

The Premiere

Richard Sabia

A decorative graphic consisting of several thick, blue lines of varying lengths and orientations, set against a solid green background. The lines form a complex, abstract pattern that resembles a stylized staircase or a series of interconnected paths. The lines are positioned in the lower half of the page, starting from the left edge and extending towards the right, with some lines curving downwards and to the right.

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE PREMIERE ***

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*The young actor was great...
They didn't realize just how great
until the night of*

**THE
PREMIERE**

By RICHARD SABIA

CLAMPED to the contour couch, the young girl strained against the padded steel grips and screamed. Again she writhed and screamed as she felt the hideous touch of the monster snatching at her. She struggled frenziedly through the muck of the swamp but the thing with the blood eyes scabbled faster on its rotten limbs. The thing seized her in its obscene embrace. Raw terror tore another scream from her throat. Behind her on the projector a needle slammed into the red zone. Beyond the hundreds of long rows of couches a warning light flashed on the control console of Mezzanine F and its persistent buzz snared the attention of one of the ushers. He glanced at the light's location number and ran along one of the aisles till he came to the girl. He saw that the projector had shut off the feature feelie and was running the emergency tranquil strip. She had stopped screaming but her breathing was still agitated. He looked around at the rows of couches, nearly all occupied but none of the other patrons seemed more frightened than they should be. Some of the other ushers had halted on their rounds and were looking quizzically across at him. He shrugged the question back at them, removed the feelie permit from its clip on the girl's couch and checked the permitted intensity level against the setting of the projector. They matched. Still puzzled, he examined the other settings without discovering any apparent cause for her fright-hysteria. The tranquil strip ended and the machine shut itself off. The usher moved a switch that released the pressure of the electrodes against the girl's head and retracted them into the headset. Her eyes opened as he removed the apparatus and folded back the clamps.

"Feel all right, miss?" he inquired with a solicitous smile.

She nodded, but her eyes still held echoes of alarm.

"Better come down to the clinic," he said gently, assisting her from the couch.

She said nothing but allowed him to lead her along. They stepped into a float shaft and drifted gently down past other floors of the theater occupied by the myriad rows of feelie couches. When they reached what was obviously an office level, the usher grasped a tug bar which pulled them into a corridor opening. He

brought her to the clinic and left her with the doctor after explaining what had happened.

The doctor seated her alongside his desk. "How do you feel now?"

She smiled weakly. "All right Ah guess," she said with a soft drawl.

"Let's see," he said looking at her feelie permit, "you are Miss, ah, Loretta Meenan, and, well, you are from Hammond, Louisiana." He looked up at her and smiled. "May I ask how old you are Miss Meenan?"

"Sixteen."

"A very charming sixteen, I must say. Are you here with your family?"

"Yes. Ma an' pa are at the convention. They let us come to the feelies."

"Us?"

"Mah older brother, Jason."

"Oh? How old is he?"

"Eighteen. But he's big, real man-lookin' an' folks who don't know mistake him for past twenty."

"What couch did he have?"

"Next to mine on the left."

The doctor consulted his notepad. "Ah, that would make it number, ah, six thousand forty-two. We'll have one of the ushers bring him down."

"Please don't," she said hastily. "Not 'till the feelie's over anyhow. He'll have the furies with me if he misses the endin' on mah account."

"All right," the doctor agreed amiably. "How are you enjoying your visit to New York?"

"Ah'm havin' a dazzlin' time."

"Good. Do you go to the feelies at home?" The doctor saw her tense forward from the curve of the chair.

"Yes."

"Enjoy them?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been badly upset by horror feelies before?"

"No, sir."

The doctor was aware of the apprehension behind her guardedness. "Do you have any idea why this one should have upset you so?"

"No, sir, except maybe the excitement. Ah ain't never been much away from home before but once to New Orleans."

The doctor looked at her permit card again. "This isn't a very good likeness of you."

"It does reflect me poorly," she murmured.

The doctor's smile evaporated from his suddenly stern face. "Perhaps it's because this is not your picture and this is not your card."

Her face went white.

"What is your name?"

"Robina Rowe." Her downcast eyes were locked on her fingers squirming in her lap.

"Who's Loretta Meenan?"

"Mah girlfriend."

"Why did you borrow her card?"

She was close to tears. "Ah jus' had to go to this feelie. It's got mah very favorite actor in it."

"Evidently your card doesn't permit you to attend horror feelies."

She nodded.

"Why not? Nightmares?"

She shook her head.

"Don't tell me you have a bad heart!"

She shook her head again. "Ah'm a Sensitive," she said bleakly.

In a sudden surge of anger the doctor half rose out of his chair and leaned across the desk. "Why you little fool!" he roared. "You little damn fool!"

From the open doorway a shape hurtled across the desk at the doctor and crashed with him to the floor.

"Jason!" Robina shrieked.

"Don't you talk to mah sister that way," Jason shouted as he pummelled the doctor. "Ah'll kill you!"

The usher who had guided Jason to the clinic dashed around the desk to pull the boy from the doctor. Robina tried to help but in the tussle she was knocked down, striking her head on a leg of the overturned chair. Jason, hearing her cry of pain, leaped off the doctor to aid her.

"It's only a little bump," Jason said reassuringly as he cradled her in his arms.

The doctor got to his feet and glared at the tall, strikingly handsome boy-man helping his sister to a chair.

That done, Jason whirled to face the doctor. "Now listen here—"

"Now you listen to me," the doctor shouted. He saw Jason gather himself as if for another leap but Robina placed a restraining hand on his arm and his fists slowly uncurled. "If you loved your sister as much as you pretend to you wouldn't have helped her try to kill herself!"

"What do you mean?" the boy said sullenly.

"You know damn well what I mean," the doctor said. "You *know* your sister is a Sensitive. She experiences things with ten times the impact of an ordinary person and her empathy threshold is so high a death scene in a feelie could kill her! And if you don't know what some of the words mean," the doctor said, noticing Jason's slight puzzlement, "you do know what your sister is and the care

that has to be taken."

The guilt in Jason's abashed face agreed.

Fired by his anger, the doctor raged on. "Why the devil do you think we have laws concerning attendance permits? What do you think all that testing by doctors and psychologists before a permit is issued is for? You, you big ox, could be killed by fright too if the intensity level of the projector was set higher than your psycho-profile rating."

He saw his last words had lost the boy again. "In any case you know better. Why did you allow your sister to endanger her life by letting her illegally use another's permit? And of all things, a horror feelie!"

"Ah didn't want to take her," Jason complained, "but she jus' fussed an' fretted at me 'till Ah gave in."

"Well you've both broken the law. Your parents will be notified and you'll have to stay here until they come." The doctor buzzed and a guard appeared. "Take these two to Mr. Lemson's office," he instructed him.

The guard led them from the floating steel and crystal theater structure of the U-Live-It Corporation complex to the executive wing of the general offices. He stayed with them until the receptionist at the office suite of Vice President Cyrus W. Lemson ushered them inside.

After having them seat themselves, Mr. Lemson stared at Jason in his tight, crimson, dress dungarees and rhinestone speckled, black shirt which accentuated his lithe, muscled body. *Eighteen or not*, he thought in mild astonishment, *that handsome giant is no boy*. "The doctor viphoned me about you," he said sternly. He spoke to them further about the seriousness of what they had done and told them their parents were on the way down. Then he took them into an interior office furnished like a luxurious living room. "Please wait here," he said, "until your people arrive. Magazines are there on the table and you may turn on the television set." He closed the door.

"Want me to turn on the television set?" Jason asked.

"No, Ah don't much feel like it."

They settled themselves on the enormous couch and Robina looked at her brother. "Jason, Ah'm real sorry. Ah went an' stirred up a hornet's nest of trouble

for you again."

"Don't fret about it, Robee. They won't really do nothin' serious. They'll talk to Ma an' Pa an' Pa'll make like he's goin' to cuff us aroun' when we get back to the hotel an' instead he'll jus' look dark an' make us feel bad with his talk. It'll jus' be a lot of commotion like a bee stuck in a tar bucket."

"Ah guess," Robina said. She cast a sheepish glance at her brother. "Say Jason, how did the feelie end up?"

Jason was indignant. "Now listen, Robee, ain't you had enough? You heard the doc say that last was like to kill you."

"Please, Jason, there's nothin' wrong with you jus' *tellin'* me."

"It's almost as bad. You still get yourself all flittered up."

"That's because nobody can tell a story like you do, the way you act it out an' all."

"Ah don't act it out. Ah jus' tell it."

"Well *you* might call it tellin' but everybody home says it's jus' like a feelie when you do it. An' don't pretend you don't know it, brother Jay, an' enjoy it too!"

Jason did not tell the ending of the feelie; he recreated it. He was the monster slurching across the floor toward her, step by scraping step and in spite of her fist on her mouth a tiny nervous scream escaped Robina. Jason wanted to stop then but she badgered him into continuing. Now he was the hero, Gregg Mason, battling the unspeakable fiend and she shivered uncontrollably as she watched them struggle to the death. In a last, desperate, superhuman effort, Gregg's hands clawed into the monster's body and ripped out the foul, quivering heart of it. The creature twisted to the ground and perished in its own slime. Gregg, torn and bleeding and with shock-frozen eyes, turned and staggered into the arms of Robina.

"Oh, Gregg, Gregg," Robina cried in relief, the tears streaming down her face.

"It's okay, Joan," he said comforting her, "okay. It's all over now. C'mon now, Joan, get out from behind those tears so you can see how much Ah love you. Everything's all right."

"Oh, Gregg!" A weak smile broke through.

Gregg enfolded Joan in his arms and pressed his mouth against her eager lips.

"What are you two *doing*?!!" a shocked voice exclaimed from the open door.

Gregg and Joan were blown away by the sound like spindrift before the wind. Jason and Robina slowly came apart to see Mr. Lemson and another man coming into the room.

"What is the matter with you both?" Mr. Lemson spoke again. "Aren't you in enough trouble now?"

"Let me handle this, Cy," the other man said stepping forward. "I'm Bob Herschell," he said smiling and radiating friendliness at the youngsters. "Would you please tell me exactly what you were doing before we came in here?"

"Weren't doin' nothin'," Jason said belligerently.

"Shades of the decadent South!" Lemson exclaimed. "Brother and sister glued together and he calls it *nothin'*."

"Ah wasn't kissin' her like you think," Jason said hotly. "Ah was tellin' her a story."

"What kind of a story?" Herschell asked excitedly.

"Ah was tellin' her the end of the feelie we saw; Ah mean Ah saw. She didn't get to see it."

"You mean Terror From Mars?" Herschell asked.

"Ah guess that's it. Ah don't recollect the title for certain."

"Great!" Lemson said. "It often takes a week long conference to select a feelie title and this typical American youth can't remember the name of the feelie he lived less than a hour ago."

"How were you telling it?" Herschell asked.

"Ah jus' told it."

"He storytells fine," Robina said proudly. "He sorta acts it out with feelin' an'

really makes it seem like it's happenin' to you right then and there."

Herschell turned to Lemson. "I'm sure he's the one, Cy. It fits. I've got the spark of an idea and if it works then U-Live-It will be right on top of the feelie heap."

"We're already on top," Lemson said wearily. "U-Live-It is the biggest producer of feelies and I think you're crazy, I think they're both insane and I will be if you don't tell me what this is all about. You come barging into my office—"

"Sorry, Cy, but this thing happened so fast. I'm in my office right below you. I've got Myra Shane doing a reading, trying to convince her the part is perfect for her. But she isn't coming through on the receptor. Instead I'm getting the climax of Terror From Mars. Zack is receptorman and it takes him less than no time to check through and okay our electronics. That means only one thing. Someone, somehow, is blotting us with another projection. I call around and no one is running a projector and no one is reading. Your girl tells me you have a couple of kids up there so I come up to see. And I'm sure that big rebel is the one! He has to be!"

Lemson was alert with interest. "But he's not wearing a relay. How could the receptor pick up and record his perceptics?"

"He might have a surgical." Herschell inquired of Jason, "Did you ever have an operation for the insertion of an encephalic booster relay! you know, a thought relay?"

"You mean them tiny transistor things that feelie actors have stuck in their heads?"

"That's it."

"No, Ah never had nothin' like that," Jason said, baffled.

"That's impossible," Lemson said, "no one can project with enough natural power to imprint a receptor unless they've got a booster."

"Well it's not impossible anymore," Herschell said gleefully. "Look Cy, you squash this silly business about the permit. I want this fella to make a receptor test as soon as possible. When his folks show up tell them we might want to make a feelie star out of their son but don't build it up or they'll be back with a regiment of lawyers and contracts."

"Bob, you're going off the deep end with this deal. So what if he can project *au naturel*? Can he act?"

"If you had been plugged into the receptor like I was a few minutes ago and felt him, you wouldn't even ask."

"What about that atrocious accent?"

"Look, Cy, I'll abide by the receptor test. If he can't act; out! If he's as terrific as I think he is we'll put him in westerns and civil war feelies until we can train the accent out of him. Cy, if he doesn't turn out to be the greatest thing that hit the feelie business I'll eat my contract."

Five months later Herschell came beaming into Lemson's office and tossed an open-folded newspaper at him. "Cy, did you read Lorancelli's review of Rowe's oatburner?"

"That's just great!" Lemson snapped. "We spend millions of advertising and publicity dollars to convince people that we make *adult* westerns and you, a production vice president, go around calling them *oatburners*."

"Okay, Cy, but read the review. He rated the feelie so so but he raves about Jason Rowe."

Lemson picked up the paper and had it immediately snatched out of his hands by an impatient Herschell who began reading snatches of it. "Listen ... uh ... Jason Rowe is an intense young man whose magnificent talent is wasted in the role of a young gunfighter in this bland western ... uh ... he projects a sense of immediacy and aliveness endless in its delicate ramifications of feeling. His characterization is unmarred by even the slightest hint of extraneous awareness and unaccompanied by the usual continual subliminal blur which is the mark of the receptorman's frantic deletion of the actor's sublevel, irrelevant thoughts. Either Mr. Rowe is fortunate to be blessed with a most superiorly skilled receptorman or he is gifted with an awesome ability to submerge his total being in the role he plays. In this feelie it is as if Mr. Rowe, the actor, dies and imparts only his life force to the character of the cocky youngster who comes fully alive without the slightest trace of the personality of Jason Rowe. In this debut performance young Rowe achieves the hitherto unattainable goal of completely displacing the feeliegoer's identity with that of the character he portrays. We expect great things from him for a talent such as his illumines the theater but

once in a millennium. Thanks to Mr. Jason Rowe, the U-Live-It Corporation can now completely guarantee the promise of its name." Herschell dropped the newspaper on the desk. "How do you like that, Cy?"

"I like it so well, I surrender," Lemson said with a pleased smile. "You were right all along in pushing him so we'll put him in 'Land' as you want and I'll at last have you off my back."

"Y'know, Cy, Lorancelli is wrong about the receptorman."

"He didn't exactly say—"

"Oh Zack is the best there is," Herschell interrupted, "but right after we started recording the Rowe feelie he came in all shook up to see me. Said the Rowe stuff was recording as if he was actually living the part. There were no extraneous sublevels at all and that's just never happened before. It's like Lorancelli says about Rowe dying and the character coming to life. Zack swears that Rowe just disappears. There isn't a speck of him that shows on the strip."

"Then Zack should be happy, not having to over-engineer the recording."

"Oh now, it isn't all breeze. There's highlighting and emphasizing selected perceptics and such. You know Zack's the difference between the artist and the photographer. Actually Zack's real difficulty is the battle he has to keep from getting completely sucked in to Rowe's portrayal while he's recording. Don't misunderstand. He's not complaining. In fact when I suggested relieving him if the strain was too much he said if he couldn't do Rowe's feelies I could relieve him from the payroll. It's that much of a challenge for him. So much so, he's designed a new receptor adaptor to prevent Rowe's potency from overpowering him."

"Will there be any trouble in making 'Land'?"

"Yes," Herschell said bleakly as Lemson prepared to hear the worst, "we need horses. In this atom age I'd like to know where I'm going to get a couple of divisions of cavalry."

"Why you can't even see where they put it," Robina said, fingering Jason's skull. "Oh, wait, Ah feel a little hard lump right here. Ah'm right ain't Ah? That's the

relay."

"No it ain't," Jason said laughing. "Got that fallin' off a horse yesterday."

"But why do you have to have one at all? Ah thought you could project without it."

"Well Ah can, but this makes it better. This picks up all the tiny waves from mah brain that wouldn't otherwise get recorded. Like the difference between super high-fi an' ordinary high-fi. It makes the feelie more real."

"When are you goin' to be in somethin' else besides westerns? Ain't you ever goin' to get to do some romancin'?"

"Now don't you go lookin' at the wrong end of the hog, Robee. They been keepin' our bellies filled. Besides this one Ah'm doin' now ain't no western."

"Then what's all them horses over there for?"

"Confederate cavalry, you melon head. What you think this uniform is Ah'm wearin'? Fine southern daughter you are!"

"Oh, a civil war feelie! What's it called?"

"... uh ... A Stillness in the Land." Jason smiled, "An' it sure would make Mr. Lemson happy to know Ah remembered the title. They say it was a big best seller book. Goin' to cost ten million dollars. Ah play the lead; Jed Carter, young southern fella. Lots of love an' battles an' the best thing is Ah don't have to fret about mah accent." Jason took his sister's arm. "C'mon now if you want to see the set. Ah'll be havin' to go to work in a few minutes."

They passed by one of the receptors and Jason stopped. "Now here's the machine that picks up an' records what Ah'm thinkin' an' feelin'. The receptorman wears this gizmo on his head an' cuts in to what Ah'm feelin' an' he fiddles them dials an' switches an' amplifies weak signals an' cuts down overpowerin' ones an'—well, Ah don't want to frazzle you with the technical details; he jus' controls the quality of the recordin'. He cuts out stuff that don't belong like if Ah should be kissin' the gal an' somewhere under those passionate thoughts Ah might wonder when we're goin' to knock off for lunch. Here, slip this headset on an' Ah'll get Zack to run it so you can feel how it works."

"Don't do anythin' strong," Robina advised.

"Don't worry. Jus' a peaceful bit."

Zack came over at Jason's call and ran the receptor while Jason went through a few quiet lines with an extra.

"Why it's funny, somehow," Robina said after they removed the headset. "It jus' didn't seem very good. Ah've felt you better without it, Jason."

"You didn't get the full projection," Zack explained. "You see, Miss Rowe, the receptorman has got to be alert. He can't just relax and enjoy the scene and become the actor like a paying customer. He's got to work, keeping the perceptics, the feelings coming through in balance. So there's a circuit, a part of this machine that sort of shields enough of the operator's mind and keeps it from getting lost in the story while it runs the receptor and lets the other part live the scene."

"That sounds hard to do," Robina said.

"It takes training and special conditioning but the point is nobody connected with the production of a feelie ever gets to feel it in all its original depth as the feeliegoer does. Rushes are run at the lowest intensity so that the producers and directors can comment and plan changes as the strips are run. Even with projector intensity set high we can't totally submerge in the character's identity because that specially conditioned part of our minds won't submit."

"Well, you're still lucky," Robina said. "Ah'm a Sensitive and Ah'm not allowed to go to anythin' but silly old musicals an' some comedies. Ah can't even go to mah brother's feelies what with all the shootin' an' everythin'."

"EVERYBODY TO THEIR PLACES. RECORDING STARTS IN FIVE MINUTES." The announcement boomed throughout the vast set and a population of extras began to animate the streets with purposeful activity.

"Robee, honey, you'll have to go."

"Oh, Jay, can't Ah watch. Ah won't fuss around."

"Tain't that. Nobody who ain't in the feelie can be in sight of any of the actors they're recordin'. Why if Ah was to walk down that street as Jed Carter and

suddenly see you standin' over here in them men's pants—"

"These ain't men's pants!" Robina said indignantly. "These are ladies slacks."

"Ah know that but Jed Carter don't. All he knows is even a hussy wouldn't strut around like that. Tell you what. You go over there to where it says, Mrs. Hepple's Quality Boarding Home an' you can peek out the parlor window at the doin's. Ah guess they had noseybodies then too. Now get!"

Jason turned and hurried down the street, not bothering to glance after Robina. She had crossed the street and was passing a saloon when the omnipresent voice commanded her, "GIRL IN THE GREEN SLACKS GET OUT OF SIGHT." She became so flustered she dashed into the saloon doorway.

Jed Carter escorted the lady from Nashville down the plank sidewalk to her carriage. He was furious at her casual gay chatter mocking his churning desire for her. His glance caught a movement across the street and suddenly he went rigid with surprise and soft shock. A girl had come out of the saloon and the hussy was wearing men's trousers. His shock increased when he heard the delicate lady from Nashville say, "Oh, damn, who the hell is that?" and he was further startled to see an oddly dressed man wearing some sort of metal apparatus on his head follow the girl out of the saloon, gesticulating angrily at her.

"CUT!" the omnipresent voice commanded and now Jed Carter was utterly confused. The man wearing the metal apparatus crossed over to him and spoke. "Jason, please. You know the rules about visitors on the set. No one allowed during recording. Zack says we'll have to ask your sister to leave."

Jed Carter saw the townspeople just standing around staring in his direction. "What's goin' on?" he said to the odd man. "What are you talkin' about? Who are you?"

"Oh, oh," the man with the headset exclaimed, "here we go again." He made a signal with his hand and another man came running up. The man led Jason up the steps of the hotel and into the lobby with a promise to explain everything. He sat Jason in a chair. "Jason, Jason Rowe, Jason Rowe," the man's voice pulled at him. He kept repeating the name.

A minute later Zack came into the lobby. "Jason!"

"Hello Zack," Jason said.

"Oh, you're back with us," Zack said. He stared at Jason a long moment. "One of these days," he said with a wry grin, "you're not going to make it."

Bob Herschell came out of the magnificent crystal palace that was U-Live-It's New York feelie showcase and searched the garden plaza. "Cy! I thought I'd find you here wringing your hands."

"We should never have premiered cold like this," Lemson complained. "We should have at least had one private running for the reviewers. We wouldn't be dangling like this."

"Stop worrying, Cy. A first night lets the critics get caught up in the excitement. And even if they go sick and thumb down 'Land' it won't stand against the top power voodoo job the publicity gang is saturating the public with. And bigger than all the critics is Jason Rowe. He's filled six thousand couches in there with the biggest voluntary celebrity turnout for any preem."

"Jason Rowe," Lemson sighed, rolling supplicating eyes heavenward. "He jeopardized a ten million dollar feelie; almost gave *me* heart failure when he had that heart attack."

"Cy, for the sake of the studio don't let people hear you say that. It's not true! It wasn't a heart attack. He just played the death scene too fully. You know how deep he goes into a role. That's what makes him the world's greatest actor."

"I don't care what you call it," Lemson said heatedly, "the guy's heart *stopped* and it was only because of Zack's alertness that they got to him in time. He almost died. I don't want to be ghoulish about it, Bob, but the studio's putting a lot of time, money and sweat into making that boy a star—"

"Nobody's making him a star," Herschell cut in, "he was born one."

Herschell had spoken with such honest emphasis that Lemson replied, greatly subdued, "Okay, okay, but we have ourselves a pretty shaky investment if every time he dies in a feelie he's liable to really go over the edge."

"Zack thinks he can work out a receptor circuit to keep it from happening again. Sort of a subliminal survival monitor that won't show on the strip."

Lemson looked nervously at the theater entrance. "They should be coming out soon," he muttered.

"Ten minutes yet," Herschell assured him.

Inside the shining pleasure dome, six thousand Jed Carters lay dying on an afternoon hillside. The war was gone to another hill and he was alone now with the grass wind and the small summer sounds of the earth. His pain was a soft ache like a child's secret tears and his life was slipping reluctantly from him in a trickling red ribbon. He heard the sweet sound of a bird and the song of it wrung his heart. There were so many songs yet unheard, so much soft laughter unborn, so many caresses yet to be shared; a lifetime of summers, waiting, now never to be filled. His heart cried at the thought of them.

The sun warmed him like a great golden lover and filled him with an ineffable sadness for the bright days to come that would never be his.

And now at the last he thought of her. His heart ached for her, craving one more of those lost mornings when he had awakened in the dawn at her sleeping side and with his eyes happily loved her sweet slumbering face, haloed by the marvel of her wheat hair catching the first glints of the new sun.

In a last languid movement he turned on his back and opened his eyes to the bright sky. He felt her stir. Her arm brushed him and the vibrancy of her being sang through him. She opened her eyes and her love smiled out at him. The smile brightened her face until it spread across the sky and grew brilliant like the sun. She reached out for him. He sighed with a great breath of quiet happiness because she was the sun smiling down at him and at last he rose up and went to meet her.

"It's time they were coming out," Herschell said. "Let's get back."

They entered the lobby, deserted except for a scattering of ushers, and waited.

"Why aren't they coming out?" Lemson asked, more of the emptiness than of his companion. "It's ten minutes since the scheduled ending. Do you suppose the projection's broken down or maybe—"

"Relax, Cy, you know these preems. Always a bag full of delays, starting with late VIP arrivals."

"There've been no delays. They started on time—"

The sound of sirens spiralled out of the night and whirled the two men around to

face the entrance. Lights raced frantically across the plaza as a dozen turbine vehicles whined to a stop in front. More were arriving. Medical teams and squads of policemen burst through the doors. They ran past the slow float shafts to the elevators.

"What's happened?" Lemson screamed. "What's going on?" He tugged at a uniformed sleeve but was thrust aside by the running man.

Herschell and Lemson followed, half running, to the elevators. Herschell shouted an inquiry at a cluster of policemen surging into one of the cars but the nearest grim-visaged man almost angrily waved them away from the door as it closed in their faces.

"The manager's office!" Herschell cried and they ran for a private elevator. Seconds later they dashed into the manager's office.

"He's not here," Lemson wailed.

Herschell snapped a switch on the desk and a harried, shocked face appeared on the viphone screen. "Mr. Herschell! Mr. Lemson!"

"Pete!" Herschell exclaimed, "why've we got the police and medicos? An accident?"

The man's lips quivered as he spoke. "A lot of the patrons are dead."

"WHAT?!! How many?"

"Don't know ... yet ... maybe all," Pete said brokenly.

"What in heaven's name happened?"

"The death scene ... Rowe killed them ..."

"You're crazy!" Herschell shouted. "It's impossible! The projector's triggered to shut off if the patron's in danger."

"What everybody thought," Pete said, "but the house doc said something about the projectors being keyed to extreme agitation; racing pulse, increased blood pressure. That didn't happen here. The people weren't alarmed. Nothing to trigger a shutoff. Doc said the death was ... was ..." Pete turned away, trying to hold back tears.

Herschell kept himself from shouting. "Was what?"

"... was ... sweet ... beautiful ..." Pete's shoulders shook with a spasm of sobs that muffled some of his words, "... should be ... here ... see it ... kids too ... rows and rows of ... people ... all smiling ..."

THE END

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