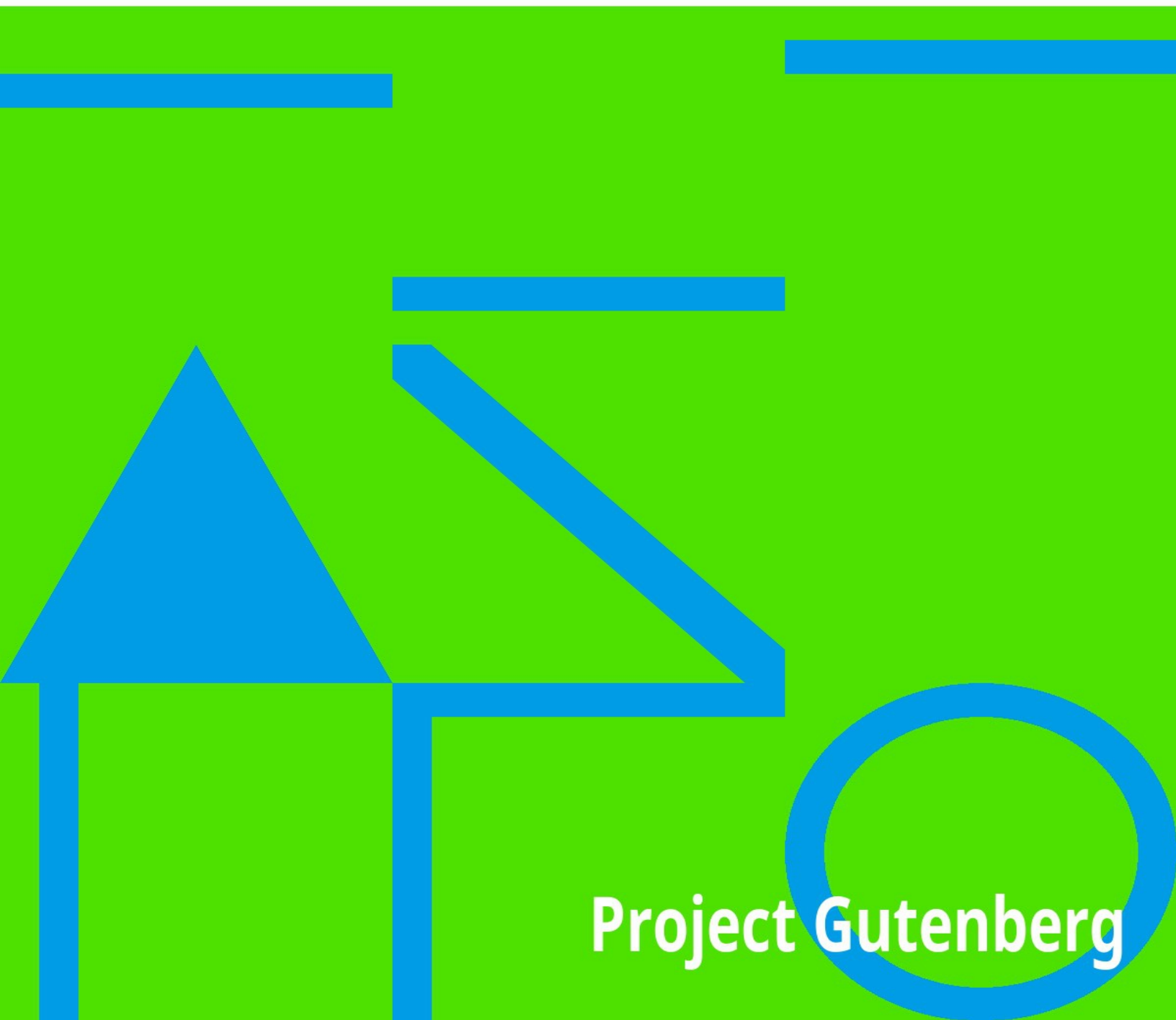


Dream Town

Henry Slesar



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DREAM TOWN

Henry Slesar, young New York advertising executive and by now no longer a new-comer to either this magazine or to this field, describes a strange little town that you, yourself, may blunder into one of these evenings. But, if you do, beware—beware of the Knights!

dream

town

by ... *HENRY SLESAR*

The woman in the doorway looked so harmless. Who was to tell she had some rather startling interests?

THE woman in the doorway looked like Mom in the homier political cartoons. She was plump, apple-cheeked, white-haired. She wore a fussy, old-fashioned nightgown, and was busily clutching a worn house-robe around her expansive middle. She blinked at Sol Becker's rain-flattened hair and hang-dog expression, and said: "What is it? What do you want?"

"I'm sorry—" Sol's voice was pained. "The man in the diner said you might put me up. I had my car stolen: a hitchhiker; going to Salinas ..." He was puffing.

"Hitchhiker? I don't understand." She clucked at the sight of the pool of water he was creating in her foyer. "Well, come inside, for heaven's sake. You're soaking!"

"Thanks," Sol said gratefully.

With the door firmly shut behind him, the warm interior of the little house covered him like a blanket. He shivered, and let the warmth seep over him. "I'm terribly sorry. I know how late it is." He looked at his watch, but the face was too misty to make out the hour.

"Must be nearly three," the woman sniffed. "You couldn't have come at a worse time. I was just on my way to court—"

The words slid by him. "If I could just stay overnight. Until the morning. I could call some friends in San Fernando. I'm very susceptible to head colds," he added inanely.

"Well, take those shoes off, first," the woman grumbled. "You can undress in the parlor, if you'll keep off the rug. You won't mind using the sofa?"

"No, of course not. I'd be happy to pay—"

"Oh, tush, nobody's asking you to pay. This isn't a hotel. You mind if I go back upstairs? They're gonna miss me at the palace."

"No, of course not," Sol said. He followed her into the darkened parlor, and watched as she turned the screw on a hurricane-style lamp, shedding a yellow pool of light over half a flowery sofa and a doily-covered wing chair. "You go on up. I'll be perfectly fine."

"Guess you can use a towel, though. I'll get you one, then I'm going up. We wake pretty early in this house. Breakfast's at seven; you'll have to be up if you want any."

"I really can't thank you enough—"

"Tush," the woman said. She scurried out, and returned a moment later with a thick bath towel. "Sorry I can't give you any bedding. But you'll find it nice and warm in here." She squinted at the dim face of a ship's-wheel clock on the mantle, and made a noise with her tongue. "Three-thirty!" she exclaimed. "I'll miss the whole execution ..."

"The what?"

"Goodnight, young man," Mom said firmly.

She padded off, leaving Sol holding the towel. He patted his face, and then scrubbed the wet tangle of brown hair. Carefully, he stepped off the carpet and onto the stone floor in front of the fireplace. He removed his drenched coat and suit jacket, and squeezed water out over the ashes.

He stripped down to his underwear, wondering about next morning's possible embarrassment, and decided to use the damp bath towel as a blanket. The sofa was downy and comfortable. He curled up under the towel, shivered once, and closed his eyes.

HE was tired and very sleepy, and his customary nightly review was limited to a few detached thoughts about the wedding he was supposed to attend in Salinas that weekend ... the hoodlum who had responded to his good-nature

by dumping him out of his own car ... the slogging walk to the village ... the little round woman who was hurrying off, like the White Rabbit, to some mysterious appointment on the upper floor ...

Then he went to sleep.

A voice awoke him, shrill and questioning.

"Are you *nakkid*?"

His eyes flew open, and he pulled the towel protectively around his body and glared at the little girl with the rust-red pigtails.

"Huh, mister?" she said, pushing a finger against her freckled nose. "Are you?"

"No," he said angrily. "I'm not naked. Will you please go away?"

"Sally!" It was Mom, appearing in the doorway of the parlor. "You leave the gentleman alone." She went off again.

"Yes," Sol said. "Please let me get dressed. If you don't mind." The girl didn't move. "What time is it?"

"Dunno," Sally shrugged. "I like poached eggs. They're my favorite eggs in the whole world."

"That's good," Sol said desperately. "Now why don't you be a good girl and eat your poached eggs. In the kitchen."

"Ain't ready yet. You going to stay for breakfast?"

"I'm not going to do anything until you get out of here."

She put the end of a pigtail in her mouth and sat down on the chair opposite. "I went to the palace last night. They had an exelution."

"Please," Sol groaned. "Be a good girl, Sally. If you let me get dressed, I'll show you how to take your thumb off."

"Oh, that's an old trick. Did you ever see an exelution?"

"No. Did you ever see a little girl with her hide tanned?"

"Huh?"

"*Sally!*" Mom again, sterner. "You get out of there, or you-know-what ..."

"Okay," the girl said blithely. "I'm goin' to the palace again. If I brush my teeth. Aren't you *ever* gonna get up?" She skipped out of the room, and Sol hastily sat up and reached for his trousers.

When he had dressed, the clothes still damp and unpleasant against his skin, he went out of the parlor and found the kitchen. Mom was busy at the stove. He said: "Good morning."

"Breakfast in ten minutes," she said cheerfully. "You like poached eggs?"

"Sure. Do you have a telephone?"

"In the hallway. Party line, so you may have to wait."

He tried for fifteen minutes to get through, but there was a woman on the line who was terribly upset about a cotton dress she had ordered from Sears, and was telling the world about it.

Finally, he got his call through to Salinas, and a sleepy-voiced Fred, his old Army buddy, listened somewhat indifferently to his tale of woe. "I might miss the wedding," Sol said unhappily. "I'm awfully sorry." Fred didn't seem to be half as sorry as he was. When Sol hung up, he was feeling more despondent than ever.

A man, tall and rangy, with a bobbing Adam's apple and a lined face, came into the hallway. "Hullo?" he said inquiringly. "You the fella had the car stolen?"

"Yes."

The man scratched his ear. "Take you over to Sheriff Coogan after breakfast. He'll let the Stateys know about it. My name's Dawes."

Sol accepted a careful handshake.

"Don't get many people comin' into town," Dawes said, looking at him curiously. "Ain't seen a stranger in years. But you look like the rest of us." He chuckled.

Mom called out: "Breakfast!"

AT the table, Dawes asked his destination.

"Wedding in Salinas," he explained. "Old Army friend of mine. I picked this hitchhiker up about two miles from here. He *seemed* okay."

"Never can tell," Dawes said placidly, munching egg. "Hey, Ma. That why you were so late comin' to court last night?"

"That's right, Pa." She poured the blackest coffee Sol had ever seen. "Didn't miss much, though."

"What court is that?" Sol asked politely, his mouth full.

"Umagum," Sally said, a piece of toast sticking out from the side of her mouth. "Don't you know *nothin'*?"

"*Armagon*," Dawes corrected. He looked sheepishly at the stranger. "Don't expect Mister—" He cocked an eyebrow. "What's the name?"

"Becker."

"Don't expect Mr. Becker knows anything about Armagon. It's just a dream, you know." He smiled apologetically.

"Dream? You mean this—Armagon is a place you dream about?"

"Yep," Dawes said. He lifted cup to lip. "Great coffee, Ma." He leaned back with a contented sigh. "Dream about it every night. Got so used to the place, I get all confused in the daytime."

Mom said: "I get muddle-headed too, sometimes."

"You mean—" Sol put his napkin in his lap. "You mean *you* dream about the same place?"

"Sure," Sally piped. "We all go there at night. I'm goin' to the palace again, too."

"If you brush your teeth," Mom said primly.

"If I brush my teeth. Boy, you shoulda seen the execution!"

"Execution," her father said.

"Oh, my goodness!" Mom got up hastily. "That reminds me. I gotta call poor Mrs. Brundage. It's the *least* I could do."

"Good idea," Dawes nodded. "And I'll have to round up some folks and get old Brundage out of there."

Sol was staring. He opened his mouth, but couldn't think of the right question to ask. Then he blurted out: "What execution?"

"None of *your* business," the man said coldly. "You eat up, young man. If you want me to get Sheriff Coogan lookin' for your car."

The rest of the meal went silently, except for Sally's insistence upon singing her school song between mouthfuls. When Dawes was through, he pushed back his plate and ordered Sol to get ready.

Sol grabbed his topcoat and followed the man out the door.

"Have to stop someplace first," Dawes said. "But we'll be pickin' up the Sheriff on the way. Okay with you?"

"Fine," Sol said uneasily.

The rain had stopped, but the heavy clouds seemed reluctant to leave the skies over the small town. There was a skittish breeze blowing, and Sol Becker tightened the collar of his coat around his neck as he tried to keep up with the fast-stepping Dawes.

THEY crossed the street diagonally, and entered a two-story wooden building. Dawes took the stairs at a brisk pace, and pushed open the door on the second floor. A fat man looked up from behind a desk.

"Hi, Charlie. Thought I'd see if you wanted to help move Brundage."

The man batted his eyes. "Oh, Brundage!" he said. "You know, I clean forgot about him?" He laughed. "Imagine me forgetting that?"

"Yeah." Dawes wasn't amused. "And you Prince Regent."

"Aw, Willie—"

"Well, come on. Stir that fat carcass. Gotta pick up Sheriff Coogan, too. This here gentleman has to see him about somethin' else."

The man regarded Sol suspiciously. "Never seen you before. Night or day. Stranger?"

"Come *on*!" Dawes said.

The fat man grunted and hoisted himself out of the swivel chair. He followed lamely behind the two men as they went out into the street again.

A woman, with an empty market basket, nodded casually to them. "Mornin', folks. Enjoyed it last night. Thought you made a right nice speech, Mr. Dawes."

"Thanks," Dawes answered gruffly, but obviously flattered. "We were just goin' over to Brundage's to pick up the body. Ma's gonna pay a call on Mrs. Brundage around ten o'clock. You care to visit?"

"Why, I think that's very nice," the woman said. "I'll be sure and do that." She smiled at the fat man. "Mornin', Prince."

Sol's head was spinning. As they left the woman and continued their determined march down the quiet street, he tried to find answers.

"Look, Mr. Dawes." He was panting; the pace was fast. "Does *she* dream about this—Armagon, too? That woman back there?"

"Yep."

Charlie chuckled. "He's a stranger, all right."

"And you, Mr.—" Sol turned to the fat man. "You also know about this palace and everything?"

"I told you," Dawes said testily. "Charlie here's Prince Regent. But don't let the fancy title fool you. He got no more power than any Knight of the Realm. He's just too dern fat to do much more'n sit on a throne and eat grapes. That

right, Charlie?"

The fat man giggled.

"Here's the Sheriff," Dawes said.

The Sheriff, a sleepy-eyed citizen with a long, sad face, was rocking on a porch as they approached his house, trying to puff a half-lit pipe. He lifted one hand wearily when he saw them.

"Hi, Cookie," Dawes grinned. "Thought you, me, and Charlie would get Brundage's body outa the house. This here's Mr. Becker; he got another problem. Mr. Becker, meet Cookie Coogan."

The Sheriff joined the procession, pausing only once to inquire into Sol's predicament.

He described the hitchhiker incident, but Coogan listened stoically. He murmured something about the Troopers, and shuffled alongside the puffing fat man.

Sol soon realized that their destination was a barber shop.

Dawes cupped his hands over the plate glass and peered inside. Gold letters on the glass advertised: HAIRCUT SHAVE & MASSAGE PARLOR. He reported: "Nobody in the shop. Must be upstairs."

THE fat man rang the bell. It was a while before an answer came.

It was a reedy woman in a housecoat, her hair in curlers, her eyes red and swollen.

"Now, now," Dawes said gently. "Don't you take on like that, Mrs. Brundage. You heard the charges. It hadda be this way."

"My poor Vincent," she sobbed.

"Better let us up," the Sheriff said kindly. "No use just lettin' him lay there, Mrs. Brundage."

"He didn't mean no harm," the woman snuffled. "He was just purely ornery,

Vincent was. Just plain mean stubborn."

"The law's the law," the fat man sighed.

Sol couldn't hold himself in.

"What law? Who's dead? How did it happen?"

Dawes looked at him disgustedly. "Now is it any of *your* business? I mean, is it?"

"I don't know," Sol said miserably.

"You better stay out of this," the Sheriff warned. "This is a local matter, young man. You better stay in the shop while we go up."

They filed past him and the crying Mrs. Brundage.

When they were out of sight, Sol pleaded with her.

"What happened? How did your husband die?"

"Please ..."

"You must tell me! Was it something to do with Armagon? Do you dream about the place, too?"

She was shocked at the question. "Of course!"

"And your husband? Did he have the same dream?"

Fresh tears resulted. "Can't you leave me alone?" She turned her back. "I got things to do. You can make yourself comfortable—" She indicated the barber chairs, and left through the back door.

Sol looked after her, and then ambled over to the first chair and slipped into the high seat. His reflection in the mirror, strangely gray in the dim light, made him groan. His clothes were a mess, and he needed a shave. If only Brundage had been alive ...

He leaped out of the chair as voices sounded behind the door. Dawes was kicking it open with his foot, his arms laden with two rather large feet, still encased in bedroom slippers. Charlie was at the other end of the burden,

which appeared to be a middle-aged man in pajamas. The Sheriff followed the trio up with a sad, undertaker expression. Behind him came Mrs. Brundage, properly weeping.

"We'll take him to the funeral parlor," Dawes said, breathing hard. "Weighs a ton, don't he?"

"What killed him?" Sol said.

"Heart attack."

The fat man chuckled.

The tableau was grisly. Sol looked away, towards the comfortingly mundane atmosphere of the barber shop. But even the sight of the thick-padded chairs, the shaving mugs on the wall, the neat rows of cutting instruments, seemed grotesque and morbid.

"Listen," Sol said, as they went through the doorway. "About my car—"

The Sheriff turned and regarded him lugubriously. "Your *car*? Young man, ain't you got no *respect*?"

Sol swallowed hard and fell silent. He went outside with them, the woman slamming the barber-shop door behind him. He waited in front of the building while the men toted away the corpse to some new destination.

HE took a walk.

The town was just coming to life. People were strolling out of their houses, commenting on the weather, chuckling amiably about local affairs. Kids on bicycles were beginning to appear, jangling the little bells and hooting to each other. A woman, hanging wash in the back yard, called out to him, thinking he was somebody else.

He found a little park, no more than twenty yards in circumference, centered around a weatherbeaten monument of some unrecognizable military figure. Three old men took their places on the bench that circled the General, and leaned on their canes.

Sol was a civil engineer. But he made like a reporter.

"Pardon me, sir." The old man, leathery-faced, with a fine yellow moustache, looked at him dumbly. "Have you ever heard of Armagon?"

"You a stranger?"

"Yes."

"Thought so."

Sol repeated the question.

"Course I did. Been goin' there ever since I was a kid. Night-times, that is."

"How—I mean, what kind of place is it?"

"Said you're a stranger?"

"Yes."

"Then 'tain't your business."

That was that.

He left the park, and wandered into a thriving luncheonette. He tried questioning the man behind the counter, who merely snickered and said: "You stayin' with the Dawes, ain't you? Better ask Willie, then. He knows the place better than anybody."

He asked about the execution, and the man stiffened.

"Don't think I can talk about that. Fella broke one of the Laws; that's about it. Don't see where you come into it."

At eleven o'clock, he returned to the Dawes residence, and found Mom in the kitchen, surrounded by the warm nostalgic odor of home-baked bread. She told him that her husband had left a message for the stranger, informing him that the State Police would be around to get his story.

He waited in the house, gloomily turning the pages of the local newspaper, searching for references to Armagon. He found nothing.

At eleven-thirty, a brown-faced State Trooper came to call, and Sol told his story. He was promised nothing, and told to stay in town until he was contacted again by the authorities.

Mom fixed him a light lunch, the greatest feature of which was some hot biscuits she plucked out of the oven. It made him feel almost normal.

He wandered around the town some more after lunch, trying to spark conversation with the residents.

He learned little.

At five-thirty, he returned to the Dawes house, and was promptly leaped upon by little Sally.

"Hi! Hi! Hi!" she said, clutching his right leg and almost toppling him over. "We had a party in school. I had chocolate cake. You goin' to stay with us?"

"Just another night," Sol told her, trying to shake the girl off. "If it's okay with your folks. They haven't found my car yet."

"Sally!" Mom was peering out of the screen door. "You let Mr. Becker alone and go wash. Your Pa will be home soon."

"Oh, pooh," the girl said, her pigtails swinging. "Do you got a girlfriend, mister?"

"No." Sol struggled towards the house with her dead weight on his leg. "Would you mind? I can't walk."

"Would you be my boyfriend?"

"Well, we'll talk about it. If you let go my leg."

Inside the house, she said: "We're having pot roast. You stayin'?"

"Of course Mr. Becker's stayin'," Mom said. "He's our guest."

"That's very kind of you," Sol said. "I really wish you'd let me pay something —"

"Don't want to hear another word about pay."

MR. DAWES came home an hour later, looking tired. Mom pecked him lightly on the forehead. He glanced at the evening paper, and then spoke to Sol.

"Hear you been asking questions, Mr. Becker."

Sol nodded, embarrassed. "Guess I have. I'm awfully curious about this Armagon place. Never heard of anything like it before."

Dawes grunted. "You ain't a reporter?"

"Oh, no. I'm an engineer. I was just satisfying my own curiosity."

"Uh-huh." Dawes looked reflective. "You wouldn't be thinkin' about writing us up or anything. I mean, this is a pretty private affair."

"Writing it up?" Sol blinked. "I hadn't thought of it. But you'll have to admit—it's sure interesting."

"Yeah," Dawes said narrowly. "I guess it would be."

"Supper!" Mom called.

After the meal, they spent a quiet evening at home. Sally went to bed, screaming her reluctance, at eight-thirty. Mom, dozing in the big chair near the fireplace, padded upstairs at nine. Then Dawes yawned widely, stood up, and said goodnight at quarter-of-ten.

He paused in the doorway before leaving.

"I'd think about that," he said. "Writing it up, I mean. A lot of folks would think you were just plum crazy."

Sol laughed feebly. "I guess they would at that."

"Goodnight," Dawes said.

"Goodnight."

He read Sally's copy of *Treasure Island* for about half an hour. Then he undressed, made himself comfortable on the sofa, snuggled under the soft blanket that Mom had provided, and shut his eyes.

He reviewed the events of the day before dropping off to sleep. The troublesome Sally. The strange dream world of Armagon. The visit to the barber shop. The removal of Brundage's body. The conversations with the townspeople. Dawes' suspicious attitude ...

Then sleep came.

HE was flanked by marble pillars, thrusting towards a high-domed ceiling.

The room stretched long and wide before him, the walls bedecked in stunning purple draperies.

He whirled at the sound of footsteps, echoing stridently on the stone floor. Someone was running towards him.

It was Sally, pigtails streaming out behind her, the small body wearing a flowing white toga. She was shrieking, laughing as she skittered past him, clutching a gleaming gold helmet.

He called out to her, but she was too busy outdistancing her pursuer. It was Sheriff Coogan, puffing and huffing, the metal-and-gold cloth uniform ludicrous on his lanky frame.

"Consarn kid!" he wheezed. "Gimme my hat!"

Mom was following him, her stout body regal in scarlet robes. "Sally! You give Sir Coogan his helmet! You hear?"

"Mrs. Dawes!" Sol said.

"Why, Mr. Becker! How nice to see you again! Pa! *Pa!* Look who's here!"

Willie Dawes appeared. *No!* Sol thought. This was *King* Dawes; nothing else could explain the magnificence of his attire.

"Yes," Dawes said craftily. "So I see. Welcome to Armagon, Mr. Becker."

"Armagon?" Sol gaped. "Then this is the place you've been dreaming about?"

"Yep," the King said. "And now *you're* in it, too."

"Then I'm only dreaming!"

Charlie, the fat man, clumsy as ever in his robes of State, said: "So *that's* the snooper, eh?"

"Yep," Dawes chuckled. "Think you better round up the Knights."

Sol said: "The Knights?"

"Exelution! Exelution!" Sally shrieked.

"Now wait a minute—"

Charlie shouted.

Running feet, clanking of armor. Sol backed up against a pillar. "Now look here. You've gone far enough—"

"Not quite," said the King.

The Knights stepped forward.

"Wait!" Sol screamed.

Familiar faces, under shining helmets, moved towards him; the tips of sharp-pointed spears gleaming wickedly. And Sol Becker wondered—would he ever awake?

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Fantastic Universe* January 1957. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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Table of Contents

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