapid woman-smile. "How *nice*" she said. And went back to her typing.

The morning after *that*, what Blake saw in the lobby sent him scurrying to the tele-phone. He dialed the home office. "Mr. Gladstone Jimm," he demanded breathlessly.

"Listen, Mr. Jimm. This is Sydney Blake at the McGowan. Mr. Jimm, this is get-ting serious! They're moving in furniture today. Office furniture. And I just saw some men go upstairs to install telephones. Mr. Jimm, they're really moving in!"

Gladstone Jimm was instantly alert. He gave the matter his full attention. "Who's moving in, my boy? Tanzen Realty Corporation? Or is it the Blair Brothers again? I was saying only last week: things have been far too quiet in the real estate field; I've felt in my bones that last year's Code of Fair Practices wouldn't be standing up much longer. Try to raid our properties, will they?" He snorted long and belligerently. "Well, the old firm has a few tricks up its sleeve yet. First, make certain that all important papers—tenant lists, rent receipts, don't overlook anything, son—are in the safe. We'll have three attorneys and a court order down there in half an hour. Meanwhile, you keep—"

"You don't understand, sir. It's those new tenants. The ones you rented the thir-teenth floor to."

Gladstone Jimm ground to a full stop and considered the matter. Ah. He under-stood. He began to

beat swords into ploughshares.

"You mean—those fellows—um, Toombs and Boole?"

"That's right, sir. There are desks and chairs and filing cabinets going upstairs. There are men from the telephone and electric companies. They're all going up to the thirteenth floor. Only, Mr. Jimm, *there isn't any thirteenth floor!*"

A pause. Then: "Any of the other tenants in the building been complaining, Blake?"

"No, Mr. Jimm, but—"

"Have Toot and Boob committed any sort of nuisance?"

"No, not at all. It's just that I—"

"It's just that you have been paying precious little attention to business! Blake, I like you, but I feel it is my duty to warn you that you are getting off on the wrong foot. You've been resident agent at the McGowan for almost a week now and the only bit of important business involving the property had to be transacted by the home office. That's not going to look good on your record, Blake, it's not going to look good at all. Do you still have those big vacancies on the third, sixteenth, and nineteenth floors?"

"Yes, Mr. Jimm. I've been planning to—"

"Planning isn't enough, Blake. Planning is only the first step. After that, there must be action! *Action*, Blake; A-C-T-I-O-N. Why don't you try this little stunt: Letter the word *action* on a sign, letter it in bright red, and hang it opposite your desk where you'll see it every time you look up. Then on the reverse side, list all the vacancies in your building. Every time you find yourself staring at that sign, ask yourself how many vacancies are still listed on the back. And then, Blake, take action!"

"Yes, sir," Blake said, very weakly.

"Meanwhile, no more of this nonsense about law-abiding, rent-paying tenants. If they leave you alone, you leave them alone. That's an order, Blake."

"I understand that, Mr. Jimm."

He sat for a long while looking at the cradled telephone. Then he rose and walked out to the lobby and into an elevator. There was a peculiar and unaccustomed jauntiness to him, a recklessness to his stride that could be worn only by a man deliberately disobeying a direct order from the reigning head of Wellington Jimm & Sons, Inc., Real Estate.

Two hours later he crept back, his shoulders bent, his mouth loose with defeat.

Whenever Blake had been in an elevator full of telephone linemen and furniture movers on their way to the thirteenth floor, there had been no thirteenth floor. But as soon as, a little irritated, they had changed elevators, leaving him behind, so far as he could tell, they had gone right up to their destination. It was obvious. For him there was no thirteenth floor. There probably never would be.

He was still brooding on the injustice of it at five o'clock, when the scrubwomen who were coming on duty bounced their aged joints into his outer office to punch the time clock. "Which one of you," he asked, coming at them suddenly with an inspiration, "which one of you takes care of the thirteenth floor?"

"I do"

He drew the woman in the bright green, fringed shawl after him into his private office. "When did you start cleaning the thirteenth floor, Mrs. Ritter?"

"Why, the day the new tenants moved in."

"But before that..." He waited, watching her face anxiously.

She smiled, and several wrinkles changed their course. "Before that, Lord love you, there was no tenants. Not on the thirteenth."

"So..." he prompted.

"So there was nothing to clean."

Blake shrugged and gave up. The scrubwoman started to walk away. He put his hand on her shoulder and detained her. "What," he asked, staring at her enviously, "is it like—the thirteenth floor?"

"Like the twelfth. And the tenth. Like any other floor."

"And everyone," he muttered to himself, "gets to go there. Everyone but me."

He realized with annoyance that he'd spoken too loudly. And that the old woman was staring at him with her head cocked in sympathy. "Maybe that's because," she suggested softly, "you have no *reason* to be on the thirteenth floor."

He was still standing there, absorbing the concept, when she and her colleagues bumped and clattered their way upstairs with mops, brooms, and metal pails.

There was a cough and the echo of a cough behind him. He turned. Mr. Tohu and Mr. Bohu bowed. Actually, they seemed to fold and unfold.

"For the lobby directory" said the tall man, giving Blake a white business card. "This is how we are to be listed."

G. TOHU & K. BOHU
Specialists in Intangibles
For the Trade

Blake struggled, licked his lips, fought his curiosity and lost. "What kind of intangibles?"

The tall man looked at the tiny man. The tiny man shrugged. "Soft ones," he said.

They walked out.

Blake was positive he saw the tall man pick up the tiny man a moment before they stepped into the street. But he couldn't see what he did with him. And then there was the tall man walking down the street all by himself.

From that day on, Sydney Blake had a hobby. Trying to work out a good reason for visiting the thirteenth floor. Unfortunately, there just wasn't *any good* reason so long as the tenants created no nuisances and paid their rent regularly.

Month in, month out, the tenants paid their rent regularly. And they created no nuisances. Window washers went up to wash windows. Painters, plasterers, and car-penters went up to decorate the offices on the thirteenth floor. Delivery boys stag-gered up under huge loads of stationery. Even what were obviously customers went up to the thirteenth floor, a group of people curiously lacking characteristics in com-mon: they ranged from poor backwoods folk in their brogans to flashily dressed book-makers; an occasional group of dark-suited, well-tailored gentlemen discussing in-terest rates and new bond issues in low well-bred voices would ask the elevator op-erator for Tohu & Bohu. Many, many people went to the thirteenth floor.

Everyone, Sydney Blake began to think, but Sydney Blake. He'd tried sneaking up on the thirteenth floor by way of the stairs. He had always arrived on the fourteenth floor or the twelfth completely winded. Once or twice, he'd tried stowing away on the elevator with G. Tohu and K. Bohu themselves. But the car had not been able to find their floor while he was in the elevator. And they had both turned around and smiled at the spot where he was trying to stay hidden in the crowd so that he had gone out, red-faced, at the earliest floor he could.

Once he'd even tried—vainly—to disguise himself as a building inspector in search of a fire hazard...

Nothing worked. He just had no business on the thirteenth floor.

He thought about the problem day and night. His belly lost its slight plumpness, his nails their

manicure, his very trousers their crease.

And nobody else showed the slightest interest in the tenants of the thirteenth floor.

Well, there *was* the day that Miss Kerstenberg looked up from her typewriter. "Is that how they spell their names?" she asked. "T-O-H-U and B-O-H-U? Funny."

"What's funny?" He pounced on her.

"Those names come from the Hebrew. I know because," she blushed well below the neckline of her dress, "I teach in a Hebrew School Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thurs-day nights. And my family is very religious so I had a real orthodox education. I think religion is a good thing, especially for a girl—"

"*What about those names?*" He was almost dancing around her.

"Well, in the Hebrew Bible, before God created the Earth, the Earth was *tohu oobohu*. The *oo* means *and*. And *tohu* and *bohu*—gee, it's hard to translate."

"Try," he implored her. "*Try*."

"Oh, for example, the usual English translation of *tohu oobohu* is *without form and void*. But *bohu* really means *empty* in a lot of—"

"Foreigners," he chortled. "I knew they were foreigners. And up to no good. With names like that."

"I don't agree with you, Mr. Blake," she said very stiffly. "I don't agree with you at all about those names being no good. Not when they come from the Hebrew." And she never showed him any friendliness again.

Two weeks later, Blake got a message from the home office of Wellington Jimm & Sons, Inc., Real Estate, that almost shoved his reason off the corner of the slippery throne it still occupied. Tohu & Bohu had given notice. They were quitting the pre-mises at the end of the month.

For a day or so, he walked around talking to himself. The elevator operators re-ported hearing him say things like: "They're the most complete foreigners there could be—they don't even belong in the physical universe!" The scrubwomen shivered in their locker room as they told each other of the mad, mad light in his eyes as he'd muttered, with enormous gestures: "Of course—thirteenth floor. Where else do you think they could stay, the nonexistent so-and-so's? *Hah!*" And once when Miss Kerstenberg had caught him glaring at the water cooler and saying, "They're trying to turn the clock back a couple of billion years and start all over, I bet. *Filthy* fifth col-umnists!" she thought tremulously of notifying the F.B.I., but decided against it. After all, she reasoned, once the police start snooping around a place, you never can tell who they'll send to jail.

And, besides, after a little while, Sydney Blake straightened out. He began shaving every morning once more and the darkness left his nails. But he was definitely not the crisp young realtor of yore. There was a strange, skirling air of triumph about him almost all the time.

Came the last day of the month. All morning, load after load of furniture had been carried downstairs and trucked away. As the last few packages came down, Sydney Blake, a fresh flower in his buttonhole, walked up to the elevator nearest his office and stepped inside.

"Thirteenth floor, if you please," he said clearly and resonantly.

The door slid shut. The elevator rose. It stopped on the thirteenth floor.

"Well, Mr. Blake," said the tall man. "This is a surprise. And what can we do for you?"

"How do you do, Mr. Tohu?" Blake said to him. "Or is it Bohu?" He turned to his tiny companion. "And you, Mr. Bohu—or, as the case may be, Tohu—I hope you are well? Good."

He walked around the empty, airy offices for a little while and just looked. Even the partitions had been taken down. The three of them were alone, on the thirteenth floor.

"You have some business with us?" the tall man inquired.

"Of course he has business with us," the tiny man told him crossly. "He has to have some sort of

business with us. Only I wish he'd hurry up and get it over, whatever it is."

Blake bowed. "Paragraph ten, Section three of your lease:...the tenant further agrees that such notice being duly given to the landlord, an authorized representative of the land-lord, such as the resident agent if there is one on the property, shall have the privilege of examining the premises before they are vacated by the tenant for the purpose of making certain that they have been left in good order and condition by the tenant..."

"So that's your business," said the tall man thoughtfully.

"It had to be something like that," said the tiny man. "Well, young fellow, you will please be quick about it."

Sydney Blake strolled about leisurely. Though he felt a prodigious excitement, he had to admit that there was no apparent difference between the thirteenth and any other floor. Except—Yes, except—

He ran to a window and looked down. He counted. Twelve floors. He looked up and counted. Twelve floors. And with the floor he was on, that made twenty-five. Yet the McGowan was a twenty-four-story building. Where did that extra floor come from? And how did the building look from the outside at this precise moment when his head was sticking out of a window on the thirteenth floor?

He walked back in, staring shrewdly at G. Tohu and K. Bohu. They would know.

They were standing near the elevator door that was open. An operator, almost as impatient as the two men in black, said, "*Down? Down?*"

"Well, Mr. Blake," said the tall man. "Are the premises in good condition, or are they not?"

"Oh, they're in good condition, all right," Blake told him. "But that's not the point."

"Well, *we* don't care what the point is," said the tiny man to the tall man. "Let's get out of here."

"Quite," said the tall man. He bent down and picked up his companion. He folded him once backward and once forward. Then he rolled him up tightly and shoved him in his right-hand overcoat pocket. He stepped backward into the elevator. "Coming, Mr. Blake?"

"No, thank you," Blake said. "I've spent far too much time trying to get up here to leave it this fast."

"Suit yourself," said the tall man. "Down," he told the elevator operator.

When he was all alone on the thirteenth floor, Sydney Blake expanded his chest. It had taken so long! He walked over to the door of the staircase that he'd tried to find so many times, and pulled on it. It was stuck. Funny. He bent down and peered at it closely. It wasn't locked. Just stuck. Have to get the repairman up to take care of it.

Never could tell. Might have an extra floor to rent in the old McGowan from now on. Ought to be kept up.

How *did* the building look from the outside? He found himself near another win-dow and tried to look out. Something stopped him. The window was open, yet he couldn't push his head past the sill. He went back to the window he'd looked out of originally. Same difficulty.

And suddenly he understood.

He ran to the elevator and jabbed his fist against the button. He held it there while his breathing went faster and faster. Through the diamond-shaped windows on the doors, he could see elevators rising and elevators descending. But they wouldn't stop on the thirteenth floor.

Because there no longer was a thirteenth floor. Never had been one, in fact. Who ever heard of a thirteenth floor in the McGowan Building?...

Afterword

I had a duodenal ulcer and suffered horribly from it from the age of twenty-nine to the age of fifty-eight, when I finally had a partial gastroectomy—just a few years before it was discovered that ulcers were microbial in nature and could be treated by antibiotics. But I still look at this story or that by me and remember the amount of pain-time involved.

The week in which I wrote "The Tenants" was one of the worst. I typed the piece with one hand, massaging my abdomen with the other, while chugging down chalky tablespoonsful of a reasonably popular antacid of the time.

When I brought it to Horace Gold as a submission to his fantasy magazine, *Beyond*, he immediately commented on the white blobs on almost every page (this being before the age of the computer and printer: retyping a long manuscript then, if you didn't have the money to hire someone, was a murderous chore).

"What is it," he asked holding a page up to the light, "Maalox or Amphojel? I use Maalox, and this looks very much like it."

Then he disappeared into his bedroom to read the story. He came out a few minutes later, grimacing, and called to Sam Merwin, his associate editor. "I want you to take a look at this," he said.

I immediately felt a lot better. I had known Sam Merwin since he had been an editor at *Thrilling Wonder Stories*; I had great respect for his literary judgment (he had bought a lot of Ray Bradbury over the protests of his publisher) and he had always liked everything I wrote. But Sam read "The Tenants" and shrugged. "What is it supposed to be," he asked, "something funny? Something eerie? What?"

"That's how I feel," Horace said. "What exactly were you trying to do?"

"Oh," I said, picking up the story and heading for the door. "Nothing much. No thirteenth floor in a lot of buildings. I've always been curious about what's on that floor."

"Well, it's meaningless to me," I heard Horace say as I closed the door, and I heard Sam Merwin mutter agreement.

I sent the piece to Anthony Boucher of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, who, up to then, had not seen anything of mine he wanted to buy. By return mail I got a check with a bonus rate and a long letter burbling with praise over the story. "But don't use Maalox," it ended. "Stick to plain bicarbonate of soda."

I called him and thanked him. Then I told him of Horace's reaction, and Sam Merwin's.

"Some people are color-blind," he said. "And some are tone-deaf. You know that. Well, some have absolutely no sense of the thirteenth floor. You just have to feel sorry for them."

Written 1953 / Published 1954