

Elementals

BY STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

"Elementals" was Benét's first short story. In allowing it to make its initial book appearance here, he said: "It seems to me one of the very few decent short stories I've ever written." Many of us, who have liked it for a long time, will go further than that. Anyway, it is the tale which broke this brilliant young man of letters into the big time. He had published The Beginning of Wisdom to some plaudits, but not until "Elementals" appeared under the sponsorship of the late Ray Long, in Cosmopolitan Magazine, did he begin to get the attention which he so magnificently answered with his later work.

THE human soul is a house of many fantastic chambers. But for most of us, as we go our way easily through life, the most curious of those chambers are the least frequented. Bluebeard's closet we would not unriddle if we could; blank doors we gape at in passing with a little wonder, perhaps, but with more relief that we, who are safe in our everydayness, will never be called upon to turn the key in the lock and face the incredible things within.

There are almighty things behind those doors. There is beauty so intense that it burns on the mind like fiery water; much agony, hideous fear and many torments; and after the torments are past, a certain sense that seems to its wounded possessors priceless, a sense and memory of impossible things endured.

Not easily nor often do the doors swing open—they will not budge for the catchwords of ordinary speech. It is only the elemental forces of the naked and crying soul that will suffice to move them—the elemental powers; fear, hunger, love and hate. And this is just—and it

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is just that the doors should open seldom—for the man upon whom they have opened even for an instant will never be the same again.

When Sherwood Latimer had accepted the invitation of his temporary employer, John Slake, to a little dinner for two in the big ugly residence on Madison Avenue that was always so obtrusively guarded by private detectives—for so many fanatics seemed to feel it their duty to try and assassinate the first millionaire in America—it was no idea at all of opening those doors or encountering anything more elemental than well-cooked food.

But after the coffee he and Slake had got to talking.

About Latimer's just finished job in the first place—that excellent translation of Carlo Guiccardini's rare sixteenth century pamphlet that Slake had bought in his last bandit raid on European art collections. About sixteenth century Italy in general, and why Latimer, in spite of his twenty-five years, was the best man to be got on sixteenth century Italian in the country.

About universities—Latimer was going back to Harvard as an assistant in history in the fall—and the ludicrousness of the contrast between the salaries paid American teachers and the energy, personality and wide knowledge expected of them. And then slashing down into the elementals of life itself—what ruled this curious thing called human existence—what forces swayed it most wholly and made it pageant or tragedy or only gray succession of lackluster days.

They made an odd contrast as they stared at each other across the tablecloth—the lean, hungry-looking young man in the shabby dress suit so obviously a family relic—the sleek, tigerish, diverse figure in the perfectly fitting dinner coat, with his voice as soft and purring as the voice of a gigantic cat. An even odder contrast when they had once begun to argue, for the argument concerned the essential invisible power that rules all human affairs.

That force, quoth Latimer, was the love of a man for the one woman—and he defended his youthful proposition with a vigor most un-academic in its skill and intensity, in spite of all Slake's grumblings of, "Bosh, my friend—pure bosh—there are only three prime movers in this vagrant piece of oddity we are pleased to call the human soul—fear, hunger and hate."

The little ormolu clock on the mantelpiece had chimed eleven some minutes before. They had been contending two hours over their point—and in spite of all Slake's mockingly perfect examples of human cow-

ardice and weakness and insufficiency, he had not been able to make his opponent budge one inch from his original position. The elder man leaned forward in his chair now, regarding the younger, his eyes widening and glowing like those of a great smooth beast when it walks into darkness from a lighted place. His voice, when it came again, had the slow throb and insistence of a savage drum.

"Good! You persist. You stick to your guns and your illusions in spite of any facts that I can adduce. Very well, let us take another instance. From Guiccardini this time." He spoke slowly and thoughtfully.

"You will remember the incident—your translation of it was flawlessly terse, by the way. In the chapter on the Merry Diversions of His Highness Prince Alessandro."

Latimer twisted uneasily. He did remember the incident, as it happened—one of those pieces of cruel and sensitive torture in which that mad Renaissance Prince had taken such a refined and exquisite delight.

"Leaving out a few of those details which are rather heady for a modern stomach, the two lovers whose devotion was a proverb in his court—the two lovers who were ready to undergo anything in life or death for each other. Their devotion came to the ears of Alessandro—and he, like myself, had somewhat of the practical executive's tendency for testing promises by performance. He suggested a test of this immortal devotion—a very simple test.

"You remember what the reward was to be if the test were withstood? It was liberal enough—a dukedom for the man, a permanent revenue for them both—titles of honor. The title of 'Most Faithful In Love' was the one which he had appropriately selected, if I recall it rightly. If the test were not withstood, the penalty was death, of course—and Alessandro had always been an experimenter in curious methods of making people die.

"And you will remember that, though it appeared they had little choice in the matter, even so the lovers were genuinely delighted to accept the test. 'They embraced it,' says Guiccardini, 'as if they were to dance together at a feast day, with great nobleness and joy of heart.' But, unfortunately, the test was an elemental one—and when Alessandro heard of their eagerness, I can imagine that he smiled. In fact, I can see him smiling."

He smiled himself and a resemblance that had long been pricking at him resolved itself with a shudder in Latimer's mind. That was

where Slake came from, certainly—from his merciless power-in-leash to his taste for all that was superexquisite in art—from the hot, cruel, gorgeous first youth of awakening Italy. He had no real part in twentieth century America at all. Latimer stared at him as he might have at Alessandro come alive again in all his leopard's subtlety and strength and ravin. Slake went on:

"The test was to be by hunger—elemental hunger. For ten days they were to be kept in adjoining rooms—a strong glass partition between so that they could see each other but neither encourage each other by conversation nor plan for the future. They were given water lest they die of thirst and so spoil the jest—water but nothing more. On the tenth day, but at an hour known to neither of them since they had been left no means for calculating time—which is a refinement on which I must really congratulate Alessandro—the glass partition was to be removed and one piece of bread thrown in to them, as meat is thrown into a place where two starving animals are caged together. On their mutual behavior as regarded that piece of bread depended the success or failure of the test."

Slake paused and Latimer brushed his hand across his eyes for a moment. Slake's voice had made the picture indecently vivid—the two hunger-bitten creatures in their gay court dresses, gaping with licking lips and avid eyes at that one precious scrap of food.

"Well, you know the rest. Alessandro's faith in his elemental was justified. Guiccardini says that it was difficult for the men who were to take them to execution to separate them at first—they had torn and entwined their way into such a deadly knot in their death grapple for the unique possession of that one small piece of bread. And the bread was spoilt between them; neither got any good of it. And yet if this elemental love of theirs had been greater than elemental hunger for one half-hour—for Alessandro was just enough to provide that time limit—well, they both would have had their heart's desire forever and been 'Most Faithful In Love.' Well?"

He looked at Latimer with narrowed, lambent eyes.

"Alessandro was a mad monster—a cruel devil!" said Latimer shakily.

"Perhaps—but he was also a practical man. And in this case a fair one. He merely wished to see if their professions had any value. If they had, he stood ready to reward them very magnificently. But they proved to have no value at all."

"It wasn't a fair test—not by any means a fair test!" said Latimer. "Starvation—death by starvation—that was too much, too horrible. And then suddenly giving them food! And then just because they lost their heads for a moment——"

"They—lost their heads." Slake smiled. "But before they lost them they had proved in their own persons that hunger is greater than love. The test was too hard for them, you say—but a few minutes ago you were saying with apparent conviction that *no* test could be too hard. At all events, I think I have proved my point."

"*No!*" said Latimer rebelliously. "They would have died for each other—of course they would—even Guiccardini admits that. It was the means—the dragging out——"

"It was hunger. The elemental. They acted as any two people would have acted. Oh, *I* don't blame them, believe me! For myself, I should have acted in precisely the same way. Except that I think I would have managed to get the piece of bread." He smiled. "Yes, I think I would have. Oh, they were in love, of course they were—probably more in love than most people dare to be now! But their love, whatever its dimensions, was smaller than their hunger. Their hunger ate them up. Any two would have been the same."

He settled back more comfortably.

"Any two would *not*," said Latimer violently. "They failed because their love wasn't big enough. Certainly. But some people would have been big enough—some loves would! You *can't*—" and he hesitated and stopped.

The purr had come back into Slake's voice.

"Then I haven't convinced you—even by such a perfect instance? That seems odd. Some people would have been big enough, you say. I wonder, I very much wonder, Mr. Latimer, just what people you mean."

"Oh—dozens!" said Latimer vaguely. "Most people," he went on stoutly, "or half of them at any rate. Even now."

"Yes," said Slake softly. "Yes." Then he stiffened suddenly in his chair. "Would *you*?"

Latimer was taken completely aback. If the question had come at the beginning of the conversation he merely would have treated it as an insult, but now he was both too angry at Slake and too interested in trying to refute him for that.

"Why, I don't know, Mr. Slake—why—why the premise is preposterous, of course! Such a thing couldn't happen now—"

"But suppose it could, Mr. Latimer? Suppose it could?"

That particular thick sleekness of scorn was the last drop of fuel on the silent, intense flame of Latimer's internal wrath.

"*Yes!*" he said defiantly, and then wondered why on earth he had said it.

"You would be willing to wager—your future professorship, say—on your and one woman's ability to withstand Alessandro's test? You are wholly certain of that?"

"Yes," said Latimer again, and more composedly. At least he had managed to take most of the contempt out of Slake's low voice.

"You are absolutely sure of yourself and the lady in question?"

Young Sherwood Latimer smiled. Catherine and himself—how ridiculously simple with them a thing like Alessandro's test would be! Something to joke about—they were so sure.

"Very well, then—suppose we try it," Slake said amazingly.

"What!"

"No, really, I'm not suggesting anything so impossible as that seems. The stakes first—let me see, the stakes." He smiled freezingly.

"Your idea would be so fantastic—if it weren't so insolent, Mr. Slake—"

"The stakes," Slake went on unheeding. "As I am not Alessandro—and a great pity it is—I can hardly request you to put up your lives as a forfeit. A written promise from you that you would give up your present career forever and enter any business I wished you to at a salary entirely at my own discretion—that would be quite sufficient, in case either one of you—failed! From the lady, I should, naturally, require no promise at all—the loss of your career would be quite sufficient to make you both wholly miserable for a number of years in case you married—if you did marry—which, if either of you failed in such a test, I should hardly imagine you would care to do."

He paused for Latimer to speak, but Latimer seemed to have no words.

"Should the test be withstood successfully—and I should not require a longer period than twenty minutes for its actual duration—a check for ten thousand dollars to be delivered to you the same day."

He smiled again. Latimer shivered. Ten thousand dollars! That meant that he and Catherine could marry at once instead of waiting

another year; they had been engaged a year already. It meant leisure for research—to do the work that he wanted. It meant a home and children, being able to afford to have children safely, without fear, without every summer spent in hack tutoring, without Catherine's being worn to the bone by the pinching inexorable grip of their "honorable" poverty. It meant security; it meant everything that both of them wanted most in life. Ten thousand dollars! He sighed tiredly—it was like John Slake to dangle all these things like a golden feather so casually, so nearly in reach of his hands, so utterly and completely on conditions that he could never accept. If he had only required some other conditions—any other ones——

"I suppose you think you have the right to play practical jokes of this sort on your employees, Mr. Slake," he stammered. "Or rather you haven't the right but you seem to have the power. The thing is utterly impossible, of course. Even supposing I accepted—which I wouldn't and couldn't—you have neither the power nor the means——"

"Power? Means? My dear Mr. Latimer, you are hardly flattering!"

"But this is the twentieth century!" said Latimer, platonically.

"The twentieth century. Exactly. That is why. The century of all centuries where money is power. I made a rather interesting statistical computation a year or so ago." He smiled. "As to the legal penalties I should have incurred for—a few little things I have found it necessary to do at one time or another. They amounted, in the aggregate, to a prison sentence of one hundred and fourteen years."

He leaned forward, looking at Latimer intently. The sheer force and will of him seemed to flow into the other man's body like an electric wave.

"My servants are—well trained," he said slowly. "They should be—at their salaries. The better ones—and I have several—are quite beyond the possibility of surprise at any whim I may happen to wish carried out. Well!

"On the third story there is a little suite of sound-proof rooms—a miniature apartment—seven rooms in all. I use it whenever a problem chances to come up that I wish to think over entirely undisturbed. The meals are sent up on a dumb-waiter—the species of waiter that, on the whole, I prefer. We could carry out our little experiment there in perfect peace." He waved his hands defensively in the air.

"Oh, I shouldn't make the conditions nearly as hard as Alessandro's! The glass screen was a pretty idea but a little—expensive. I could have

a window put in that would do just as well. The apartment is sizable enough—I should stay in it, of course, for the duration of the experiment. Meals would be sent up from the kitchen for three."

He grinned like a dog.

"But naturally only one person could eat them—myself. You would be in one room, the young lady in the room adjoining. The rest of the apartment would be mine. You would not have food—but water in any quantity would be yours at your convenience. As for cleanliness, I think I could arrange matters so that you would have a bathroom apiece. In consideration of the fact that neither of you, in all probability, possesses a Renaissance physique, I would be perfectly willing to shorten the time to seven days. Just consider!" He seemed to be speaking very earnestly. "A seven days' fast—a thing any one of a score of health cranks undergo voluntarily several times a year. A fast that no reputable early Christian hermit or modern explorer would treat as anything but a joke.

"There was that Irishman—the Lord Mayor of Cork. He lasted—how long was it? Almost a month, I believe—nearly five times the paltry number of hours I am asking you to hold out. And, moreover, if you will permit me, a fast with every modern convenience at your disposal in a well lighted, well heated apartment—for I should differ from some of Alessandro's quaintest conceits in that respect. Books?" he ruminated. "I shall consider whether I could allow you books. Anything else in reason, certainly. Well, Mr. Latimer, you accept, of course?"

"Of course *not*!" said Latimer firmly.

"Really, but why? Ten thousand dollars for one week's lack of occupation! You will never have a chance like that in all your life. And of course you are sure of winning or we would never have had any argument. Ten thousand dollars *now*, when life is just beginning for both of you, when you need money more than you will ever need it again! Ten—thousand—dollars!" His voice was as gradual and insistent as the pulsing throb of a drum.

"But what in God's name would you expect to get out of your ridiculous proposal?" said Latimer suddenly, out of an overmastering curiosity. Slake sank back in his chair again. His eyes filmed like a preying eagle's.

"Amusement," he said slowly. "A man as rich as I am, Mr. Latimer, is the hardest person under the sky to amuse. He has tasted most things too early. In the old days there were gladiatorial games for

such men—and that was as it should be. You see, that is always amusing—that one thing. One can be bored ineffably by all other things in the world but not by that. The struggle of life against elemental chance. The struggle of life to live!" His voice sank to a cruel cadence.

"To look on—to see men fighting with the paltry weapons of men against something too strong to conquer—bleeding—dying." He looked at the tablecloth as if the blood he was speaking of lay on it like a stain. "That is—most intensely amusing," he said, a little hoarsely. "And what I have proposed, Mr. Latimer, is just such a spectacle. On a small scale of course—but that would make it only the more poignant. The terror, the fear, the—the amusement would be refined and thrice refined. And besides—" He changed again.

"I admire your brains, Mr. Latimer," he said briskly. "I could use you. If I could be sure of utter obedience from you, you might make me a very valuable—servant—in many ways. But anything I offered you now in reason you would refuse—you are *such* a stubborn young man, so sure of your own career. Should you lose—I would have that obedience. Oh, you're a gentleman—you wouldn't break your word! I should have the absolute use of you—like an extra finger—for, say, ten years. That gamble, you see—why, that would double the amusement. Well, I offer."

"And I refuse," said Latimer for the last time. He rose. "I really must be going to bed now, Mr. Slake. I have some correspondence to attend to—" his voice trailed off uncertainly. Slake remained seated, his eyes smoldering still with that vision of proud life beaten into the dust by the odds against it which his words had conjured up.

"You will always remember this, though—when you're poor and at your wits' end," he said sardonically. "That you might have had ten thousand dollars, for the asking—in exchange for a little courage."

"Perhaps I shall." Latimer was past caring for Slake's purr of mockery now. "I'll be frank, Mr. Slake—if you'd made your insane offer to myself alone—I'd have jumped at it." He laughed. "But, as it is—"

"Of course," Slake purred, "of course! The young lady. She could not bear it—of course. Well, perhaps it is just as well, Mr. Latimer. You will be able to keep a few of your youthful illusions—for a time." He rose, giving his hand.

"By the way, I hope you will give my sincerest congratulations to Miss—to Miss——"

"Vane—Catherine Vane," said Latimer mechanically. His only thought at the moment was how soon he could get out of the room.

"Miss Vane. Not one of the Newport Vanes, I presume? There were Vanes in Philadelphia, but I really don't seem to recall—" He hesitated maliciously.

"Oh, you wouldn't know!" said Latimer in a burst of careless irritation. "She's working up at Columbia—in the Secretary's office." Then he stopped nervously. Why had he said that?

"Miss Catherine Vane, the Secretary's Office, Columbia University." Slake produced a gold pencil and made a note on his cuff. His eyes held Latimer straitly; the chill flame in them burned higher.

"What are you doing?" said Latimer, suddenly, in a stifled, terrified voice.

Slake gestured in the air.

"Oh nothing, Mr. Latimer, nothing! Merely a habit of mine—a notation—a little reminder. You see," his eyes glittered with bright and dancing flecks, "you see I have a whim—a whim of wishing to meet Miss Catherine Vane in person. I should like very much indeed, since you are so obdurate, to find out what *she* will say to this trifling experiment of mine!"

II

LATIMER looked stupefiedly for what seemed to him a very long time at the little white dints his teeth had just made in the flesh of his wrist. An uncontrollable shudder went over his body. It was impossible—he couldn't have come to *that* stage yet when it was only the fourth day of the fast.

He forced his eyes up and away from those sinister pale markings—away and around the walls of the neat, luxuriously decorated box of a room that those eyes knew already so dully and completely by heart. The wall paper was covered with bluebirds. There were twenty-one birds to each wall, eighty-four to the room; eighty-four bluebirds perched upon eighty-four sprays of some species of blue shrub. Every bird was exactly like every other bird—eighty-four bluebirds that he had counted so many times.

He was sane. He was completely sane. If he had bitten his arm just then, it was nervousness, that was all—pure nervousness and wondering if Catherine, too, suffered under this shameful, continual pain like

the pressure of a dull, thick knife against the pit of his stomach. Catherine. And Catherine, too, was sane. Quite sane. Quite sane—still.

He thought with horrible doubt: "Catherine Vane is sane, is sane. Catherine Vane is sane, is sane."

The foolish rhyme started beating in his mind like the noise of a broken bell. He stopped it with a gripping effort of will. No more of *that* either. They both of them were sane—and in three days it would all be over.

He counted all the bluebirds on the wall that was nearest him again and carefully. Twenty-one! There was always that haunting thing inside his brain that kept telling him that some day there might be twenty, or twenty-two. And after that——

No more of *that*, Sherwood Latimer! No more of *that*, at all!

Presently he would get up and go over to the window and look at Catherine. That would help. And after that, presently, he would read.

Slake saw them twice a day; that had been in the contract. How many times had Slake been in already, then? He counted slowly. Seven times. He would come again in an hour—it must be just about an hour—after the daylight in the room had died and the electric lights were on. Seven times. That meant four days. Eight times would mean four days, too, but nine times and ten times would mean five days. He still knew what day it was. That was very good.

His mind kept going back to the strangeness—the utter strangeness of the last two weeks. He and Catherine—Catherine and he. Catherine Vane and Sherwood Latimer, two ordinary, usual, everyday young people—and Slake's ruddy face looking down at them forever as the moon looks down on people in hell—the moon that makes people go mad. Go mad and do things like this.

Slake's smooth voice, pulsing, insistent, possessed with incredible power, softly possessed as liquid metal is possessed with flame. That voice always in their ears like the beat of the sea—calling to them—making them crumble—until like drugged birds they did the fantastic thing which that voice required. Slake's long delicate fingers gripping hold of them, moving them like checkers across a board—because they must always be amused and in motion or their power would fail them, those hands—till at last he and Catherine lay as light and pithless in the hands as pieces of painted wood, and the hands did with them what they desired, according to their sport.

Catherine had wanted to do this—that had been the only reason. Catherine had been so sure. He remembered her laughing voice: "Why Sherry, darling, just *think*. It's everything we want, Sherry, everything *now*, and it's *ours* if we only have the little courage to take it." The little little courage. Latimer grinned wryly. It was going to take a good deal more than that.

The last straw had been when Slake had simply said that he would be willing, if necessary, to carry out his damnable experiment with Catherine alone; conditions might have to be altered but she should have the same terms. Of course that had settled Catherine—she had such clear courage. And she'd told him—perfectly seriously—how strange women were, how marvelously strange!—that she'd rather have it that way because then she'd be the only person to do any suffering and it would all be for both of them. And then, of course—

It must have been a paralysis of will on his part, he reflected grimly. Will! He had always been credited with a strong will, too. But no man who had the will of a vertebrate animal would have let the person he loved go through a thing like this with him—even for a week—even if neither of them had been able to imagine it would be anything like this. He was mud, that was what he was. A thing made out of mud that happened to be wearing clothes.

All the same he knew, as he knew that he had eyes, that Catherine, somehow, would have carried this deathly business through alone if he hadn't finally accepted it for both of them. Because she loved him. Oh, how *pitiiful*! He closed his eyes.

What power there was in Slake—what a deadly cruelty of jesting power! Those contracts—those contracts had been so clever. Slake had had them drawn up, of course. All the terrible meaning in them hidden away under a drift of legal, ordinary sounding phrases. They were very subtle too, very binding. In consideration of a task to be performed, Sherwood Latimer and Catherine Vane were to receive ten thousand dollars. If the task were not performed—the forfeit clause. The unspecified task.

Setting a definite date for the performance. The clause stating that in case both asked to be relieved of the task before it was completed the forfeit clause should come into operation at once—but that neither could be released without full written consent from the other. Oh, Slake was a clever devil! He would doubtless hold places of high trust when he got to hell.

Of course, possibly, the contracts might not hold. If the nature of the task were explained. But nobody could ever believe the explanation. And even if they did—Latimer sighed hopelessly. The law, as he knew it, took little account of the meanings of things—only the forms. And besides—trying to break those contracts—they—against Slake and his millions? Latimer knew the nature of the man too well. He would be prepared to spend incredible sums to carry out his jest. And Latimer and Catherine had no money to spend.

They were in it now, in it like flies on a piece of fly paper. They must just stick it out—that was all. The bitterness was, he thought distractedly, that, even if they won, he could wear himself to the quick for Catherine all the rest of his life and yet never make up for these seven days.

If they won! For a moment that gilded possibility touched his tired mind as lightly as blowing air. If they only won. They had to win, now.

There was nobody like Catherine; there never could be. She had been able to make a joke of it, the hour before they started—able to make him make a joke of it, too. He remembered her voice, quoting silverly, mockingly, poignantly out of one of their best-loved poets:

*"Why, sweet my love, no fear!
The Gascon frontier is so near,
A week——"*

So near. So utterly, intolerably far.

She had laughed even when Slake explained the arrangements, his hands moving backward and forward as he spoke like the needling thrust and retraction of the claws of a cat.

"You will have one slight inconvenience, I fear," he had said. "Beside the fact that your only outlook is on a rather unæsthetic airshaft, I cannot, of course, allow either of you either soap or tooth paste—and I am very sorry. But they are—edible, unfortunately." And he had smiled.

And again: "You will notice that I have provided you each with a Bible, a Koran, some volumes of the Zend-Avesta and other religious works—really quite a compact small library apiece. You can employ yourselves most profitably, no doubt, in making a comparative study of various forms of belief."

Two ordinary human beings, accustomed to three meals a day, but physically fit enough—not weaklings, either of them. It seemed rather

ridiculous to think that they couldn't hold out seven days without food. To people who didn't have to do it, that was.

The second day had been worse than this in some ways. The mere physical pain had been sharper. Now it was only constant; eternally constant, eternally heavy—a thick sort of nibbling like the continual but never violent gnawing of blunted iron teeth. But the second day, the giddiness had not really begun till toward the end. The giddiness was bad. It made your body feel light all over like cork, and fierce in intermittent spurts as if it were filled with burning air. It made your mind too babyishly pleased or irritated with small things like creases in the carpet.

He would go and see Catherine now. He could walk quite firmly if he tried, though his legs felt queerly unsubstantial and brittle. Peanut-brittle legs. He chuckled weakly. He would go and see Catherine.

He started tapping like a woodpecker at his side of the double window of netted glass. The window was small and high up—you had to stand your height to look through it. Pretty soon you might not be able to stand—even now standing seemed to tire you immensely for some odd reason. He had not noticed the clever position of the window at first. But that was Slake.

Catherine was sitting in a low chair, reading. A shock of delight and release ran over his heart like warm wind; that was what you did to yourself by sitting alone and brooding. Why, she was just the same—a little paler, perhaps, but then she had never been ruddy. She was just the same—she held her book just as he had seen her hold it a hundred times. She was standing it superbly. Only three more days! He tapped once more impatiently.

She turned her head, saw him, smiled beautifully. Darling, darling! She got up, left her book by the chair and went over to the table for another one. How slowly she walked! Then she was at the window.

They had fooled Slake in one respect, anyhow. Thanks to his giving them books they were able to talk to each other—though he had carefully taken away all writing materials. They had tried lip reading at first, but that was too hard; it really worked only with very simple sentences.

She held her copy of the Bible so that he could see. She pointed at a word on the page, "Good." She turned to another place, "Evening." To another, "Dear."

He smiled. How very like Catherine! Oh, Lord, if he could only *get* to her!

He had spent half an hour that afternoon looking for a sentence he knew must be somewhere. He grinned a little. Slake's experiment was an admirable training in Biblical exegesis, at least. Finally he found his sentence and pointed.

"The lions do lack and suffer hunger," it said.

She shook her head with mock dolefulness, then started turning leaves rapidly.

"Happy shalt thou be and it shall be well with thee." Her finger ran along the line. "Thy wife." Then it stopped and he knew that she had meant it for a signature.

He dived into Proverbs—they didn't trip you up with "begats" and unimportant details of the construction of Solomon's temple.

"The rich man's wealth is his strong city. The destruction of the poor is their poverty."

His fingernail underlined the passage bitterly. She responded with something on the same page.

"Love covereth all transgressions. Love," she pointed again.

"Oh, my dear!" he breathed. "My dear!"

Her mouth made a soundless "Darling." They stood there for a moment with their books forgotten.

Then her face seemed to change a trifle; her hand went hesitatingly to her side. But she smiled reassuringly.

"I—am—all—right," her mouth said, forming the syllables slowly. She pointed again:

"Yet a little sleep—a little slumber——"

"Yes, do lie down!" he said earnestly, forgetting she could not hear him. Then, and after a fashion he would have thought only foolishly romantic four days ago, he pressed his lips against the cold glass. She smiled elfishly, faint color coming to her cheeks.

She put the tips of her fingers against her mouth and blew a kiss to him like a child before it is carried upstairs to bed. Then—very slowly, this time—she was walking back to her chair. He saw her hand clutch an instant at the back of it before she sat down.

He realized that his knees were trembling. Silly! His head swam for a moment, too—he felt the floor begin to turn like a plate underneath his feet. He set his teeth and managed to get back to his chair.

King David, in his angrier moods, was an admirable tonic. He turned

to the Psalms—the one about “Break their teeth in their mouths, oh Lord! Break the jawbones of the lions!” expressed his own feelings in regard to John Slake to his utmost satisfaction. He would like to have somebody breaking the teeth in Slake’s mouth; in fact he would very much like to do it himself. His fist balled up; it knew how those even teeth would give and splinter when knuckles crashed into them. He would like to see Slake waste away like a snail in the sun, consume like burning grass. He would like—he would like!

“Deliver my soul from the sword, my darling from the power of the dog,” he read idly. A wrench of blinding pain passed over his mind. “My darling from the power of the dog.”

The light failed gradually in the room. When it was quite gone Latimer rose and felt his way to the electric switch. There was another dumbshow of talk with Catherine that left him tottery. Then he went back to his chair again and sat there, thinking.

After a while Slake came. The soft clink of a key in the door; Slake’s head looking in rather cautiously.

“Good evening, Mr. Latimer.”

“Good evening, Mr. Slake.”

Latimer made his eyes lift and meet the probing intentness of those other eyes. A curious pricking thrill gripped his stomach for a moment; the man was so obviously, so damnably, so superbly well fed. He licked lips suddenly parched.

“Everything perfectly all right, I suppose, Mr. Latimer?”

“Everything—entirely—satisfactory—Mr. Slake.”

Latimer forced the words. His eyes burned at the bulge of Slake’s throat over his collar; at the ruddy shine on his cheeks that came from the quantity of good hot food he had just consumed.

“How—charming! You are admirable guests indeed, Mr. Latimer—you and Miss Vane. You make so little demand on one’s hospitality.”

He paused, smiling.

“I wished for you at dinner this evening—I really wished for you,” he said smoothly. “The bisque had a trifle too much whipped cream in it for my personal taste, but the fish was perfection—baked bluefish, you know. And the roast——”

“Stop!” said Latimer suddenly and harshly through clenched teeth.

“Dear, dear, I forgot. My apologies.” He gazed at Latimer with the curious dispassionateness of a scientist watching the ferment of life in a culture through the long eye of his microscope.

"So it has really begun to touch you—my elemental," he said amusedly.

"I have no complaints to make," said Latimer in a stifled voice. If he gripped his hands on the chair rim they would not tremble. It was nothing—only the sudden steam and odor of roasting meat that had risen in his mind like perfume at Slake's words.

"No complaints? And Miss Vane has no complaints. Very well. Good night."

The door closed softly after him. The key clinked again. Latimer stared at his book for a long while, making no sense of the jumble of black and white signs on the page.

A tapping on the window aroused him. Catherine!

"I—am—going—to—bed."

"Good night, dear," as he watched her lips. "Try and sleep."

"Good night—oh, good night!"

Presently, Latimer thought, he would go to bed himself. "Who sleeps dines," the French said. Well—he would try.

Drowsiness came easily—sleep was harder. Drowsiness to lie and think of all the meals he had ever had, of all the different varieties of food that had ever existed—trooping through his mind like a restaurant keeper's nightmare. Winter breakfasts in the country—hot cakes, golden and puffy, a huge warm pile of them, drowned with yellow syrup. Little sausages sending a rich sharp steam into the air, crammed to bursting with crumbs of hot meat and spice. Lunch—dinner—bacon frying over a wood-smoke fire—a great pan of frizzling bacon—chicken à la king—a roast of rare beef, the thick good slices curling and bleeding away from the knife. All food—any food—burnt chops—cold mashed potato—if he had a dish of cold mashed potato here beside him he wouldn't care about forks or spoons—he would put his mouth to it as if he were tasting wine and when the last good, good bit of it was gone he would lick the dish all over with his tongue.

The day before, his mind had planned unconsciously a series of perfect meals—Lucullan feasts in which everything from the first roll to the final demi-tasse should be as composed and harmonized and unified as the tones of an April sunset or the scheme of a perfect concerto. Now his mind started stripping these visions of their unnecessary trappings, one by one. Rolls, for instance—rolls were only a fillip; and there were only one or two sorts of soup that one could really call *substantial*;

hors d'œuvres were mere byplay—tantalizing your appetite; and things like napkins and waiters wholly inessential. Food, that was it, just *food*! Meat, cooked meat—and no finicking around about how done it was or wasn't—meat that sent its rich perfect smell up into your brain until you wanted to pick it up in your hands and worry it like an enemy—meat——

He lay back on his pillow almost trembling with the violence of his wish for a piece of meat. But after a while he managed to fall asleep.

It was light again. He looked in the mirror as he was dressing. He seemed to be having a great deal of trouble with his clothes this morning—they had too many buttons—they were hard to put on. A four days' beard had not improved his appearance, certainly—even shaving soap had been barred by Slake. But otherwise he seemed to himself to be much as usual. The cheeks were a little hollower perhaps; the beard made it hard to tell. His eyes, too—they seemed larger, somehow, and as if they were in fever. Only two days more!

When he was dressed, he got to his chair on legs that seemed yards from his body, sank into it and fell asleep again.

He was wakened from a dream in which the walls of the room had turned to meat. He ate and ate, but as soon as he swallowed a morsel it seemed to vanish into air; it never reached his stomach. Slake's voice:

"Good morning, Mr. Latimer."

The usual questions and answers. "I am perfectly satisfied." The key in the door. Ten hours till Slake came again.

Again he dreamed, and this time there was a long table like the buffet table of a club directly in front of him. Slake was at his shoulder, purring: "There is your dinner, Mr. Latimer. You are quite at liberty to choose anything you like." But Latimer's hands were tied behind him and though he bent his neck forward till it seemed as if it would break, the food was always an inch beyond his lips. "Dinner is served, Mr. Latimer," and multitudes of people came and took food from the table, deliberately, boredly, gluttonously. They took it away. He could see them eating it; he could hear the munching of jaws, the tinkle of silver on china. "Not bad, the cold lobster—really, not bad at all." Saliva poured into his mouth; all the things that had ever been food since the beginning of time lay there in front of him, and he could not touch a morsel of it; he could not, though he strove with the last ache of his strength.

He woke and went for a drink of water. How *useless* water was. You could pour the flimsy stuff down your throat in gallons and it didn't help at all.

Catherine didn't get up till late today, he noticed—not until about the time when lunch would have ended—if there ever had been such a thing as lunch. She was wholly without color now; her face had the pallor of wax but her eyes were indomitable. They gave him strength for a little. Only now neither could stay at the window for more than a few minutes at a time; they were both too weak.

He was counting those infernal birds on the wall again, sometime in the afternoon; he didn't know what time. This time there were twenty-two on the wall that faced him. He counted them over and over. Twenty-two.

It was a good deal later. What was this stuff he had in his mouth—this thing you could chew and chew without ever getting sustenance? Oh, yes, he remembered now! In sieges—eating grass. Fooling your stomach by putting almost anything in it; that made it hurt less. But there wasn't any grass here, of course, so he had tried paper—a flyleaf out of the Koran. Disgusting. And then pieces of towel—it was probably towel he had now. But it didn't help.

It was night now. Slake had come in and taken away the books.

"I had forgotten that they might be—misapplied," he had said. That was probably because he had noticed the teethmarks on the leather binding of that Hindu book.

Pain. Pain that was as much a part of him as the tick of his heart. Pain that took him up in its soft heavy hands and squeezed his body between them like a fruit. The line between actuality and those things that were only in the mind—the room in which he lived and those universes of hot food that swam before drowsy eyes like a succession of raw and gaudy lights—growing fainter and fainter like a line rubbed out of a drawing. Unspeakable weakness. Fever in the head. Bad dreams.

It had been dark for a while and now it was light again—real light, not electric light. Morning. Must get dressed before Slake came in for the morning. Slake had been in already—how many times? He didn't know.

He was sitting in his chair composedly when Slake entered. He must find out what day it was.

"Still no complaints, Mr. Latimer?"

"Still no complaints." He had let his eyelids droop a little—if Slake saw too close into his eyes, Slake would know.

"After all, Mr. Slake, it won't be for very much longer," he said in a voice that seemed to come thinly from a great distance.

"True," Slake was purring, "true. A mere question of hours, shall we say?" He was looking keenly at Latimer.

"Hours!" croaked Latimer avidly. "Hours! Yes."

"Or shall we say—days?" Slake dropped the last word into the silence like a leaden weight.

"Days. Days. *Is it days?*"

"I'm afraid you will have to puzzle that out for yourself, Mr. Latimer."

The door closed.

Latimer was glad that he had had the foresight to move his chair directly under the window yesterday. Even so it had taken him the strugglings of an ant with an overlarge pebble and the sweat had poured from his hands at the end. Today it would have been just impossible. Today. Why, today it had been a matter of meticulously planned effort and conquest to get from his bed to his chair; and even so it would have taken him years to manage it if it hadn't been for the table which offered a prop and resting place midway.

He dozed fitfully, tormented by visions of plenty. It must be afternoon.

There was a feeble sound going on somewhere near him—a sound like the noise of a moth beating itself against the glass of a lamp. He raised his head and listened. Catherine?

He dragged himself to his feet, gripping on the windowsill for support till the tips of his fingers were white. There was a face at the other side of the window—Catherine's face.

The face was trying to smile. How could it smile? It was trying to speak, but his mind was too blurred to read what it said with its soundless, moving lips. All he knew was that the face was Catherine's and that she was starving.

He fell back from the window and covered his face with his hands.

He did not know how long the fit of ugly weeping lasted that shook him so hysterically. But when it was over, his mind, in spite of the intermittent burnings of its fever, was quite composed. This couldn't go on. This was over. They had come to the end.

After an immense amount of time had passed, Slake came. Latimer

heard his key and quieted himself with a straining effort. He must speak slowly, calmly.

"I'm afraid—I shall have to withdraw from the contest—Mr. Slake."

"Really?" Slake's eyes were duller than stone. "When only a few more hours would have brought us to the most interesting part?"

"Yes."

"And—may I ask why?"

"Catherine," said Latimer weakly. He was ashamed of not saying more but every word that he spoke seemed to take some of his life out with it as it left his mouth.

"I see," said Slake dubiously. "I see. And yet the young lady seems to be standing it very well—she is less plump, perhaps, but—well, I shall go and consult her." He turned away. In a short time he was back.

"I am sorry, Mr. Latimer, but Miss Vane refuses to consider any withdrawal on her part," he said, his eyes adance again. "And therefore, by the terms of our agreement——"

"Damn the agreement!" Latimer had risen now—he was moving toward Slake—moving with the tortuous cautiousness of the cripple—his right hand clenched.

"Damn the agreement—and you—and you—and you—you devil from hell!" and he suddenly snarled like a dog and sprang for Slake's throat.

"Oh, would you, Mr. Latimer, would you?"

Slake had put him aside like a doll; he was holding him off at arm's length; the slender, feminine fingers had tightened around his throat like strangling wire. Latimer did not speak, as speech is known to humanity; he made inarticulate gobbling sounds and beat with his hands, but his eyes glared into Slake's eyes with a passion that had gone beyond fear.

"What an exhibition of temper!" said Slake—the cut in his voice was as if he were speaking to some small biting sort of animal. "What a pitiful exhibition!" And then he flung Latimer from him as if the latter were made out of paper.

Latimer lay on the floor for a moment, whining and striving to crawl forward on incapable limbs. Then Slake had gone—but Latimer realized with a thin tinge of imbecile pride that he had backed his way to the door.

He was left alone with his hunger—and that last glimpse of Catherine's face.

Exactly what Latimer did and said and thought during the next twenty-four hours he was, fortunately, not to remember except in snatches. There was a great deal of noise all about him, for one thing—an endless drumming pulsation of sound that was somehow part of him and yet seemed to come from outside himself as well, and fill the whole world as a shell is filled with the tumult of the sea. He was the skin of the drum—and the drummer that played a measure for dancing skeletons upon it—and the twitching drumsticks—and the ear that heard and the mind that recorded all.

There was a squawking voice—not his own—it couldn't be his own—his voice had never sounded like that—that kept talking to itself and cursing somebody called Slake in a high, recurrent gasp. There were colors that streaked before his eyes like blots of vivid light, piercing colors of sunset-orange and scarlet and bright green. These settled to the burning ruddiness of the heart of a furnace; and that ruddiness was within him also, oddly. It scorched at him as if he were the furnace itself and some one had lighted a fire that ate over his bones and flesh without consuming one cell of them, with only torment. There was a reeling phantasmagoria of dreams like the patterns a madman draws in the air; and at the end of it a collapse into broken peace, a peace so complete and sightless that, he thought dully, he must have died.

Then somebody was carrying him like a great shattered toy along a smooth, paneled corridor.

"Nurse," he giggled to himself inanely, his lips moving with little sound.

He was being put down on something that yielded and was soft. For a long time it seemed to him, he lay there, delicately and easily, his body relaxed, as a man might lie in warm water.

After that measureless time he turned his head toward his left side. He was lying on a couch in a room which was not the room in which he had been tortured, he realized without surprise.

Three steps away from him, if he had been able to rise, there was another couch. A figure lay on the couch—a woman, by the dress. His eyes regarded her incuriously. Why was she there? His eyes went back to the ceiling. The ceiling was cool and white. It had nothing to do with pain.

After another time a faint prickling began to work like yeast inside

his body. It ran all over him at first like the feet of a small and rapid animal. Then it settled to one place, as such an animal might settle, finding food. It began to gnaw.

He was hungry. He opened his mouth, but no sounds came. When people were hungry, they asked. Then they were given food, he seemed to remember. Food.

"Food," he said faintly, his lips writhing back from his teeth.

A voice from somewhere distant; a smooth voice. He hated the voice; it made his flesh bristle as if he had stroked the fur of a cat the wrong way.

"There is food on the floor," said the voice. It waited. "There is food on the floor," it said again.

He raised himself on one arm with an immensity of effort. His eyes looked at the space between the two couches. There was something there on a plate—something white and solid. A slice of bread.

The figure on the other couch had stirred now, too. It had raised itself on an arm—its great eyes stared at the bread. Then its eyes left the bread and looked into his, without recognition. His muscles began to tense. That thing on the other couch had seen the food, too. That thing wanted the food as bitterly and wholly as he wanted it; he could tell that by its eyes.

For a long time they lay there, looking at each other suspiciously, like starving dogs across a bone. Then Latimer looked at the bread again, and his whole body seemed to grow thin with longing. It was such a little, little piece of bread.

Slowly, with the cautious movements of a thief, putting his hands in front of him like the paws of a cat, Latimer slid down from the couch. Then he rested on all fours for a moment, gazing at the woman. A vast wave of unspeakable relief passed through his body. She had not got down from her couch to meet him—to fight him for that food. She was not able. She could only lie there and stare at the bread with eyes that seemed to pierce it; most intent, most hopeless eyes.

His hand reached out and touched the bread, shyly. He shivered, as a dog shivers on being stroked, at the exquisiteness of that touch. There was not very much of it—that piece of bread—but its surface was rough and pleasant. He knew to the last quarter-crumb of it how tinglingly rich and satisfying it would be. It was good bread. Good bread.

The woman on the couch had made a tiny despairing sound at seeing

him touch the bread. For a moment, now that the bread was in his hands, he forgot about it, looking at her. Who was she, that strange gaunt woman who could not move to come down and take the bread away from him? His mind tried perplexedly to remember—for ages, it seemed.

It was pitiful to see her lying there, making no movement. After he had eaten the bread he might have strength enough to go over to her and find out who she was and what she wanted. Not now, though. Not now.

The lust for the bread possessed him until he shuddered. His fingers closed over it, grippingly, tenderly, possessively. In a moment he would feel the first sweet taste of it on his tongue. His hand began to go to his mouth—not very fast or he might drop the bread.

Somewhere in the room some one who was not the woman had laughed. He paused, hugging the bread to his breast, his eyes going furtively about him. They should not have that bread—it was his, his, *his!*

A frail whisper of sound came to his ears.

"Sherwood," it was saying. "Sherwood." He nodded. That was his name. He was Sherwood Latimer, the man who had bread at last.

"Sherry!" said the whisper, again, insistently, growing stronger. "Oh Sherry, dear!"

The bread was very near his mouth now—his mouth that slavered at it unconsciously—but he did not look at it. He looked at the strange woman.

"Sherry, dear. Dear Sherry. Oh, Sherry, I'm so hungry!" the voice wailed thinly like a child.

And then there was a soft bright shock in his mind like the impact of a blunted arrow and the whole room seemed to right itself before him as if it had been swinging upside down in space. That was *Catherine*, that lean, worn image of fever on the couch. That was Catherine, Catherine, *Catherine!* And she was hungry.

Sighing, he put the bread away from his lips. It was all very simple now.

Holding the hand with the bread in it in front of him as a dog holds out a hurt paw, he began the immense journey across the floor to the other couch. Catherine was hungry, so he must feed her; that was all. It was very lucky indeed, he thought dully, that somebody had left that piece of bread on the plate.

He reached her side and rose clumsily to his knees. He broke the bread into two pieces and laid one carefully on the floor. If she was as hungry as he was, it wouldn't be good for her to eat that whole slice of bread all at once—he remembered that now.

His arm went around her shoulders, the hand settled and was at rest in the soft curls of her hair. The other hand had crumbled a small piece of bread. Their eyes looked at each other deeply; this time they knew.

"Dear Sherry," she said with a gulp. Something burned behind his eyes like salt.

"Bread. Eat it," he said childishly, in a choking voice. His head sank on her breast. Even now, and though she was Catherine, he could hardly bear to see her take the bread. He waited agonizedly for her to be finished. When she was, in spite of everything, he would give her the rest.

Then he felt his hand at her mouth being pushed away by her weak hand. He raised his head.

"You first—you're—you're *hungrier!*" she said in a whisper. His fingers relaxed. The bread fell to the floor.

"Time!" said a voice behind them, and then, "Time—all over!" And then, "Oh, pick it up, you babies, do you think *I'm* going to feed you?" in tones of outrageous disappointment. But they were not listening. They were holding each other close.