**Legal Rites**

Isaac Asimov with James MacCreigh

I

Already the stars were out, though the sun had just dipped under the horizon, and the sky of the west was a blood-stuck gold behind the Sierra Nevadas.

“Hey!” squawked Russell Harley. “Come back!”

But the one-lunged motor of the old Ford was making too much noise; the driver didn’t hear him. Harley cursed as he watched the old car careen along the sandy ruts on its half-flat tires. Its taillight was saying a red no to him. No, you can’t get away tonight; no, you’ll have to stay here and fight it out.

Harley grunted and climbed back up the porch stairs of the old wooden house. It was well made, anyhow. The stairs, though half a century old, neither creaked beneath him nor showed cracks.

Harley picked up the bags he’d dropped when he experienced his abrupt change of mind-fake leather and worn out, they were-and carted them into the house. He dumped them on a dust-jacketed sofa and looked around.

It was stifling hot, and the smell of the desert outside had permeated the room. Harley sneezed.

“Water,” he said out loud. “That’s what I need.”

He’d prowled through every room on the ground floor before he stopped still and smote his head. Plumbing-naturally there’d be no plumbing in this hole eight miles out on the desert! A well was the best he could hope for

If that.

It was getting dark. No electric lights either, of course. He blundered irritatedly through the dusky rooms to the back of the house. The screen door shrieked metallically as he opened it. A bucket hung by the door. He picked it up, tipped it, shook the loose sand out of it. He looked over the “back yard”-about thirty thousand visible acres of hilly sand, rock and patches of sage and flame-tipped ocotillo.

No well.

The old fool got water from somewhere, he thought savagely. Obstinately he climbed down the back steps and wandered out into the desert. Overhead the stars were blinding, a million billion of them, but the sunset was over already and he could see only hazily. The silence was murderous. Only a faint whisper of breeze over the sand, and the slither of his shoes.

He caught a glimmer of starlight from the nearest clump of sage and walked to it. There was a pool of water, caught in the angle of two enormous boulders. He stared at it doubtfully, then shrugged. It was water. It was better than nothing. He dipped the bucket in the little pool. Knowing nothing of the procedure, he filled it with a quart of loose sand as he scooped it along the bottom. When he lifted it, brimful, to his lips, he spat out the first mouthful and swore violently.

Then he used his head. He set the bucket down, waited a second for the sand grains to settle, cupped water in his hands, lifted it to his lips....

Pat. HISS. Pat. HISS. Pat. HISS-

”What the hell!” Harley stood up, looked around in abrupt puzzlement. It sounded like water dripping from somewhere, onto a redhot stove, Hashing into sizzling steam. He saw nothing, only the sand and the sage and the pool of tepid, sickly water.

Pat. HISS

Then he saw it, and his eyes bulged. Out of nowhere it was dripping, a drop a second, a sticky, dark drop that was thicker than water, that fell to the ground lazily, in slow defiance of gravity. And when it struck each drop sizzled and skittered about, and vanished. It was perhaps eight feet from him, just visible in the starlight.

And then, “Get off my land!” said the voice from nowhere.

Harley got. By the time he got to Rebel Butte three hours later, he was barely managing to walk, wishing desperately that he’d delayed long enough for one more good drink of water, despite all the fiends of hell. But he’d run the first three miles. He’d had plenty of encouragement. He remembered with a shudder how the clear desert air had taken milkly shape around the incredible trickle of dampness and had advanced on him threateningly.

And when he got to the first kerosene-lighted saloon of Rebel Butte, and staggered inside, the saloonkeeper’s fascinated stare at the front of his shoddy coat showed him strong evidence that he hadn’t been suddenly taken with insanity, or drunk on the unaccustomed sensation of fresh desert air. All down the front of him it was, and the harder he rubbed the harder it stayed, the stickier it got. Blood!

“Whiskey!” he said in a strangled voice, tottering to the bar. He pulled a threadbare dollar bill from his pocket, flapped it onto the mahogany.

The blackjack game at the back of the room had stopped. Harley was acutely conscious of the eyes of the players, the bartender and the tall, lean man leaning on the bar. All were watching him.

The bartender broke the spell. He reached for a bottle behind him without looking at it, placed it on the counter before Harley. He poured a glass of water from a jug, set it down with a shot glass beside the bottle.

“I could of told you that would happen, “ he said casually. “Only you wouldn’t of believed me. You had to meet Hank for yourself before you’d believe he was there:’

Harley remembered his thirst and drained the glass of water, then poured himself a shot of the whiskey and swallowed it without waiting for the chaser to be refilled. The whiskey felt good going down, almost good enough to stop his internal shakes.

“What are you talking about?” he said finally. He twisted his body and leaned forward across the bar to partly hide the stains on his coat. The saloonkeeper laughed.

“Old Hank,” he said. “I knowed who you was right away, even before Tom came back and told me where he’d took you. I knowed you was Zeb Harley’s no-good nephew, come to take Harley Hall an’ sell it before he was cold in the grave.”

The blackjack players were still watching him, Russell Harley saw. Only the lean man farther along the bar seemed to have dismissed him. He was pouring himself another drink, quite occupied with his task.

Harley flushed. “Listen,” he said, “I didn’t come in here for advice. I wanted a drink. I’m paying for it. Keep your mouth out of this.”

The saloonkeeper shrugged. He turned his back and walked away to the blackjack table. After a couple of seconds one of the players turned, too, and threw a card down. The others followed suit.

Harley was just getting set to swallow his pride and talk to the saloonkeeper again-he seemed to know something about what Harley’d been through, and might be helpful-when the lean man tapped his shoulder. Harley whirled and almost dropped his glass. Absorbed and jumpy, he hadn’t seen him come up.

“Young man, “ said the lean one, “My name’s Nicholls. Come along with me, sir, and we’ll talk this thing over. I think we may be of service to each other.”

Even the twelve-cylinder car Nicholls drove jounced like a haywagon over the sandy ruts leading to the place old Zeb had-laughingly-named “Harley Hall.”

Russell Harley twisted his neck and stared at the heap of paraphernalia in the open rumble seat. “I don’t like it, “ he complained. “I never had anything to do with ghosts. How do I know this stuff’ll work?”

Nicholls smiled. “You’ll have to take my word for it. I’ve had dealings with ghosts before. You could say that I might qualify as a ghost exterminator, if I chose.”

Harley growled. “I still don’t like it.” Nicholls turned a sharp look on him. “You like the prospect of owning Harley Hall, don’t you? And looking for all the money your late uncle is supposed to have hidden around somewhere?” Harley shrugged. “Certainly you do,” said Nicholls, returning his eyes to the road. “ And with good reason. The local reports put the figure pretty high, young man.”

“That’s where you come in, I guess,” Harley said sullenly. “I find the money-that I own anyhow-and give some of it to you. How much?”

“We’ll discuss that later,” Nicholls said. He smiled absently as he looked ahead.

“We’ll discuss it right now!”

The smile faded from Nicholls’ face. “No,” he said. “We won’t. I’ve doing you a favor, young Harley. Remember that. In return-you’ll do as I say, all the way!”

Harley digested that carefully, and it was not a pleasant meal. He waited a couple of seconds before he changed the subject.

“I was out here once when the old man was alive,” he said. “He didn’t say nothing about any ghost. “

“Perhaps he felt you might think him-well, peculiar,” Nicholls said. “And perhaps you would have. When were you here?”

“Oh, a long time ago,” Harley said evasively. “But I was here a whole day, and part of the night. The old man was crazy as a coot, but he didn’t keep any ghosts in the attic...

“This ghost was a friend of his.” Nicholls said. “The gentleman in charge of the bar told you that. surely. Your late uncle was something of a recluse. He lived in this house a dozen miles from nowhere. came into town hardly ever. Wouldn’t let anyone get friendly with him. But he wasn’t exactly a hermit. He had Hank for company.”

“Fine company...

Nicholls inclined his head seriously. “Oh, I don’t know.” he said. “From all accounts, they got on well together. They played pinochle and chess-Hank’s supposed to have been a great pinochle player. He was killed that way, according to the local reports. Caught somebody dealing from the bottom and shot it out with him. He lost. A bullet pierced his throat and he died quite bloodily... He turned the wheel, putting his weight into the effort, and succeeded in twisting the car out of the ruts of the “road, “ sent it jouncing across unmarked sand to the old frame house to which they were going.

“That,” he finished as he pulled up before the porch. “Accounts for the blood that accompanies his apparition...

Harley opened the door slowly and got out, looking uneasily at the battered old house. Nicholls cut the motor, got out and walked at once to the back of the car.

“Come on.” he said, dragging things out of the compartment. “Give me a hand with this. I’ve not going to carry this stuff all by myself...

Harley came around reluctantly, regarded the curious assortment of bundles of dried faggots, lengths of colored cord, chalk pencils, ugly little bunches of wilted weeds, bleached bones of small animals and a couple of less pleasant things without pleasure.

Pat. HISS. Pat. HISS-

”He’s here!” Harley yelped. “Listen! He’s someplace around here watching us.”

“Ha!”

The laugh was deep, unpleasant and-bodiless. Harley looked around desperately for the tell-tale trickle of blood. And he found it; from the air it issued, just beside the car, sinking gracefully to the ground and sizzling, vanishing, there.

“I’m watching you, all right,” the voice said grimly. “Russell, you worthless piece of corruption, I’ve got no more use for you than you used to have for me. Dead or alive, this is my land! I shared it with your uncle, you young scalawag, but I won’t share it with you. Get out!”

Harley’s knees weakened and he tottered dizzily to the rear bumper, sat on it. “Nicholls—” he said confusedly.

“Oh, brace up,” Nicholls said with irritation. He tossed a ball of gaudy twine, red and green, with curious knots tied along it, to Harley. Then he confronted the trickle of blood and made a few brisk passes in the air before it. His lips were moving silently, Harley saw, but no words came out.

There was a gasp and a chopped-off squawk from the source of the blood drops. Nicholls clapped his hands sharply, then turned to young Harley.

“Take that cord you have in your hands and stretch it around the house,” he said. “ All the way around, and make sure it goes right across the middle of the doors and windows. It isn’t much, but it’ll hold him till we can get the good stuff set up.”

Harley nodded, then pointed a rigid finger at the drops of blood, now sizzling and fuming more angrily than before. “What about that?” he managed to get out.

Nicholls grinned complacently. “I’ll hold him here till the cows come home,” he said. “Get moving!”

Harley inadvertently inhaled a lungful of noxious white smoke and coughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks. When he recovered he looked at Nicholls, who was reading silently from a green leather book with dog-eared pages. He said, “Can I stop stirring this now?”

Nicholls grimaced angrily and shook his head without looking at him. He went on reading, his lips contorting over syllables that were not in any language Harley had ever heard, then snapped the book shut and wiped his brow.

“Fine,” he said. “So far, so good.” He stepped over to windward of the boiling pot Harley was stirring on the hob over the fireplace, peered down into it cautiously.

“That’s about done,” he said. “Take it off the fire and let it cool a bit.”

Harley lifted it down, then squeezed his aching biceps with his left hand. The stuff was the consistency of sickly green fudge.

“Now what?” he asked.

Nicholls didn’t answer. He looked up in mild surprise at the sudden squawk of triumph from outside, followed by the howling of a chill wind.

“Hank must be loose,” he said casually. “He can’t do us any harm, I think, but we’d better get a move on.” He rummaged in the dwindled pile of junk he’d brought from the car, extracted a paintbrush. “Smear this stuff around all the windows and doors. All but the front door. For that I have something else.” He pointed to what seemed to be the front axle of an old Model-T. ”Leave that on the doorsill. Cold iron. You can just step over it, but Hank won’t be able to pass it. It’s been properly treated already with the very best thaumaturgy.”

“Step over it, “ Harley repeated. “What would I want to step over it for? He’s out there.”

“He won’t hurt you,” said Nicholls. “You will carry an amulet with you-that one, there-that will keep him away. Probably he couldn’t really hurt you anyhow, being a low-order ghost who can’t materialize to any great density. But just to take no chances, carry the amulet and don’t stay out too long. It won’t hold him off forever, not for more than half an hour. If you ever have to go out and stay for any length of time, tie that bundle of herbs around your neck.” Nicholls smiled. “That’s only for emergencies, though. It works on the asafoetida principle. Ghosts can’t come anywhere near it-but you won’t like it much yourself. It has-ah-a rather definite odor.”

He leaned gingerly over the pot again, sniffing. He sneezed.

“Well, that’s cool enough,” he said. “Before it hardens, get moving. Start spreading the stuff upstairs-and make sure you don’t miss any windows.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I,” said Nicholls sharply, “will be here. Start.”

But he wasn’t. When Harley finished his disagreeable task and came down, he called Nicholls’ name, but the man was gone. Hurley stepped to the door and looked out; the car was gone, too.

He shrugged. “Oh, well, “ he said, and began taking the dust-cloths off the furniture.

II

Somewhere within the cold, legal mind of Lawyer Turnbull, he weighed the comparative likeness of nightmare and insanity.

He stared at the plush chair facing him, noted with distinct uneasiness how the strangely weightless, strangely sourceless trickle of redness disappeared as it hit the floor, but left long, mud-ochre streaks matted on the upholstery. The sound was unpleasant, too; Pat. HISS. Pat. HISS—

The voice continued impatiently, “Damn your human stupidity! I may be a ghost, but heaven knows I’m not trying to haunt you. Friend, you’re not that important to me. Get this-I’m here on business.”

Turnbull learned that you cannot wet dry lips with a dehydrated tongue. “Legal business?”

“Sure. The fact that I was once killed by violence, and have to continue my existence on the astral plane, doesn’t mean I’ve lost my legal rights. Does it?”

The lawyer shook his head in bafflement. He said, “This would be easier on me if you weren’t invisible. Can’t you do something about it?”

There was a short pause. ‘Well, I could materialize for a minute,” the voice said. “It’s hard work-damn hard, for me. There are a lot of us astral entities that can do it easy as failing out of bed, but-Well, if I have to I shall try to do it once.”

There was a shimmering in the air above the armchair, and a milky, thin smoke condensed into an intangible seated figure. Turnbull took no delight in noting that, through the figure, the outlines of the chair were still hazily visible. The figure thickened. Just as the features took form-just as Turnbull’s bulging eyes made out a prominent hooked nose and a crisp beard-it thinned and exploded with a soft pop.

The voice said weakly, “I didn’t think I was that bad. I’m way out of practice. I guess that’s the first daylight materialization I’ve made in seventy-five years.”

The lawyer adjusted his rimless glasses and coughed. Hell’s binges, he thought, the worst thing about this is that I’m believing it!”

“Oh, well, “ he said aloud. Then he hurried on before the visitor could take offense: “Just what did you want? I’m just a small-town lawyer, you know. My business is fairly routine—”

“I know all about your business,” the voice said. “You can handle my case-it’s a land affair. I want to sue Russell Harley.”

“Harley?” Turnbull fingered his cheek. “ Any relation to Zeb Harley?”

“His nephew-and his heir, too.”

Turnbull nodded. “Yes, I remember now. My wife’s folks live in Rebel Butte, and I’ve been there. Quite a coincidence you should come to me-“

The voice laughed. “It was no coincidence,” it said softly.

“Oh.” Turnbull was silent for a second. Then, “I see,” he said. He cast a shrewd glance at the chair. “Lawsuits cost money, Mr.-I don’t think you mentioned your name?”

“Hank Jenkins,” the voice prompted. “I know that. Would-let’s see. Would six hundred and fifty dollars be sufficient?”

Turnbull swallowed. “I think so,” he said in a relatively unemotional tone-relative to what he was thinking.

“Then suppose we call that your retainer. I happen to have cached a considerable sum in gold when I was-that is to say, before I became an astral entity. I’m quite certain it hasn’t been disturbed. You will have to call it treasure trove, I guess, and give half of it to the state, but there’s thirteen hundred dollars altogether.”

Turnbull nodded judiciously. “Assuming we can locate your trove,” he said, “I think that would be quite satisfactory.” He leaned back in his chair and looked legal. His aplomb had returned.

And half an hour later he said slowly, “I’ll take your case.”

Judge Lawrence Gimbel had always liked his job before. But his thirteen honorable years on the bench lost their flavor for him as he grimaced wearily and reached for his gavel. This case was far too confusing for his taste.

The clerk made his speech, and the packed courtroom sat down en masse. Gimbel held a hand briefly to his eyes before he spoke.

“Is the counsel for the plaintiff ready?”

“I am, your honor.” Turnbull, alone at his table, rose and bowed.

“The counsel for the defendant?”

“Ready, your honor!” Fred Wilson snapped. He looked with a hard flicker of interest at Turnbull and his solitary table, then leaned over and whispered in Russell Harley’s ear. The youth nodded glumly, then shrugged.

Gimbel said, “I understand the attorneys for both sides have waived jury trial in this case of Henry Jenkins versus Russell Joseph Harley.”

Both lawyers nodded. Gimbel continued, “In view of the unusual nature of this case, I imagine it will prove necessary to conduct it with a certain amount of informality. The sole purpose of this court is to arrive at the true facts at issue, and to deliver a verdict in accord with the laws pertaining to these facts. I will not stand on ceremony. Nevertheless, I will not tolerate any disturbances or unnecessary irregularities. The spectators will kindly remember that they are here on privilege. Any demonstration will result in the clearing of the court.”

He looked severely at the white faces that gleamed unintelligently up at him. He suppressed a sigh as he said, “The counsel for the plaintiff will begin.”

Turnbull rose quickly to his feet, faced the judge.

“Your honor,” he said, “we propose to show that my client, Henry Jenkins, has been deprived of his just rights by the defendant. Mr. Jenkins, by virtue of a sustained residence of more than twenty years in the house located on Route 22, eight miles north of the town of Rebel Butte, with the full knowledge of its legal owner, has acquired certain rights. In legal terminology we define these as the rights of adverse possession. The layman would call them common-law rights-squatters’ rights.”

Gimbel folded his hands and tried to relax. Squatters’ rights-for a ghost! He sighed, but listened attentively as Turnbull went on.

“Upon the death of Zebulon Harley, the owner of the house involved-it is better known, perhaps, as Harley Hall-the defendant inherited title to the property. We do not question his right to it. But my client has an equity in Harley Hall; the right to free and full existence. The defendant has forcefully evicted my client, by means which have caused my client great mental distress, and have even endangered his very existence.”

Gimbel nodded. If the case only had a precedent somewhere.... But it hadn’t; he remembered grimly the hours he’d spent thumbing through all sorts of unlikely law books, looking for anything that might bear on the case. It had been his better judgment that he throw the case out of court outright-a judge couldn’t afford to have himself laughed at, not if he were ambitious. And public laughter was about the only certainty there was to this case. But Wilson had put up such a fight that the judge’s temper had taken over. He never did like Wilson, anyhow.

“You may proceed with your witnesses,” he said.

Turnbull nodded. To the clerk he said, “Call Henry Jenkins to the stand.”

Wilson was on his feet before the clerk opened his mouth.

“Objection!” he bellowed. “The so-called Henry Jenkins cannot qualify as a witness!”

“Why not?” demanded Turnbull.

“Because he’s dead!”

The judge clutched his gavel with one hand, forehead with the other. He banged on the desk to quiet the courtroom.

Turnbull stood there, smiling. “Naturally,” he said, “you’ll have proof of that statement.”

Wilson snarled. “Certainly.” He referred to his brief. “The so-called Henry Jenkins is the ghost, spirit or specter of one Hank Jenkins, who prospected for gold in this territory a century ago. He was killed by a bullet through the throat from the gun of one Long Tom Cooper, and was declared legally dead on September 14, 1850. Cooper was hanged for his murder. No matter what hocus-pocus you produce for evidence to the contrary now, that status of legal death remains completely valid.”

“What evidence have you of the identity of my client with this Hank Jenkins?” Turnbull asked grimly.

“Do you deny it?”

Turnbull shrugged. “I deny nothing. I’m not being cross-examined. Furthermore, the sole prerequisite of a witness is that he understand the value of an oath. Henry Jenkins was tested by John Quincy Fitzjames, professor of psychology at the University of Southern California. The results-I have Dr. Fitzjames’ sworn statement of them here, which I will introduce as an exhibit-show clearly that my client’s intelligence quotient is well above normal, and that a psychiatric examination discloses no important aberrations which would injure his validity as a witness. I insist that my client be allowed to testify on his own behalf.”

“But he’s dead!” squawked Wilson. “He’s invisible right now!”

“My client.” said Turnbull stiffly, “is not present just now. Undoubtedly that accounts for what you term his invisibility.” He paused for the appreciative murmur that swept through the court. Things were breaking perfectly, he thought, smiling. “I have here another affidavit,” he said. “It is signed by Elihu James and Terence MacRae, who respectively head the departments of physics and biology at the same university. It states that my client exhibits all the vital phenomena of life. I am prepared to call all three of my expert witnesses to the stand, if necessary.”

Wilson scowled but said nothing. Judge Gimbel leaned forward. “I don’t see how it is possible for me to refuse the plaintiff the right to testify,” he said. “If the three experts who prepared these reports will testify on the stand to the facts contained in them, Henry Jenkins may then take the stand.”

Wilson sat down heavily. The three experts spoke briefly-and dryly. Wilson put them through only the most formal of cross-examinations.

The judge declared a brief recess. In the corridor outside, Wilson and his client lit cigarettes and looked unsympathetically at each other.

“I feel like a fool,” said Russell Harley. “Bringing suit against a ghost.”

“The ghost brought the suit,” Wilson reminded him. “If only we’d been able to hold fire for a couple more weeks, till another judge came on the bench, I could’ve got this thing thrown right out of court.”

“Well, why couldn’t we wait?”

“Because you were in such a damn hurry!” Wilson said. “you and that idiot Nicholls-so confident that it would never come to trial.”

Harley shrugged, and thought unhappily of their failure in completely exorcising the ghost of Hank Jenkins. That had been a mess. Jenkins had somehow escaped from the charmed circle they’d drawn around him, in which they’d hoped to keep him till the trial was forfeited by non-appearance.

“That’s another thing,” said Wilson. “Where is Nicholls?”

Harley shrugged again. “I dunno. The last I saw of him was in your office. He came around to see me right after the deputy slapped the show-cause order on me at the house. He brought me down to you-said you’d been recommended to him. Then you and him and I talked about the case for a while. He went out, after he lent me a little money to help meet your retainer. Haven’t seen him since.”

“I’d like to know who recommended me to him,” Wilson said grimly. “I don’t think he’d ever recommend anybody else. I don’t like this case-and I don’t much like you.”

Harley growled but said nothing. He flung his cigarette away. It tasted of the garbage that hung around his neck-everything did. Nicholls had told no lies when he said Harley wouldn’t much like the bundle of herbs that would ward off the ghost of old Jenkins. They smelled.

The court clerk was in the corridor, bawling something, and people were beginning to trickle back in. Harley and his attorney went with them.

When the trial had been resumed, the clerk said, “Henry Jenkins!”

Wilson was on his feet at once. He opened the door of the judge’s chamber, said something in a low tone. Then he stepped back, as if to let someone through.

Pat. HISS. Pat. HISS-

There was a concerted gasp from the spectators as the weirdly appearing trickle of blood moved slowly across the open space to the witness chair. This was the ghost-the plaintiff in the most eminently absurd case in the history of jurisprudence.

“All right, Hank,” Turnbull whispered. “You’ll have to materialize long enough to let the clerk swear you in.”

The clerk drew back nervously at the pillar of milky fog that appeared before him, vaguely humanoid in shape. A phantom hand, half transparent, reached out to touch the Bible. The clerk’s voice shook as he administered the oath, and heard the response come from the heart of the cloudpillar.

The haze drifted into the witness chair, bent curiously at about hip-height, and popped into nothingness.

The judge banged his gavel wildly. The buzz of alarm that had arisen from the spectators died out.

“I’ll warn you again,” he declared, “that unruliness will not be tolerated. The counsel for the plaintiff may proceed.”

Turnbull walked to the witness chair and addressed its emptiness. “

“Your name?”

“My name is Henry Jenkins.”

“Your occupation?”

There was a slight pause. “I have none. I guess you’d say I’m retired.”

“Mr. Jenkins, just what connection have you with the building referred to as Harley Hall?”

“I have occupied it for ninety years.”

“During this time, did you come to know the late Zebulon Harley, owner of the Hall?”

“I knew Zeb quite well.”

Turnbull nodded. “When did you make his acquaintance?” he asked.

“In the spring of 1907. Zeb had just lost his wife. After that, you see, he made Harley Hall his year-round home. He became-well, more or less of a hermit. Before that we had never met, since he was only seldom at the Hall. But we became friendly then.”

“How long did this friendship last?”

“Until he died last fall. I was with him when he died. I still have a few keepsakes he left me then.” There was a distinct nostalgic sigh from the witness chair, which by now was liberally spattered with muddy red liquid. The falling drops seemed to hesitate for a second, and their sizzling noise was muted as with a strong emotion.

Turnbull went on, “Your relations with him were good, then?”

“I’d call them excellent,” the emptiness replied firmly. “Every night we sat up together. When we didn’t play pinochle or chess or cribbage, we just sat and talked over the news of the day. I still have the book we used to keep records of the chess and pinochle games. Zeb made the entries himself, in his own handwriting.”

Turnbull abandoned the witness for a moment. He faced the judge with a smile. “I offer in evidence,” he said, “the book mentioned. Also a ring given to the plaintiff by the late Mr. Harley, and a copy of the plays of Gilbert and Sullivan. On the flyleaf of this book is inscribed, ‘To Old Hank’, in Harley’s own hand.”

He turned again to the empty, blood-leaking witness chair.

He said, “In all your years of association, did Zebulon Harley ever ask you to leave, or to pay rent?”

“Of course not. Not Zeb!”

Turnbull nodded. “Very good,” he said. “Now, just one or two more questions. Will you tell in your own words what occurred, after the death of Zebulon Harley, that caused you to bring this suit?”

“Well, in January young Harley—”

“You mean Russell Joseph Harley, the defendant?”

“Yes. He arrived at Harley Hall on January fifth. I asked him to leave, which he did. On the next day he returned with another man. They placed a talisman upon the threshold of the main entrance, and soon after sealed every threshold and windowsill in the Hall with a substance which is noxious to me. These activities were accompanied by several of the most deadly spells in the Ars Magicorum. He further added an Exclusion Circle with a radius of a little over a mile, entirely surrounding the Hall.”

“I see,” the lawyer said. “Will you explain to the court the effects of these activities?”

“Well,” the voice said thoughtfully, “it’s a little hard to put in words. I can’t pass the Circle without a great expenditure of energy. Even if I did I couldn’t enter the building because of the talisman and the seals.”

“Could you enter by air? Through a chimney, perhaps?”

“No. The Exclusion Circle is really a sphere. I’m pretty sure the effort would destroy me.”

“In effect, then, you are entirely barred from the house you have occupied for ninety years, due to the wilful acts of Russell Joseph Harley, the defendant, and an unnamed accomplice of his.”

“That is correct.”

Turnbull beamed. “Thank you. That’s all.”

He turned to Wilson, whose face had been a study in dourness throughout the entire examination. “Your witness,” he said.

Wilson snapped to his feet and strode to the witness chair.

He said belligerently, “You say your name is Henry Jenkins?”

“Yes.”

“That is your name now, you mean to say. What was your name before?”

“Before?” There was surprise in the voice that emanated from above the trickling blood-drops. “Before when?”

Wilson scowled. “Don’t pretend ignorance,” he said sharply. “Before you died, of course.”

“Objection!” Turnbull was on his feet, glaring at Wilson. “The counsel for the defense has no right to speak of some hypothetical death of my client!”

Gimbel raised a hand wearily and cut off the words that were forming on Wilson’s lips. “Objection sustained,” he said. “No evidence has been presented to identify the plaintiff as the prospector who was killed in 1850-or anyone else.”

Wilson’s mouth twisted into a sour grimace. He continued on a lower key.

“You say, Mr. Jenkins, that you occupied Harley Hall for ninety years.”

“Ninety-two years next month. The Hall wasn’t built-in its present form, anyhow-until 1876, but I occupied the house that stood on the site previously.”

“What did you do before then?”

“Before then?” The voice paused, then said doubtfully, “I don’t remember.”

“You’re under oath!” Wilson flared.

The voice got firmer. “Ninety years is a long time,” it said. “I don’t remember.”

“Let’s see if I can’t refresh your memory. Is it true that ninety-one years ago, in the very year in which you claim to have begun your occupancy of Harley Hall, Hank Jenkins was killed in a gun duel?”

“That may be true, if you say so. I don’t remember.”

“Do you remember that the shooting occurred not fifty feet from the present site of Harley Hall?”

“It may be.”

“Well, then,” Wilson thundered, “is it not a fact that when Hank Jenkins died by violence his ghost assumed existence? That it was then doomed to haunt the site of its slaying throughout eternity?”

The voice said evenly, “I have no knowledge of that.”

“Do you deny that it is well known throughout that section that the ghost of Hank Jenkins haunts Harley Hall?”

“Objection!” shouted Turnbull. “Popular opinion is not evidence.”

“Objection sustained. Strike the question from the record.”

Wilson, badgered, lost his control. In a dangerously uneven voice, he said, “Perjury is a criminal offense. Mr. Jenkins, do you deny that you are the ghost of Hank Jenkins?”

The tone was surprised. “Why, certainly.”

“You are a ghost, aren’t you?”

Stiffly, “I’m an entity on the astral plane.”

“That, I believe, is what is called a ghost?”

“I can’t help what it’s called. I’ve heard you called a lot of things. Is that proof?”

There was a surge of laughter from the audience. Gimbel slammed his gavel down on the bench.

“The witness,” he said, “will confine himself to answering questions.”

Wilson bellowed, “In spite of what you say, it’s true, isn’t it, that you are merely the spirit of a human being who had died through violence?”

The voice from above the blood drops retorted, “I repeat that I am an entity of the astral plane. I am not aware that I was ever a human being.”

The lawyer turned an exasperated face to the bench.

“Your honor,” he said, “I ask that you instruct the witness to cease playing verbal hide-and-seek. It is quite evident that the witness is a ghost, and that he is therefore the relict of some human being, ipso facto. Circumstantial evidence is strong that he is the ghost of the Hank Jenkins who was killed in 1850. But this is a non-essential point. What is definite is that he is the ghost of someone who is dead, and hence is unqualified to act as witness! I demand his testimony be stricken from the record!”

Turnbull spoke up at once. “Will the counsel for the defense quote his authority for branding my client a ghost-in the face of my client’s repeated declaration that he is an entity of the astral plane? What is the legal definition of a ghost?”

Judge Gimbel smiled. “Counsel for the defense will proceed with the cross-examination,” he said.

Wilson’s face Hushed dark purple. He mopped his brow with a large bandanna, then glared at the dropping, sizzling trickle of blood.

“Whatever you are,” he said, “answer me this question. Can you pass through a wall?”

“Why, yes. Certainly.” There was a definite note of surprise in the voice from nowhere. “But it isn’t as easy as some people think. It definitely requires a lot of effort.”

“Never mind that. You can do it?”

“Yes.”

“Could you be bound by any physical means? Would handcuffs hold you? Or ropes, chains, prison walls, a hermetically sealed steel chest?”

Jenkins had no chance to answer. Turnbull, scenting danger, cut in hastily. “I object to this line of questioning. It is entirely irrelevant. “

“On the contrary,” Wilson cried loudly, “it bears strongly on the qualifications of the so-called Henry Jenkins as a witness! I demand that he answer the question.”

Judge Gimbel said, “Objection overruled. Witness will answer the question.”

The voice from the chair said superciliously, “I don’t mind answering. Physical barriers mean nothing to me, by and large.”

The counsel for the defense drew himself up triumphantly.

“Very good,” he said with satisfaction. “Very good.” Then to the judge, the words coming sharp and fast, “I claim, your honor, that the so-called Henry Jenkins has no legal status as a witness in court. There is clearly no value in understanding the nature of an oath if a violation of the oath can bring no punishment in its wake. The statements of a man who can perjure himself freely have no worth. I demand they be stricken from the record!”

Turnbull was at the judge’s bench in two strides.

“I had anticipated that, your honor,” he said quickly. “From the very nature of the case, however, it is clear that my client can be very definitely restricted in his movements-spells, pentagrams, talismans, amulets, Exclusion Circles and what-not. I have here-which I am prepared to deliver to the bailiff of the court-a list of the various methods of confining an astral entity to a restricted area for periods ranging from a few moments to all eternity. Moreover, I have also signed a bond for five thousand dollars, prior to the beginning of the trial, which I stand ready to forfeit should my client be confined and make his escape, if found guilty of any misfeasance as a witness.”

Gimbel’s face, which had looked startled for a second, slowly cleared. He nodded. “The court is satisfied with the statement of the counsel for the plaintiff,” he declared. “There seems no doubt that the plaintiff can be penalized for any misstatements, and the motion of the defense is denied.”

Wilson looked choleric, but shrugged. “ All right,” he said. “That will be all:’

“You may step down, Mr. Jenkins,” Gimbel directed, and watched in fascination as the blood-dripping column rose and floated over the floor, along the corridor, out the door.

Turnbull approached the judge’s bench again. He said, “I would like to place in evidence these notes, the diary of the late Zebulon Harley. It was presented to my client by Harley himself last fall. I call particular attention to the entry for April sixth, nineteen seventeen, in which he mentions the entrance of the United States into the First World War, and records the results of a series of eleven pinochle games played with a personage identified as ‘Old Hank.’ With the court’s permission, I will read the entry for that day, and also various other entries for the next four years. Please note the references to someone known variously as ‘Jenkins’, ‘Hank Jenkins’ and-in one extremely significant passage-’Old Invisible: “

Wilson stewed silently during the slow reading of Harley’s diary. There was anger on his face, but he paid close attention, and when the reading was over he leaped to his feet.

“I would like to know,” he asked, “if the counsel for the plaintiff is in possession of any diaries after nineteen twenty?”

Turnbull shook his head. “Harley apparently never kept a diary, except during the four years represented in this.”

“Then I demand that the court refuse to admit this diary as evidence on two counts,” Wilson said. He raised two fingers to tick off the points. “In the first place, the evidence presented is frivolous. The few vague and unsatisfactory references to Jenkins nowhere specifically describe him as what he is-ghost, astral entity or what you will. Second, the evidence, even were the first point overlooked, concerns only the years up to nineteen twenty-one. The case concerns itself only with the supposed occupation of Harley Hall by the so-called Jenkins in the last twenty years-since ‘twenty-one. Clearly, the evidence is therefore irrelevant.”

Gimbel looked at Turnbull, who smiled calmly.

“The reference to ‘Old Invisible’ is far from vague,” he said. “It is a definite indication of the astral character of my client. Furthermore, evidence as to the friendship of my client with the late Mr. Zebulon Harley before nineteen twenty-one is entirely relevant, as such a friendship, once established, would naturally be presumed to have continued indefinitely. Unless of course, the defense is able to present evidence to the contrary.”

Judge Gimbel said, “The diary is admitted as evidence.”

Turnbull said, “I rest my case.”

There was a buzz of conversation in the courtroom while the judge looked over the diary, and then handed it to the clerk to be marked and entered.

Gimbel said, “The defense may open its case.”

Wilson rose. To the clerk he said, “Russell Joseph Harley.”

But young Harley was recalcitrant. “Nix, “ he said, on his feet, pointing at the witness chair. “That thing’s got blood all over it! You don’t expect me to sit down in that large puddle of blood, do you?”

Judge Gimbel leaned over to look at the chair. The drip-drop trickle of blood from the apparition who’d been testifying had left its mark. Muddy brown all down the front of the chair. Gimbel found himself wondering how the ghost managed to replenish its supply of the fluid, but gave it up.

“I see your point,” he said. ‘Well, it’s getting a bit late anyhow. The clerk will take away the present witness chair and replace it. In the interim, I declare the court recessed till tomorrow morning at ten o’clock.”

III

Russell Harley noticed how the elevator boy’s back registered repulsion and disapproval, and scowled. He was not a popular guest in the hotel, he knew well. Where he made his mistake, though, was in thinking that the noxious bundle of herbs about his neck was the cause of it. His odious personality had a lot to do with the chilly attitude of the management and his fellow guests.

He made his way to the bar, ignoring the heads that turned in surprise to follow the reeking comet-tail of his passage. He entered the red-leather-and-chromium drinking room, and stared about for Lawyer Wilson.

And blinked in surprise when he saw him. Wilson wasn’t alone. In the booth with him was a tall, dark figure, with his back to Harley. The back alone was plenty for recognition. Nicholls!

Wilson had seen him. “Hello, Harley,” he said, all smiles and affability in the presence of the man with the money. “Come on and sit down. Mr. Nicholls dropped in on me a little while ago, so I brought him over.”

“Hello,” Harley said glumly, and Nicholls nodded. The muscles of his cheeks pulsed, and he seemed under a strain, strangely uncomfortable in Harley’s presence. Still there was a twinkle in the look he gave young Harley, and his voice was friendly enough-though supercilious-as he said:

“Hello, Harley. How is the trial going?”

“Ask him,” said Harley, pointing a thumb at Wilson as he slid his knees under the booth’s table and sat down. “He’s the lawyer. He’s supposed to know these things.”

“Doesn’t he?”

Harley shrugged and craned his neck for the waitress. “Oh, I guess so....Rye and water!” He watched the girl appreciatively as she nodded and went off to the bar, then turned his attention back to Nicholls. “The trouble is,” he said, “Wilson may think he knows, but I think he’s all wet:’

Wilson frowned. “Do you imply—” he began, but Nicholls put up a hand.

“Let’s not bicker,” said Nicholls. “Suppose you answer my question. I have a stake in this, and I want to know. How’s the trial going?”

Wilson put on his most open-faced expression. “Frankly,” he said, “not too well. I’m afraid the judge is on the other side. If you’d listened to me and stalled till another judge came along—”

“I had no time to stall, “ said Nicholls. “I have to be elsewhere within a few days. Even now, I should be on my way. Do you think we might lose the case?”

Harley laughed sharply. As Wilson glared at him he took his drink from the waitress’ tray and swallowed it. The smile remained on his face as he listened to Wilson say smoothly:

“There is a good deal of danger, yes.”

“Hum.” Nicholls looked interestedly at his fingernails. “Perhaps I chose the wrong lawyer.”

“Sure you did.” Harley waved at the waitress, ordered another drink. “You want to know what else I think? I think you picked the wrong client, spelled s-t-o-o-g-e. I’m getting sick of this. This damn thing around my neck smells bad. How do I know it’s any good, anyhow? Far as I can see, it just smells bad, and that’s all.”

“It works,” Nicholls said succinctly. “I wouldn’t advise you to go without it. The late Hank Jenkins is not a very strong ghost-a strong one would tear you apart and chew up your herbs for dessert but without the protection of what you wear about your neck, you would become a very uncomfortable human as soon as Jenkins heard you’d stopped wearing it.”

He put down the glass of red wine he’d been inhaling without drinking, looked intently at Wilson. “I’ve put up the money in this,” he said. “I had hoped you’d be able to handle the legal end. I see I’ll have to do more. Now listen intently, because I have no intention of repeating this. There’s an angle to this case that’s got right by your blunted legal acumen. Jenkins claims to be an astral entity, which he undoubtedly is. Now, instead of trying to prove him a ghost, and legally dead, and therefore unfit to testify, which you have been doing, suppose you do this....”

He went on to speak rapidly and to the point.

And when he left them a bit later, and Wilson took Harley up to his room and poured him into bed, the lawyer felt happy for the first time in days.

Russell Joseph Harley, a little hung over and a lot nervous, was called to the stand as first witness in his own behalf.

Wilson said, “Your name?”

“Russell Joseph Harley.”

“You are the nephew of the late Zebulon Harley, who bequeathed the residence known as Harley Hall to you?”

“Yes.”

Wilson turned to the bench. “I offer this copy of the late Mr. Zebulon Harley’s will in evidence. All his possessions are left to his nephew and only living kin, the defendant.”

Turnbull spoke from his desk. “The plaintiff in no way disputes the defendant’s equity in Harley Hall.”

Wilson continued, “You passed part of your childhood in Harley Hall, did you not, and visited it as a grown man on occasion?”

“Yes.”

“At any time, has anything in the shape of a ghost, specter or astral entity manifested itself to you in Harley Hall?”

“No. I’d remember it.”

“Did your late uncle ever mention any such manifestation to you?”

“Him? No.”

“That’s all.”

Turnbull came up for the cross-examination.

“When, Mr. Harley, did you last see your uncle before his death?”

“It was in nineteen thirty-eight. In September, some time-around the tenth or eleventh of the month.”

“How long a time did you spend with him?,’

Harley flushed unaccountably. “Ah-just one day,” he said.

“When before that did you see him?,’

“Well, not since I was quite young. My parents moved to Pennsylvania in nineteen twenty...

“And since then-except for that one-day visit in nineteen thirty-eight-has any communication passed between your uncle and yourself?”

“‘No, I guess not. He was a rather queer duck-solitary. A little bit balmy, I think.”

“‘Well, you’re a loving nephew. But in view of what you’ve just said, does it sound surprising that your uncle never told you of Mr. Jenkins? He never had much chance to, did he?”

“He had a chance in nineteen thirty-eight, but he didn’t,” Harley said defiantly.

Turnbull shrugged. “I’m finished, “ he said.

Gimbel began to look bored. He had anticipated something more in the way of fireworks. He said, “Has the defense any further witnesses?”

Wilson smiled grimly. “Yes, your honor,.. he said. This was his big moment, and he smiled again as he said gently, “I would like to call Mr. Henry Jenkins to the stand.”

In the amazed silence that followed, Judge Gimbel leaned forward. “‘You mean you wish to call the plaintiff as a witness for the defense?”

Serenely, “Yes, your honor.”

Gimbel grimaced. “Call Henry Jenkins,” he said wearily to the clerk, and sank back in his chair.

Turnbull was looking alarmed. He bit his lip, trying to decide whether to object to this astonishing procedure, but finally shrugged as the clerk bawled out the ghost’s name.

Turnbull sped do\VD the corridor, out the door. His voice was heard in the anteroom, then he returned more slowly. Behind him came the trickle of blood drops: Pat. HISS. Pat. HISS-

“One moment, “ said Gimbel, coming to life again. “I have no objection to your testifying, Mr. Jenkins, but the State should not be subjected to the needless expense of reupholstering its witness chair every time you do. Bailiff, find some sort of a rug or something to throw over the chair before Mr. Jenkins is sworn in:’

A tarpaulin was hurriedly procured and adjusted to the chair; Jenkins materialized long enough to be sworn in, then sat.

“Tell me, Mr. Jenkins,” he said, “just how many ‘astral entities’-I believe that is what you call yourself-are there?”

“I have no way of knowing. Many billions.”

“As many, in other words, as there have been human beings to die by violence?”

Turnbull rose to his feet in sudden agitation, but the ghost neatly evaded the trap. “I don’t know. I only know there are billions.”

The lawyer’s cat-who-ate-canary smile remained undimmed. “And all these billions are constantly about us, everywhere, only remaining invisible. Is that it?”

“Oh, no. Very few remain on Earth. Of those, still fewer have anything to do with humans. Most humans are quite boring to us.”

“Well, how many would you say are on Earth? A hundred thousand?”

“Even more, maybe. But that’s a good guess.”

Turnbull interrupted suddenly. “I would like to know the significance of these questions. I object to this whole line of questioning as being totally irrelevant.”

Wilson was a study in legal dignity. He retorted, “I am trying to elicit some facts of major value, your honor. This may change the entire character of the case. I ask your patience for a moment or two.”

“Counsel for the defense may continue,” Gimbel said curtly. Wilson showed his canines in a grin. He continued to the blood dripping before him. “Now, the contention of your counsel is that the late Mr. Harley allowed an ‘astral entity’ to occupy his home for twenty years or more, with his full knowledge and consent. That strikes me as being entirely improbable, but shall we for the moment assume it to be the case?”

“Certainly! It’s the truth.”

“Then tell me, Mr. Jenkins, have you fingers?”

“Have I-what?”

“You heard me!” Wilson snapped. “Have you fingers, flesh-and-blood fingers, capable of making an imprint?”

“Why, no. I—” Wilson rushed on. “Or have you a photograph of yourself-or specimens of your handwriting-or any sort of material identification? Have you any of these?”

The voice was definitely querulous. “What do you mean?”

Wilson’s voice became harsh, menacing. “I mean, can you prove that you are the astral entity alleged to have occupied Zebulon Harley’s home. Was it you-or was it another of the featureless, faceless, intangible unknowns-one of the hundreds of thousands of them that, by your own admission, are all over the face of the earth, rambling where they choose, not halted by any locks or bars? Can you prove that you are anyone in particular?”

“Your honor!” Turnbull’s voice was almost a shriek as he found his feet at last. “My client’s identity was never in question!”

“It is now!” roared Wilson. “The opposing counsel has presented a personage whom he styles ‘Henry Jenkins: Who is this Jenkins? What is he? Is he even an individual-or a corporate aggregation of these mysterious ‘astral entities’ which we are to believe are everywhere, but which we never see? If he is an individual, is he the individual? And how can we know that, even if he says he is? Let him produce evidence-photographs, a birth certificate, fingerprints. Let him bring in identifying witnesses who have known both ghosts, and are prepared to swear that these ghosts are the same ghost. Failing this, there is no case! Your honor, I demand the court declare an immediate judgment in favor of the defendant!”

Judge Gimbel stared at Turnbull. “Have you anything to say?” he asked. “The argument of the defense would seem to have every merit with it. Unless you can produce some sort of evidence as to the identity of your client, I have no alternative but to find for the defense.”

For a moment there was a silent tableau. Wilson triumphant, Turnbull furiously frustrated.

How could you identify a ghost?

And then came the quietly amused voice from the witness chair.

“This thing has gone far enough, “ it said above the sizzle and splatter of its own leaking blood. “I believe I can present proof that will satisfy the court.”

Wilson’s face fell with express-elevator speed. Turnbull held his breath, afraid to hope.

Judge Gimbel said, “You are under oath. Proceed.”

There was no other sound in the courtroom as the voice said, “Mr. Harley, here, spoke of a visit to his uncle in nineteen thirty-eight. I can vouch for that. They spent a night and a day together. They weren’t alone. I was there.”

No one was watching Russell Harley, or they might have seen the sudden sick pallor that passed over his face.

The voice, relentless, went on. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have eavesdropped as I did, but old Zeb never had any secrets from me anyhow. I listened to what they talked about. Young Harley was working for a bank in Philadelphia at the time. His first big job. He needed money, and needed it bad. There was a shortage in his department. A woman named Sally—”

“Hold on!” Wilson yelled. “This has nothing to do with your identification of yourself. Keep to the point!”

But Turnbull had begun to comprehend. He was shouting, too, almost too excited to be coherent. “Your honor, my client must be allowed to speak. If he shows knowledge of an intimate conversation between the late Mr. Harley and the defendant, it would be certain proof that he enjoyed the late Mr. Harley’s confidence, and thus, Q.E.D., that he is no other than the astral entity who occupied Harley Hall for so long!”

Gimbel nodded sharply. “Let me remind counsel for the defense that this is his own witness. Mr. Jenkins, continue.”

The voice began again, “As I was saying, the woman’s name—”

“Shut up, damn you!” Harley yelled. He sprang upright. turned beseechingly toward the judge. “He’s twisting it! Make him stop! Sure, I knew my uncle had a ghost. He’s it. all right, curse his black soul! He can have the house if he wants it-I’ll clear out. I’ll clear out of the whole damned state!”

He broke off into babbling and turned about wildly. Only the intervention of a marshal kept him from hurtling out of the courtroom.

Banging of the gavel and hard work by the court clerk and his staff restored order in the courtroom. When the room had returned almost to normalcy, Judge Gimbel, perspiring and annoyed, said, “ As far as I am concerned, identification of the witness is complete. Has the defense any further evidence to present?”

Wilson shrugged morosely. “No, your honor.”

“Counsel for the plaintiff?”

“Nothing, your honor. I rest my case.” Gimbel plowed a hand through his sparse hair and blinked. “In that case,” he said, “I find for the plaintiff. An order is entered hereby that the defendant. Russell Joseph Harley, shall remove from the premises of Harley Hall all spells, pentagrams, talismans and other means of exorcism employed; that he shall cease and desist from making any attempts, of whatever nature, to evict the tenant in the future; and that Henry Jenkins, the plaintiff, shall be permitted to full use and occupancy of the premises designated as Harley Hall for the full term of his natural-ah-existence.”

The gavel banged. “The case is closed.”

“Don’t take it so hard,” said a mild voice behind Russell Harley. He whirled surlily. Nicholls was coming up the street after him from the courthouse, Wilson in tow.

Nicholls said, “You lost the case, but you’ve still got your life. Let me buy you a drink. In here, perhaps.”

He herded them into a cocktail lounge, sat them down before they had a chance to object. He glanced at his expensive wrist watch. “I have a few minutes,” he said “Then I really must be off. It’s urgent.”

He hailed a barman, ordered for all. Then he looked at young Harley and smiled broadly as he dropped a bill on the counter to pay for the drinks.

“Harley,” he said, “I have a motto that you would do well to remember at times like these. I’ll make you a present of it, if you like.”

“What is it?”

“‘The worst is yet to come.’ “

Harley snarled and swallowed his drink without replying. Wilson said, “What gets me is, why didn’t they come to us before the trial with that stuff about this charmingly illicit client you wished on me? We’d have had to settle out of court.”

Nicholls shrugged. “They had their reasons,” he said “ After all, one case of exorcism, more or less, doesn’t matter. But lawsuits set precedents. You’re a lawyer, of sorts, Wilson; do you see what I mean?”

“Precedents?” Wilson looked at him slack-jawed for a moment; then his eyes widened

“I see you understand me.” Nicholls nodded. “From now on in this state-and by virtue of the full-faith-and-credence clause of the Constitution, in every state of the country-a ghost has a legal right to haunt a house!”

“Good lord!” said Wilson. He began to laugh, not loud, but from the bottom of his chest.

Harley stared at Nicholls. “Once and for all,” he whispered, “tell me -what’s your angle on all this?”

Nicholls smiled again.

“Think about it a while,” he said lightly. “You’ll begin to understand.” He sniffed his wine once more, then sat the glass down gently

And vanished.