

THE ROOM

Crane awoke with the Tingle Tooth-foam song racing through his head. Tingle, he realized, must have bought last night's Sleepco time. He frowned at the Sleepco speaker in the wall next to his pillow. Then he stared at the ceiling: it was still blank. Must be pretty early, he told himself. As the Coffizz slogan slowly faded in on the ceiling, he averted his eyes and got out of bed. He avoided looking at the printed messages on the sheets, the pillowcases, the blankets, his robe, and the innersoles of his slippers. As his feet touched the floor, the TV set went on. It would go off, automatically, at ten PM. Crane was perfectly free to switch channels, but he saw no point in that.

In the bathroom, he turned on the light and the TV's audio was immediately piped in to him. He switched the light off and performed his first morning ritual in the dark. But he needed light in order to shave, and as he turned it on again, the audio resumed. As he shaved, the mirror flickered instantaneously once every three seconds. It was not enough to disturb his shaving, but Crane found himself suddenly thinking of the rich warm goodness of the Coffizz competitor, Teatang. A few moments later, he was reading the ads for Now, the gentle instant laxative, and Stop, the bourbon-flavoured paregoric, which were printed on alternating sheets of the bathroom tissue.

As he was dressing, the phone rang. He let it ring. He knew what he would hear if he picked it up: "Good morning! Have you had your Krakkeronies yet? Packed with protein and -" Or, maybe, "Why wait for the draft? Enlist now in the service of your choice and cash in on the following enlistee benefits -" Or: "Feeling under the weather? Coronary disease kills four out of five! The early symptoms are -"

On the other hand, it could be an important personal call. He picked up the phone and said hello. "Hello yourself," answered a husky, insinuating feminine voice. "Bob?"

"Yes."

"Bob Crane?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"My name's Judy. I know you, but you don't know me. Have you felt logy lately, out of sorts -" He put down the phone. That settled it. He pulled a crumpled slip of paper from his desk drawer. There was an address on it. Hitherto, he had been hesitant about following up this lead. But this morning he felt decisive. He left his apartment and hailed a cab.

The back of the cab's front seat immediately went on and he found himself watching the Juice-O-Vescent Breakfast Hour. He opened a newspaper the last passenger had left behind. His eyes managed to slide over the four-color Glitterink ads with their oblique homosexual, sadistic, masochistic, incestuous and autoerotic symbols, and he tried to concentrate on a news story about the initiating of another government housing program, but his attempts to ignore the Breeze Deodorant ads printed yellow-on-white between the lines were fruitless. The cab reached its destination. Crane paid the driver with a bill bearing a picture of Abraham Lincoln on one side and a picture of a naked woman bathing with Smoothie Soap on the other. He entered a rather run-down frame building, found the correct door, and pressed the doorbell. He could hear, inside the flat, the sound of an old-fashioned buzzer, not a chime playing the EetMeet or Jetfly or Krispy Kola jingles. Hope filled him.

A slattern answered the door, regarded him suspiciously and asked, "Yeah?"

"I - uh - Mrs. Ferman? I got your name from a friend, Bill Seavers? I understand you -" his voice dropped low, "- rent rooms."

"Get outta here; you wanna get me in trouble? I'm a private citizen, a respectable -"

"I'll, I'll *pay*. I have a good job. I -"

"How much?"

"Two hundred? That's twice what I'm paying at the housing project."

"Come on in." Inside, the woman locked, bolted and chained the door. "One room," she said. "Toilet and shower down the hall, you share it with two others. Get rid of your own garbage. Provide your own heat in the winter. You want hot water, it's fifty extra. No cooking in the rooms. No guests. Three nights' rent in advance, cash."

"I'll take it," Crane said quickly; then added, "I can turn off the TV?"

"There ain't no TV. No phone neither."

"No all-night Sleepco next to the bed? No sublims in the mirrors? No Projecto in the ceiling or walls?"

"None of that stuff."

Crane smiled. He counted out the rent into her dirty hand. "When can I move in?"

She shrugged. "Any time. Here's the key. Fourth floor, front. There ain't no elevator."

Crane left, still smiling, the key clutched in his hand.

Mrs. Ferman picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Hello?" she said. "Ferman reporting. We have a new one, male, about thirty."

"Fine, thank you," answered a voice. "Begin treatment at once, Dr. Ferman."