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The SHIP SAILS at MIDNIGHT





By Fritz Leiber

Though other—usually lesser—writers may view the stars with something like dread, seeing them as populated by hosts of hideous globs or tentacled horrors waiting to screech down on a defenseless Earth, that's never been the way of Fritz Leiber. Author of such classics as the Hugo-winning Wanderer, he tends to view life more compassionately—terrestrial or otherwise. So when he thinks of a visitor from the stars, often as not it will come out—as it does here—something like Helen, a “waitress” in an all-night eaterie—tall, exotically beautiful, and capable of more love than any four of the sorry mortals caught in her spell.

THIS IS the story of a beautiful woman.

And of a monster.

It is also the story of four silly, selfish, culture-bound inhabitants of the planet Earth. Es, who was something of an artist. Gene, who studied atoms—and fought the world, and himself. Louis, who philosophized. And Larry—that's my name—who tried to write books.

It was an eerie, stifling August when we met Helen. The date is fixed in my mind because our little city had just had its mid-western sluggishness ruffled by a series of those scares that either give rise to oddity items in the newspapers, or else are caused by them—it's sometimes hard to tell which. People had seen flying discs and heard noises in the sky—someone from the college geology department tried unsuccessfully to track down a meteorite. A farmer this side of the old coal pits got all excited about something "big and shapeless" that disturbed his poultry and frightened his wife, and for a couple of days men tracked around fruitlessly with shot-guns—just another of those "rural monster" scares.

Even the townfolk hadn't been left out. For their imaginative enrichment they had a "Hypnotism Burglar," an apparently mild enough chap who blinked soft lights in people's faces and droned some siren-song outside

their houses at night. For a week high-school girls squealed twice as loud after dark, men squared their shoulders adventurously at strangers, and women peered uneasily out of their bedroom windows after turning out the lights.

Louis and Es and I had picked up Gene at the college library and wanted a bite to eat before we turned in. Although by now they had almost petered out, we were talking about our local scares—a chilly hint of the supernatural makes good conversational fare in a month too hot for any real thinking. We slouched into the one decent open-all-night restaurant our dismal burg possesses (it wouldn't have that if it weren't for the "wild" college folk) and found that Benny had a new waitress.

She was really very beautiful, much too exotically beautiful for Benny's. Masses of pale gold ringlets piled high on her head. An aristocratic bony structure (from Es's greedy look I could tell she was instantly thinking sculpture). And a pair of the dreamiest, calmest eyes in the world.

She came over to our table and silently waited for our orders. Probably because her beauty flustered us, we put on an elaborate version of our act of "intellectuals precisely and patiently explaining their desires to a pig-headed member of the proletariat." She listened, nodded, and

presently returned with our orders.

Louis had asked for just a cup of black coffee.

She brought him a half cantaloupe also.

He sat looking at it for a moment. Then he chuckled incredulously. "You know, I actually wanted that," he said. "But I didn't know I wanted it. You must have read my subconscious mind."

"What's that?" she asked in a low, lovely voice with intonations rather like Benny's.

Digging into his cantaloupe, Louis sketched an explanation suitable for fifth-graders.

She disregarded the explanation. "What do you use it for?" she asked.

Louis, who is something of a wit, said, "I don't use it. It uses me."

"That the way it should be?" she commented.

None of us knew the answer to that one, so since I was the Gang's specialist in dealing with the lower orders, I remarked brilliantly, "What's your name?"

"Helen," she told me.

"How long have you been here?"

"Couple days," she said, starting back toward the counter.

"Where did you come from?"

She spread her hands. "Oh—places."

Whereupon Gene, whose humor inclines toward the fantas-

tic, asked, "Did you arrive on a flying disc?"

She glanced back at him and said, "Wise guy."

But all the same she hung around our table, filling sugar basins and what not. We made our conversation especially erudite, each of us merrily spinning his favorite web of half-understood intellectual jargon and half-baked private opinion. We were conscious of her presence, all right.

Just as we were leaving, the thing happened. At the doorway something made us all look back. Helen was behind the counter. She was looking at us. Her eyes weren't dreamy at all, but focused, intent, radiant. She was smiling.

My elbow was touching Es's naked arm—we were rather crowded in the doorway—and I felt her shiver. Then she gave a tiny jerk and I sensed that Gene, who was holding her other arm (they were more or less sweethearts), had tightened his grip on it.

For perhaps three seconds it stayed just like that, the four of us looking at the one of her. Then Helen shyly dropped her gaze and began to mop the counter with a rag.

We were all very quiet going home.

Next night we went back to Benny's again, rather earlier. Helen was still there, and quite as beautiful as we remembered

her. We exchanged with her a few more of those brief, teasing remarks—her voice no longer sounded so much like Benny's—and staged some more intellectual pyrotechnics for her benefit. Just before we left, Es went up to her at the counter and talked to her privately for perhaps a minute, at the end of which Helen nodded.

"Ask her to pose for you?" I asked Es when we got outside.

She nodded. "That girl has the most magnificent figure in the world," she proclaimed fervently.

"Or out of it," Gene confirmed grudgingly.

"And an incredibly exciting skull," Es finished.

It was characteristic of us that Es should have been the one to really break the ice with Helen. Like most intellectuals, we were rather timid, always setting up barriers against other people. We clung to adolescence and the college, although all of us but Gene had been graduated from it. Instead of getting out into the real world, we lived by sponging off our parents and doing academic odd jobs for the professors (Es had a few private students.) Here in our home city we had status, you see. We were looked upon as being frightfully clever and sophisticated, the local "bohemian set" (though Lord knows we were anything but that). Whereas out in the real world we'd have been greenhorns.

We were scared of the world, you see. Scared that it would find out that all our vaunted abilities and projects didn't amount to much—and that as for solid achievements, there just hadn't been any. Es was only a mediocre artist; she was afraid to learn from the great, especially the living great, for fear her own affected little individuality would be engulfed. Louis was no philosopher; he merely cultivated a series of intellectual enthusiasms, living in a state of feverish private—and fruitless—excitement over the thoughts of other men. My own defense against reality consisted of knowingness and a cynical attitude; I had a remarkable pack-rat accumulation of information; I had a line on everything—and also always knew why it wasn't worth bothering with. As for Gene, he was the best of us and also the worst. A bit younger, he still applied himself to his studies, and showed promise in nuclear physics and math. But something, perhaps his small size and puritanical farm background, had made him moody and contrary, and given him an inclination toward physical violence that threatened some day to get him into real trouble. As it was, he'd had his license taken away for reckless driving. And several times we'd had to intervene—once unsuccessfully—to keep him from getting beaten up in bars.

We talked a great deal about

our "work." Actually we spent much more time reading magazines and detective stories, lazing around, getting drunk, and conducting our endless intellectual palavers.

If we had one real virtue, it was our loyalty to each other, though it wouldn't take a cynic to point out that we desperately needed each other for an audience. Still, there was some genuine feeling there.

In short, like many people on a planet where mind is waking and has barely become aware of the eon-old fetters and blindfolds oppressing it, and has had just the faintest glimpse of its tremendous possible future destiny, we were badly cowed—frightened, frustrated, self-centered, slothful, vain, pretentious.

Considering how set we were getting in those attitudes, it is all the more amazing that Helen had the tremendous effect on us that she did. For within a month of meeting her, our attitude toward the whole world had sweetened, we had become genuinely interested in people instead of being frightened of them, and we were beginning to do real creative work. An astonishing achievement for an unknown little waitress!

It wasn't that she took us in hand or set us an example, or anything like that. Quite the opposite. I don't think that Helen was responsible for a half dozen

positive statements (and only one really impulsive act) during the whole time we knew her. Rather, she was like a Great Books discussion leader, who never voices an opinion of his own, but only leads other people to voice theirs—as an intellectual midwife.

Louis and Gene and I would drop over to Es's, say, and find Helen getting dressed behind the screen or taking a cup of tea after a session of posing. We'd start a discussion and for a while Helen would listen dreamily, just another shadow in the high old shadowy room. But then those startling little questions of hers would begin to come, each one opening a new vista of thought. By the time the discussion was finished—which might be at the Blue Moon bar or under the campus maples or watching the water ripple in the old coal pits—we'd have got somewhere. Instead of ending in weary shoulder-shrugging or cynical grousing at the world or getting drunk out of sheer frustration, we'd finish up with a plan—some facts to check, something to write or shape to try.

And then, people! How would we ever have got close to people without Helen? Without Helen, Old Gus would have stayed an ancient and bleary-eyed dishwasher at Benny's. But with Helen, Gus became for us what he really was—a figure of romance who had sailed the Seven Seas,

who had hunted for gold on the Orinoco with twenty female Indians for porters (because the males were too lazy and proud to hire out to do anything) and who had marched at the head of his Amazon band carrying a newborn baby of one of the women in his generous arms (because the women assured him that a man-child was the only burden a man might carry without dishonor.

Even Gene was softened in his attitudes. I remember once when two handsome truckdrivers picked up Helen at the Blue Moon. Instantly Gene's jaw muscles bulged and his eyes went blank and he began to wag his right shoulder—and I got ready for a scene. But Helen said a word here and there, threw in a soft laugh, and began to ask the truckdrivers her questions. In ten minutes we were all at ease and the four of us found out things we'd never dreamed about dark highways and diesels and their proud, dark-souled pilots (so like Gene in their temperaments).

But it was on us as individuals that Helen's influence showed up the biggest. Es's sculptures acquired an altogether new scope. She dropped her pet mannerisms without a tear and began to take into her work whatever was sound and good. She rapidly developed a style that was classical and yet had in it something that was wholly of the future. Es is getting recognition now and her work is

still good, but there was a magic about her "Hellenic Period" which she can't recapture. The magic still lives in the pieces she did at that time—particularly in a nude of Helen that has all the serenity and purpose of the best ancient Egyptian work, and something much more. As we watched that piece take form, as we watched the clay grow into Helen under Es's hands, we dimly sensed that in some indescribable way Helen was growing into Es at the same time, and Es into Helen. It was such a beautiful, subtle relationship that even Gene couldn't be jealous.

At the same time Louis gave over his fickle philosophical flirtations and found the field of inquiry for which he'd always been looking—a blend of semantics and introspective psychology designed to chart the chaotic inner world of human experience. Although his present intellectual tactics lack the brilliance they had when Helen was nudging his mind, he still keeps doggedly at the project, which promises to add a whole new range of words to the vocabulary of psychology and perhaps of the English language.

Gene wasn't ripe for creative work, but from being a merely promising student he became a brilliant and very industrious one, rather to the surprise of his professors. Even with the cloud that now overhangs his life and darkens his reputation, he has man-

aged to find worthwhile employment on one of the big nuclear projects.

As for myself, I really began to write. Enough said.

We sometimes used to speculate as to the secret of Helen's effect on us, though we didn't by any means give her all the credit in those days. We had some sort of theory that Helen was a completely "natural" person, a "noble savage" (from the kitchen), a bridge to the world of proletarian reality. Es once said that Helen couldn't have had a Freudian childhood, whatever she meant by that. Louis spoke of Helen's unthinking social courage and Gene of the catalytic effect of beauty. And sometimes we attributed Helen's influence merely to some difference between her life pattern and ours.

Oddly, in these discussions we never referred to that strange, electric experience we'd all had when we first met Helen—that tearing moment when we'd looked back from the doorway. We were always strangely reticent there. And none of us ever voiced the conviction that I'm sure all of had at times: that our social and psychoanalytic theories weren't worth a hoot when it came to explaining Helen, that she possessed powers of feeling and mind (mostly concealed) that set her utterly apart from every other inhabitant of the planet Earth, that she was like a being from another,

far saner and lovelier world.

That conviction isn't unusual, come to think of it. It's the one every man has about the girl he loves. Which brings me to my own secret explanation of Helen's effect on me (though not on the others).

It was simply this. I loved Helen and I knew Helen loved me. And that was quite enough.

It happened scarcely a month after we'd met. We were staging a little party at Es's. Since I was the one with the car, I was assigned to pick up Helen at Benny's when she got through. On the short drive I passed a house that held unpleasant memories for me. A girl had lived there whom I'd been crazy about and who had turned me down. (No, let's be honest, I turned her down, though I very much wanted her, because of some tragic cowardice, the memory of which always sears me like a hot iron.)

Helen must have guessed something from my expression, for she said softly, "What's the matter, Larry?" and then, when I ignored the question, "Something about a girl?"

She was so sympathetic about it that I broke down and told her the whole story, sitting in the parked and lightless car in front of Es's. I let myself go and lived through the whole thing again, with all its biting shame. When I was finished I looked up from the steering wheel. The streetlight

made a pale aureole around Helen's head and a paler one where the white angora sweater covered her shoulders. The upper part of her face was in darkness, but a bit of light touched her full lips and a narrow, almost fennec—or fox-like chin.

"You poor kid," she said softly, and the next moment we were kissing each other, and a feeling of utter relief and courage and power was budding deep inside me.

A bit later she said to me something that even at the time I realized was very wise.

"Let's keep this between you and me, Larry," she said. "Let's not mention it to the others. Let's not even hint." She paused, and then added, a trifle unhappily, "I'm afraid they wouldn't appreciate it. Sometime, I hope—but not quite yet."

I knew what she meant. That Gene and Louis and even Es were only human—that is, irrational—in their jealousies, and that the knowledge that Helen was my girl would have put a damper on the exciting but almost childlike relationship of the five of us (as the fact of Es's and Gene's love would never have done. Es was a rather cold, awkward girl, and Louis and I seldom grudged poor, angry Gene her affection.)

So when Helen and I dashed in and found the other berating Benny for making Helen work overtime, we agreed that he was an

unshaven and heartless louse, and in a little while the party was going strong and we were laughing and talking unconstrainedly. No one could possibly have guessed that a new and very lovely factor had been added to the situation.

After that evening everything was different for me. I had a girl. Helen was (why not say the trite things, they're true) my goddess, my worshipper, my slave, my ruler, my inspiration, my comfort, my refuge—oh, I could write books about what she meant to me.

I guess all my life I will be writing books about that.

I could write pages describing just one of the beautiful moments we had together. I could drown myself in the bitter ghosts of sensations. Rush of sunlight through her hair. Click of her heels on a brick sidewalk. Light of her presence brightening a mean room. Chase of unearthly expressions across her sleeping face.

Yet it' was on my mind that Helen's love had the greatest effect. It unfettered my thoughts, gave them passage into a far vaster cosmos.

One minute I'd be beside Helen, our hands touching lightly in the dark, a shaft of moonlight from the dusty window silvering her hair. The next, my mind would be a billion miles up, hovering like an iridescent insect

over the million bright worlds of existence.

Or I'd be surmounting walls inside my mind—craggy, dire ram-parts that have been there since the days of the cave man.

Or the universe would become a miraculous web, with Time the spider. I couldn't see all of it—no creature could see a trillionth of it in all eternity—but I would have a sense of it all.

Sometimes the icy beauty of those moments would become too great, and I'd feel a sudden chill of terror. Then the scene around me would become a nightmare and I'd half expect Helen's eyes to show a catlike gleam and slit, or her hair to come rustlingly alive, or her arms to writhe bonelessly, or her splendid skin to slough away, revealing some black and antlike form of dread.

Then the moment would pass and everything would be sheer loveliness again, richer for the fleeting terror.

My mind is hobbled once more now, but I still know the taste of the inward freedom that Helen's love brought.

You might think from this that Helen and I had a lot of times alone together. We hadn't—we couldn't have, with the Gang. But we had enough. Helen was clever at arranging things. They never suspected us.

Lord knows there were times I yearned to let the Gang in on our secret. But then I would re-

member Helen's warning and see the truth of it.

Let's face it. We're all of us a pretty vain and possessive people. As individuals, we cry for attention. We jockey for admiration. We swim or sink according to whether we feel we're being worshipped or merely liked. We demand too much of the person we love. We want them to be a never-failing prop to our ego.

And then if we're lonely and happen to see someone else loved, the greedy child wakes, the savage stirs, the frustrated Puritan clenches his teeth. We seethe, we resent, we hate.

No, I saw that I couldn't tell the others about Helen and myself. Not Louis. Not even Es. And as for Gene, I'm afraid that with his narrow-minded upbringing, he'd have been deeply shocked by what he'd have deduced about our relationship. We were supposed, you know, to be "wild" young people, "bohemians." Actually we were quite straight-laced—Gene especially, the rest of us almost as much.

I knew how I would have felt if Helen had happened to become Louis's or Gene's girl. That says it.

To tell the truth, I felt a great deal of admiration for the Gang, because they could do alone what I was only doing with Helen's love. They were enlarging their minds, becoming creative, working and playing hard—and doing

it without my reward. Frankly, I don't know how I could have managed it myself without Helen's love. My admiration for Louis, Es, and Gene was touched with a kind of awe.

And we really were getting places. We had created a new mind-spot on the world, a sprouting-place for thought that wasn't vain or self-conscious, but concerned wholly with its work and its delights. The Gang was forming itself into a kind of lens for viewing the world, outside and in.

Any group of people can make themselves into that sort of lens, if they really want to. But somehow they seldom get started. They don't have the right inspiration.

We had Helen.

Always, but mostly in unspoken thoughts, we'd come back to the mystery of how she had managed it. She was mysterious, all right. We'd known her some six months now, and we were as much in the dark about her background as when we first met her. She wouldn't tell anything even to me. She'd come from "places." She was a "drifter." She liked "people." She told us all sorts of fascinating incidents, but whether she'd been mixed up in them herself or just heard them at Benny's (she could have made a Trappist jabber) was uncertain.

We sometimes tried to get her to talk about her past. But she dodged our questions easily and we didn't like to press them.

You don't cross-examine Beauty.

You don't demand that a Great Books discussion leader state his convictions.

You don't probe a goddess about her past.

Yet this vagueness about Helen's past caused us a certain uneasiness. She'd drifted to us. She might drift away.

If we hadn't been so involved in our thought-sprouting, we'd have been worried. And if I hadn't been so happy, and everything so smoothly perfect, I'd have done more than occasionally ask Helen to marry me and hear her answer, "Not now, Larry."

Yes, she was mysterious.

And she had her eccentricities.

For one thing, she insisted on working at Benny's although she could have had a dozen better jobs. Benny's was her window on the main street of life, she said.

For another, she'd go off on long hikes in the country, even in the snowiest weather. I met her coming back from one and was worried, tried to be angry. But she only smiled.

Yet, when spring came round again and burgeoned into summer, she would never go swimming with us in our favorite coal pit.

The coal pits are a place where they once strip-mined for the stuff where it came to the surface. Long ago the huge holes

were left to fill with water and their edges to grow green with grass and trees. They're swell for swimming.

But Helen would never go to our favorite, which was one of the biggest and yet the least visited—and this year the water was unusually high. We changed to suit her, of course, but because the one she didn't like happened to be near the farmhouse of last August's "rural monster" scare, Louis joshed her.

"Maybe a monster haunts the pool," he said. "Maybe it's a being come from another world on a flying disk."

He happened to say that on a lazy afternoon when we'd been swimming at the new coal pit and were drying on the edge, having cigarettes. Louis' remark started us speculating about creatures from another world coming secretly to visit Earth—their problems, especially how they'd disguise themselves.

"Maybe they'd watch from a distance," Gene said. "Television, supersensitive microphones."

"Or clairvoyance, clairaudience," Es chimed, being rather keen on parapsychology.

"But to really mingle with people . . ." Helen murmured. She was stretched on her back in white bra and trunks, looking deep into the ranks of marching clouds. Her olive skin tanned to an odd hue that went bewitching-

ly with her hair. With a sudden and frightening poignancy I was aware of the catlike perfection of her slim body.

"The creature might have some sort of elaborate plastic disguise," Gene began doubtfully.

"It might have a human form to begin with," I ventured. "You know, the idea that Earth folk are decayed interstellar colonists."

"It might take possession of some person here," Louis cut in. "insinuate its mind or even itself into the human being."

"Or it might grow itself a new body," Helen murmured sleepily.

That was one of the half dozen positive statements she ever made.

Then we got to talking about the motives of such an alien being. Whether it would try to destroy men, or look on us as cattle, or study us, or amuse itself with us, or what not.

Here Helen joined in again, distant-eyed but smiling. "I know you've all laughed at the comic-book idea of some Martian monster lusting after beautiful white women. But has it ever occurred to you that a creature from outside might simply and honestly fall in love with you?"

That was another of Helen's rare and positive statements.

The idea was engaging and we tried to get Helen to expand it, but she wouldn't. In fact, she was rather silent the rest of that day.

As the summer began to mount toward its crests of heat and growth, the mystery of Helen began to possess us more often—that, and a certain anxiety about her.

There was a feeling in the air, the sort of uneasiness that cats and dogs get when they are about to lose their owner.

Without exactly knowing it, without a definite word being said, we were afraid we might lose Helen.

Partly it was Helen's own behavior. For once she showed a kind of restlessness, or rather preoccupation. At Benny's she no longer took such an interest in "people."

She seemed to be trying to solve some difficult personal problem, nerve herself to make some big decision.

Once she looked at us and said, "You know, I like you kids terribly." Said it the way a person says it when he knows he may have to lose what he likes.

And then there was the business of the Stranger.

Helen had been talking quite a bit with a strange man, not at Benny's, but walking in the streets, which was unusual. We didn't know who the Stranger was. We hadn't actually seen him face to face. Just heard about him from Benny and glimpsed him once or twice. Yet he worried us.

Understand, our happiness went on, yet faintly veiling it

was this new and ominous mist.

Then one night the mist took definite shape. It happened on an occasion of celebration. After a few days during which we'd sensed they'd been quarreling, Es and Gene had suddenly announced that they were getting married. On an immediate impulse we'd all gone to the Blue Moon.

We were having the third round of drinks, and kidding Es because she didn't seem very enthusiastic, almost a bit grumpy—when he came in.

Even before he looked our way, before he drifted up to our table, we knew that this was the Stranger.

He was a rather slender man, fair haired like Helen. Otherwise he didn't look like her, yet there was a sense of kinship. Perhaps it lay in his poise, his wholly casual manner.

As he came up, I could feel myself and the others getting tense, like dogs at the approach of the unknown.

The Stranger stopped by our table and stood looking at Helen as if he knew her. The four of us realized more than ever that we wanted Helen to be ours alone (and especially mine), that we hated to think of her having close ties with anyone else.

What got especially under my skin was the suggestion that there was some kinship between the Stranger and Helen, that behind

his proud, remote-eyed face, he was talking to her with his mind.

Gene apparently took the Stranger for one of those unpleasant fellows who strut around bars looking for trouble—and proceeded to act as if he were one of those same fellows himself. He screwed his delicate features into a cheap frown and stood up as tall as he could, which wasn't much. Such tough-guy behavior, always a symptom of frustration and doubts of masculinity, had been foreign to Gene for some months. I felt a pulse of sadness—and almost winced when Gene opened the side of his mouth and began, "Now look here, Jos—"

But Helen laid her hand on his arm. She looked calmly at the Stranger for a few more moments and then she said, "I won't talk to you that way. You must speak English."

If the Stranger was surprised, he didn't show it. He smiled and said softly, with a faint foreign accent, "The ship sails at midnight, Helen."

I got a queer feeling, for our city is two hundred miles from anything you'd call navigable waters.

For a moment I felt what you might call supernatural fear. The bar, so tawdry and dim, the line of hunched neurotic shoulders, the plump dice-girl at one end and the tiny writhing television screen at the other. And against

that background, Helen and the Stranger, light-haired, olive-skinned, with proud feline features, facing each other like duelists, on guard, opposed, yet sharing some secret knowledge. Like two aristocrats come to a dive to settle a quarrel—like that, and something more. As I say, it frightened me.

"Are you coming, Helen?" the Stranger asked.

And now I was really frightened. It was as if I'd realized for the first time just how terribly much Helen meant to all of us, and to me especially. Not just the loss of her, but the loss of things in me that only she could call into being. I could see the same fear in the faces of the others. A lost look in Gene's eyes behind the fake gangster frown. Louis' fingers relaxing from his glass and his chunky head turning toward the stranger, slowly, with empty gaze, like the turret-guns of a battleship. Es starting to stub out her cigarette and then hesitating, her eyes on Helen—although in Es's case I felt there was another emotion besides fear.

"Coming?" Helen echoed, like someone in a dream.

The Stranger waited. Helen's reply had twisted the tension tighter. Now Es did stub out her cigarette with awkward haste, then quickly drew back her hand. I felt suddenly that this had been bound to happen, that Helen must have had her life, her real life,

before we had known her, and that the Stranger was part of it; that she had come to us mysteriously and now would leave us as mysteriously. Yes, I felt all of that, although in view of what had happened between Helen and me, I knew I shouldn't have.

"Have you considered everything?" the Stranger asked finally.

"Yes," Helen replied.

"You know that after tonight there'll be no going back," he continued as softly as ever. "You know that you'll be marooned here forever, that you'll have to spend the rest of your life among . . ." (he looked around at us as if searching for a word) ". . . among barbarians."

Again Helen laid her hand on Gene's arm, although her glance never left the Stranger's face.

"What is the attraction, Helen?" the Stranger went on. "Have you really tried to analyze it? I know it might be fun for a month, or a year, or even five years. A kind of game, a renewal of youth. But when it's over and you're tired of the game, when you realize that you're alone, completely alone, and that there's no going back ever—Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, I have thought of all that." Helen said, as quietly as the Stranger but with a tremendous finality. "I won't try to explain it to you, because with all your wisdom and cleverness I

don't think you'd quite understand. And I know I'm breaking promises—and more than promises. But I'm not going back. I'm here with my friends, my true and equal friends, and I'm not going back."

And then it came, and I could tell it came to all of us—a great big lift, like a surge of silent music or a glow of invisible light. Helen had at last declared herself. After the faint equivocations and reservations of the spring and summer, she had put herself squarely on our side. We each of us knew that what she had said she meant wholly and forever. She was ours, ours more completely than ever before. Our quasi-goddess, our inspiration, our key to a widening future; the one who always understood, who could open doors in our imaginations and feelings that would otherwise have remained forever shut. She was *our* Helen now, our and (as my mind persisted in adding exultingly) especially mine.

And we? We were the Gang again, happy, poised, wise as Heaven and clever as Hell, out to celebrate, having fun with whatever came along.

The whole scene had changed. The frightening aura around the Stranger had vanished completely. He was just another of those hundreds of odd people whom we met when we were with Helen.

He acted almost as if he were

conscious of it. He smiled and said quickly, "Very well. I had a feeling you'd decide this way." He started to move off. Then, "Oh, by the way, Helen—"

"Yes?"

"The others wanted me to say goodby to you for them."

"Tell them the same and the best of luck."

The Stranger nodded and again started to turn away, when Helen added, "And you?"

"I'll be seeing you once more before midnight," he said lightly, and almost the next moment, it seemed, was out the door.

We all chuckled. I don't know why. Partly from relief, I suppose, and partly—God help us!—in triumph over the Stranger. One thing I'm sure of: three (and maybe even four) of us felt for a moment happier and more secure in our relationship to Helen than we ever had before. It was the peak. We were together. The Stranger had been vanquished, and all the queer unspoken threats he had brought with him. Helen had declared herself. The future stood open before us, full of creation and achievement, with Helen ready to lead us into it. For a moment everything was perfect. We were mankind, vibrantly alive, triumphantly progressing.

It was, as I say, perfect.

And only human beings know how to wreck perfection.

Only human beings are so vain, so greedy, each wanting every-

thing and for himself alone.

It was Gene who did it. Gene who couldn't stand so much happiness and who had to destroy it, from what self-fear, what Puritanical self-torment, what death-wish I don't know.

It was Gene, but it might have been any of us.

His face was flushed. He was smiling, grinning rather, in what I now realize was an oafish and overbearing complacency. He put his hand on Helen's arm in a way none of us had ever touched Helen before, and said, "That was great, dear."

It wasn't so much what he said as the naked possessiveness of the gesture. It was surely that gesture of ownership that made Es explode, that started her talking in a voice terribly bitter, but so low it was some moments before the rest of us realized what she was getting at.

When we did we were thunder-struck.

She was accusing Helen of having stolen Gene's love.

It's hard to make anyone understand the shock we felt. As if someone had accused a goddess of abominations.

Es lit another cigarette with shaking fingers, and finished up.

"I don't want your pity, Helen. I don't want Gene married off to me for the sake of appearances, like some half-discarded mistress. I like you, Helen, but not enough to let you take Gene away from

me and then toss him back—or half toss him back. No, I draw the line at that.”

And she stopped as if her emotions had choked her.

As I said, the rest of us were thunder-struck. But not Gene. His face got redder still. He slugged down the rest of his drink and looked around at us, obviously getting ready to explode in turn.

Helen had listened to Es with a half smile and an unhappy half frown, shaking her head from time to time. Now she shot Gene a warning, imploring glance, but he disregarded it.

“No, Helen,” he said, “Es is right. I’m glad she spoke. It was a mistake for us ever to hide our feelings. It would have been a ten times worse mistake if I’d kept that crazy promise I made you to marry Es. You go too much by pity, Helen, and pity’s no use in managing an affair like this. I don’t want to hurt Es, but she’d better know right now that it’s another marriage we’re announcing tonight.”

I sat there speechless. I just couldn’t realize that that drunken, red-faced poppinjay was claiming that Helen was his girl, his wife to be.

Es didn’t look at him. “You cheap little beast,” she whispered.

Gene went white at that, but he kept on smiling.

“Es may not forgive me for

this,” he said harshly, “but I don’t think it’s me she’s jealous of. What gets under her skin is not so much losing me to Helen as losing Helen to me.”

Then I could find words.

But Louis was ahead of me.

He put his hand firmly on Gene’s shoulder.

“You’re drunk, Gene,” he said, “and you’re talking like a drunken fool. Helen’s my girl.”

They started up, both of them, Louis’s hand still on Gene’s shoulder.

Then, instead of hitting each other, they looked at me.

Because I had risen too.

“But . . .” I began, and faltered.

Without my saying it, they knew.

Louis’s hand dropped away from Gene.

All of us looked at Helen. A cold, terribly hurt, horribly disgusted look.

Helen blushed and looked down. Only much later did I realize it was related to the look she’d given the four of us that first night at Benny’s.

“. . . but I fell in love with all of you,” she said softly.

Then we did speak, or rather Gene spoke for us. I hate to admit it, but at the time I felt a hot throb of pleasure at all the unforgivable things he called Helen. I wanted to see the lash laid on, the stones thud.

Finally he called her some

names that were a little worse.

Then Helen did the only impulsive thing I ever knew her to do.

She slapped Gene's face. Once. Hard.

There are only two courses a person can take when he's been rebuked by a goddess, even a fallen goddess. He can grovel and beg forgiveness. Or he can turn apostate and devil worshipper.

Gene did the latter.

He walked out of the Blue Moon, blundering like a blind drunk.

That broke up the party, and Gus and the bartender, who'd been about to interfere, returned relievedly to their jobs.

Louis went off to the bar. Es followed him. I went to the far end myself, under the writhing television screen, and ordered a double scotch.

Beyond the dozen intervening pairs of shoulders, I could see that Es was trying to act shameless. She was whispering things to Louis. At the same time, and even more awkwardly, she was flirting with one of the other men. Every once in a while she would laugh shrilly, mirthlessly.

Helen didn't move. She just sat at the table, looking down, the half smile fixed on her lips. Once Gus approached her, but she shook her head.

I ordered another double scotch. Suddenly my mind began to work furiously on three levels.

On the first I was loathing Hel-

en. I was seeing that all she'd done for us, all the mind-spot, all the house of creativity we'd raised together, had been based on a lie. Helen was unutterably cheap, common.

Mostly, on that level, I was grieving for the terrible wrong I felt she'd done me.

The second level was entirely different. There an icy spider had entered my mind from realms undreamt. There sheer supernatural terror reigned. For there I was adding up all the little hints of strangeness we'd had about Helen. The Stranger's words had touched it off and now a thousand details began to drop into place: the coincidence of her arrival with the flying disc, rural monster, and hypnotism scare: her interest in people, like that of a student from a far land; the impression she gave of possessing concealed powers; her pains never to say anything definite, as if she were on guard against imparting some forbidden knowledge; her long hikes into the country; her aversion for the big and yet seldom-visited coal pit (big and deep enough to float a liner or hide a submarine); above all, that impression of *unearthliness* she'd at times given us all, even when we were most under her spell.

And now this matter of a ship sailing at midnight. From the Great Plains.

What sort of ship?

On that level my mind shrank from facing the obvious result of its labor. It was too frighteningly incredible, too far from the world of the Blue Moon and Benny's and cheap little waitresses.

The third level was far mistier, but it was there. At least I tell myself it was there. On this third level I was beginning to see Helen in a better light and the rest of us in a worse. I was beginning to see the lovelessness behind our idea of love—and the faithfulness, to the best in us, behind Helen's faithfulness. I was beginning to see how hateful, how like spoiled children, we'd been acting.

Of course, maybe there wasn't any third level in my mind at all. Maybe that only came afterwards. Maybe I'm just trying to flatter myself that I was a little more discerning, a little "bigger" than the others.

Yet I like to think that I turned away from the bar and took a couple of steps toward Helen, that it was only those "second level" fears that showed me so that I'd only taken those two faltering steps (if I took them) before—

I remember the clock said eleven thirty.

Gene's face was dead white, and knobby with tension.

His hand was in his pocket.

He never looked at anyone but Helen. They might have been alone. He wavered—or trem-

bled. Then a terrible spasm of energy stiffened him. He started toward the table.

Helen got up and walked toward him, her arms outstretched. In her half smile were all the compassion and fatalism—and love—I can imagine there being in the universe.

Gene pulled a gun out of his pocket and shot Helen six times. Four times in the body, twice in the head.

She hung for a moment, then pitched forward into the blue smoke. It puffed away from her to either side and we saw her lying on her face, one of her outstretched hands touching Gene's shoe.

Then, before a woman could scream, before Gus and the other chap could jump the bar, the outside door of the Blue Moon opened and the Stranger came in. After that none of us *could* have moved or spoken. We cringed from his eyes like guilty dogs.

It wasn't that he looked anger at us, or hate, or even contempt. That would have been much easier to bear.

No, even as the Stranger passed Gene—Gene, pistol dangling from two fingers, looking down in dumb horror, edging his toe back by terrified inches from Helen's dead hand—even as the Stranger sent Gene a glance, it was the glance a man might give a bull that has gored a child, a pet ape

that has torn up his mistress in some inscrutable and pettish animal rage.

And as, without a word, the Stranger picked Helen up in his arms, and carried her silently through the thinning blue smoke into the street, his face bore that same look of tragic regret, of serene acceptance.

That's almost all there is to my story. Gene was arrested, of course, but you can't convict a man for the murder of a woman without real identity, when there is no body to prove a murder had been committed.

For Helen's body was never found. Neither was the Stranger.

Eventually Gene was released and, as I've said, is making a life for himself, despite the cloud over his reputation.

We see him now and then, and try to console him, tell him it might as easily have been Es or Louis or I, that we were all blind, selfish fools together.

And we've each of us got back to our work. The sculptures, the word-studies, the novels, the nuclear notions are not nearly as brilliant as when Helen was with us. But we keep turning them out. We tell ourselves Helen would like that.

And our minds all work now at the third level—but only by fits and starts, fighting the jungle blindness and selfishness that are closing in again. Still, at our

best, we understand Helen and what Helen was trying to do, what she was trying to bring the world even if the world wasn't ready for it. We glimpse that strange passion that made her sacrifice all the stars for four miserable blind-worms.

But mostly we grieve for Helen, together and alone. We know that she's gone a lot farther than the dozens or thousands of light-years her body's been taken for burial. We look at Es's statue of Helen, we read one or two of my poems to her. We remember, our minds come half alive and are tortured by the thought of what they might have become if we'd kept Helen. We picture her again sitting in the shadows of Es's studio, or sunning herself on the grassy banks after a swim, or smiling at us at Benny's. And we grieve.

For we know you get only one chance at someone like Helen.

We know that because, half an hour after the Stranger carried Helen's body from the Blue Moon, a great meteor went flaming and roaring across the countryside (some say up from the countryside and out toward the stars) and the next day it was discovered that the waters of the coal pit Helen wouldn't swim in, had been splashed, as if by the downward blow of a giant's fist, across the fields for a thousand yards.

The End