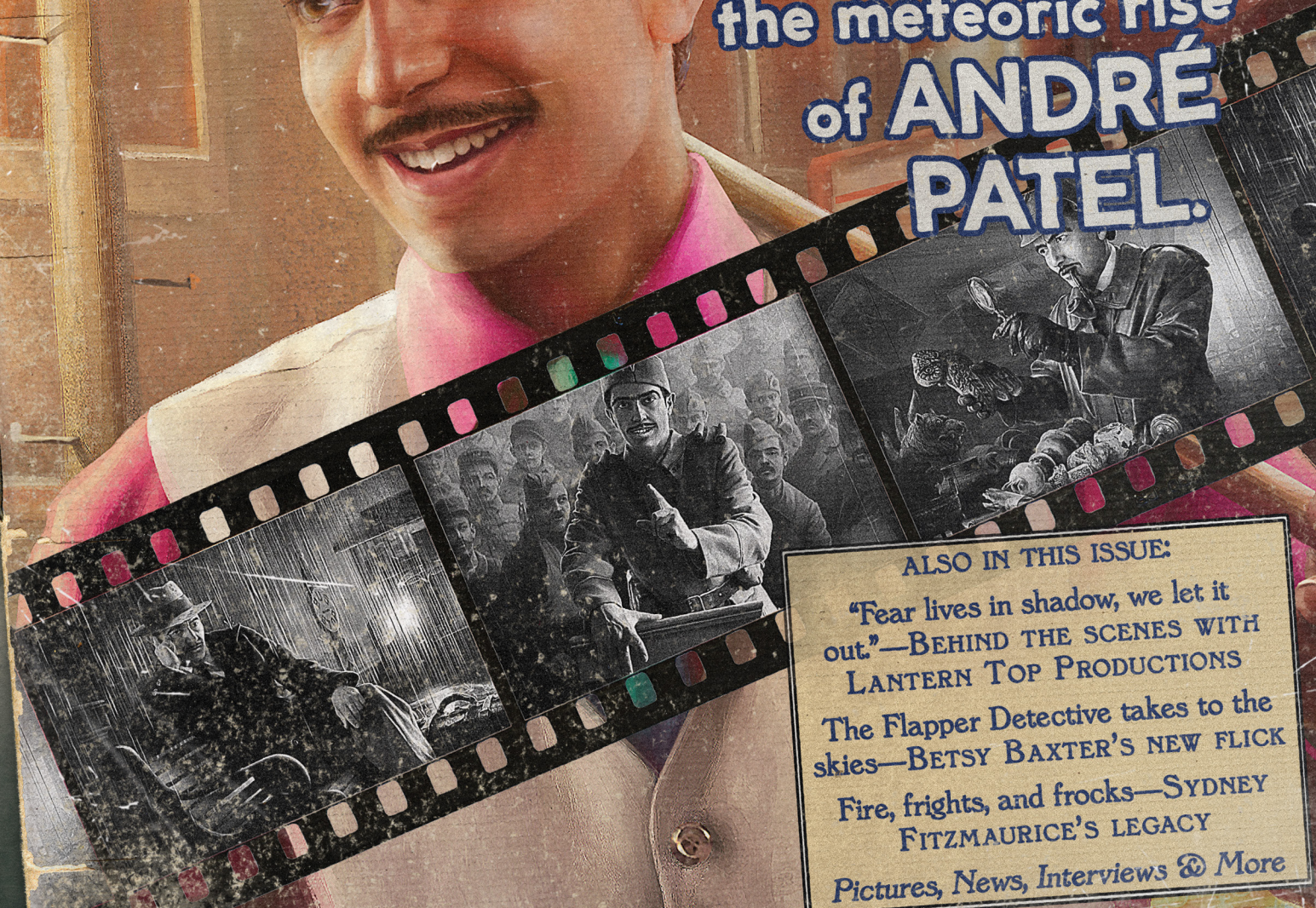
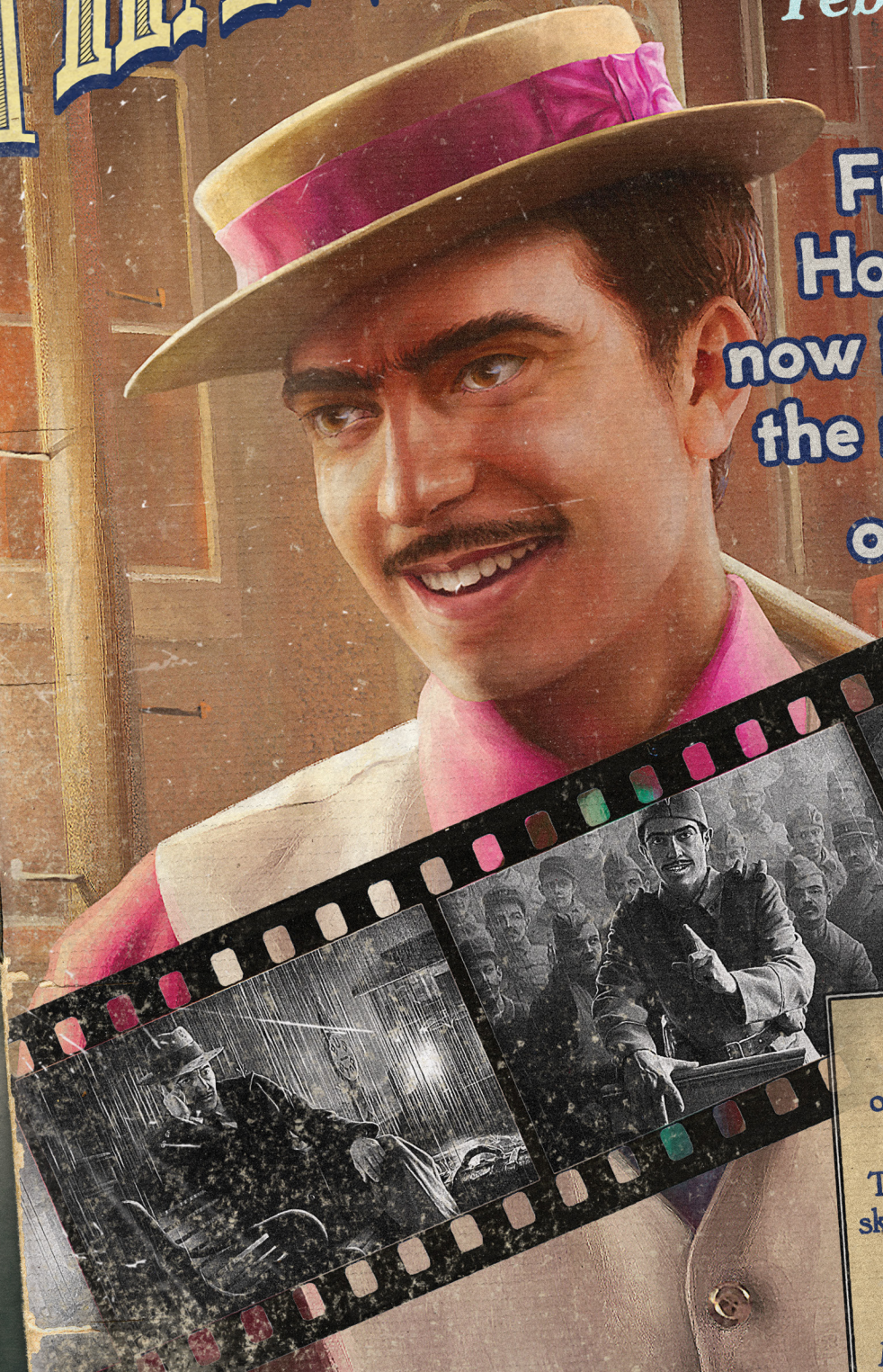


Step Through the Silver Screen! 15¢

PHANTASMASCOPE

February

From Paris to
Hollywood and
now into **SPACE!**
the meteoric rise
of **ANDRÉ
PATEL.**



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“Fear lives in shadow, we let it out.”—**BEHIND THE SCENES WITH LANTERN TOP PRODUCTIONS**
The Flapper Detective takes to the skies—**BETSY BAXTER’S NEW FLICK**
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André Patel

The Film Star

"WHAT'S A WRAP!"

As soon as the director called the day's shoot, André Patel plopped down in the middle of the set. His helmet toppled to the ground and would have rolled away if not for the hand he clapped atop it. He'd spent the day sneaking through the Saturnian tunnels, ambushing the aliens who had kidnapped his crew, and it had been quite draining.

"You okay there, honey?" asked Phyllis, the costumer, grabbing the helmet.

"Yes, yes, of course," he replied.

Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't, but the star of the show couldn't say such things. Those sorts of rumors could kill an on-set environment, as he'd seen with those abominable injuries on the set of *Curse of the Reptile Cult*. He didn't want *A Cosmic Journey* to go sideways too. The script had some real meat on its bones. It was the sort of project that could give a man a lot of pull with the studio if he played his cards right.

Phyllis frowned, her skepticism evident, and although he very much wanted to rest for a minute, he clamored to his feet and tried to look perky.

"I assume you'll be wanting my suit back too," he said, laying on the charm. She tittered, her cheeks flaming. He patted her hand and continued, "I'll have it to you in two shakes of a lamb's tail, mademoiselle. Just give me a moment to change."

He spun on his heel and would have made his exit if not for Alice Gaither. No one would have guessed that the tired woman in the wrinkled tweed had directed Lantern Top's entire film catalog, but after seeing her at work, it was impossible to doubt her capability. André scraped up a smile, swept up her hand, and kissed the back of it. In response, she swatted at him.

"Stop that," she said fondly. "Nice work today."

"I aim to please, *mon capitain*," he teased. "Say the word. I am but your faithful servant."

"You, my friend, are incorrigible. But I'll forgive it if you'll take this request off my plate. *Phantasmagoscope* magazine wants to do a Lantern Top profile."

"How lovely! A wise person once told me that any press is good press."

"I said that."

"Exactly. How can I help?"

"They want a star for an interview and photo shoot with Jacques Deschamps. I'd like you to do it."

He brightened. Deschamps was once *the* photographer for Hollywood's elite, and in the early stages of his career André had dreamed of a Deschamps shoot just like Valentino's. But the photographer had become quite a hermit over the past few years. Up until this moment, André had assumed he'd retired.

"Gladly!" he exclaimed.

"Tomorrow, at his place in the Hills," she continued.

Although he'd been looking forward to a long weekend of rest and relaxation, his bone-deep exhaustion vanished beneath a wave of elation.

"Mademoiselle," he said with a flourishing bow, "it would be my pleasure."



AFTER A FITFUL NIGHT'S SLEEP BROKEN by excited tossing and turning, André drove up into the Hollywood Hills. Deschamps lived on the outskirts, where the houses sat in impressive solitude. His long and winding driveway led into a thick stand of trees. They closed in on André's car, branches hanging so low they scraped over the roof. The canopy overhead blotted out the sun, turning the bright midmorning into the dim light of dusk. The darkness became so unnatural that his heart skipped a beat, but then he emerged out the other side, and all was forgotten in his awe.

The house was enormous. It appeared to have been assembled by different builders, each with their own vision. The entrance was stone, with a tall, Tudor-esque peak. Stretching to the right: a brick expanse that belonged in an Edwardian drama. To the left: a medieval style tower, complete with arrow loops cut through the stone. Overall, the place was a nightmare, but the architectural mishmash offered so many photographic opportunities.

André stood outside his car for a long moment, taking it all in. He was so engrossed in the view that he completely failed to notice that he had company until the crunch of gravel beneath feet drew his attention. By then, they were almost atop him.

A young man and two middle-aged women came to a stop next to his car. The man wore a dusty butler's uniform, while the women sported black dresses and white aprons, yellowed with time. They appeared to be related, with the same watery blue eyes and dark, slicked back hair. Their skin was tight – too tight – with a waxy quality that made it look more like Bakelite plastic than anything human. He shuddered as he took it in.

"You must be..." said the maid on the right.

"André Patel," finished the one on the left.

"Monsignor Deschamps is expecting you," added the butler.

Their faces didn't move. Not even the lips. It was like staring into a mask save for the burning of their eyes. As excited as André was, he struggled against a sudden urge to sprint for the car just to escape their baleful gazes. But he tamped down his nerves with effort. Deschamps was worth it.

"This way," said one of the women.

They led him into the house. The foyer was dark, shutters pulled tight over the windows. He could barely see where he was going; shadows shrouded the corners of the room. But his strange guides didn't so much as falter.

"This is quite a house," André observed, hoping to break the tense silence.

None of them responded. The acoustics in this place were quite unusual; they redirected sound like an opera house despite the close quarters. The clack of his shoes on the stone floor multiplied a hundred-fold until it sounded like an army tromping down the hall. The effect honestly rattled him.

He cleared his throat, trying to ignore the strange phenomenon.

"So will we be doing the photos first, or the interview?" he prodded. "I'm at your service, and I brought a few changes of clothes in case my suit doesn't suffice. Perhaps I should have fetched my bag from the car."

"Your suit..." said the maid on the left, neither turning nor slowing.

"...is acceptable," finished the woman on the right.

But he came to a stop anyway. The whole situation was just so odd – the dark interior of the weird old house, the unsettling behavior of his companions, the interview that had to be conducted in such a remote locale in the first place. Was this some sort of kidnapping attempt? Perhaps he should have insisted on bringing someone from the studio. The whole arrangement smelled fishy.

The butler stopped close behind him. Too close; André could feel the fellow's breath on the back of his neck. A sickly sweet smell filled his nostrils, turning his stomach. He sped back up in the hopes of enforcing some distance without being impolite, but no matter how fast he went, the butler matched his pace like a dogged shadow.

"I say—" he began, determined to get some answers.

"We are here," said one of the maids, pushing open a door.

The room beyond was pitch black, even in comparison to the dim-lit hallway. He eyed it uncertainly. The last thing he wanted to do was go inside.

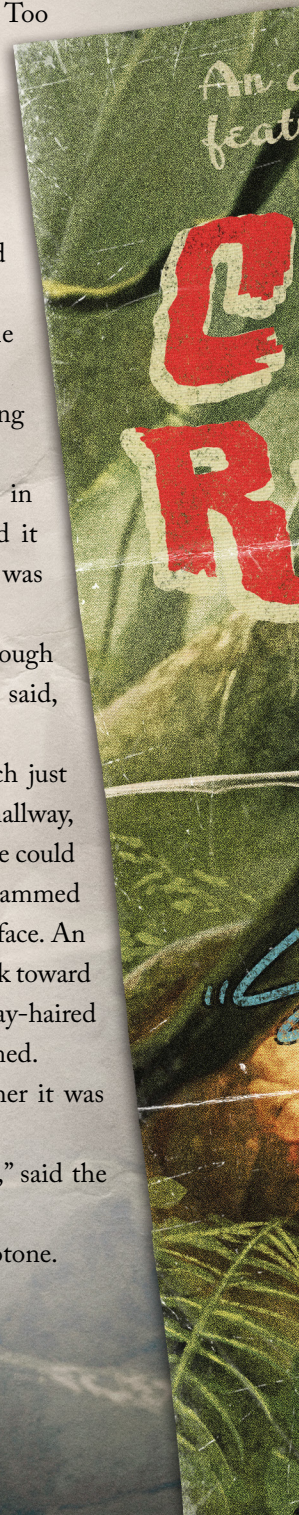
"It doesn't seem like there's quite enough illumination for a photo shoot in there," he said, backing away.

The butler reached in and flicked a switch just inside the jamb. Light spilled out into the hallway, making André's eyes water. Inside the room, he could see a rather extensive studio, with backdrops crammed in corners and cameras on every available surface. An armchair sat in the middle of the room, its back toward the door. He could just see the top of a gray-haired head; Deschamps was shorter than he'd assumed.

His heart skipped; he couldn't tell whether it was out of excitement or nerves.

"We'll be back once the photos are done," said the butler, ushering him through the door.

"Enjoy," said one of the women in a monotone.



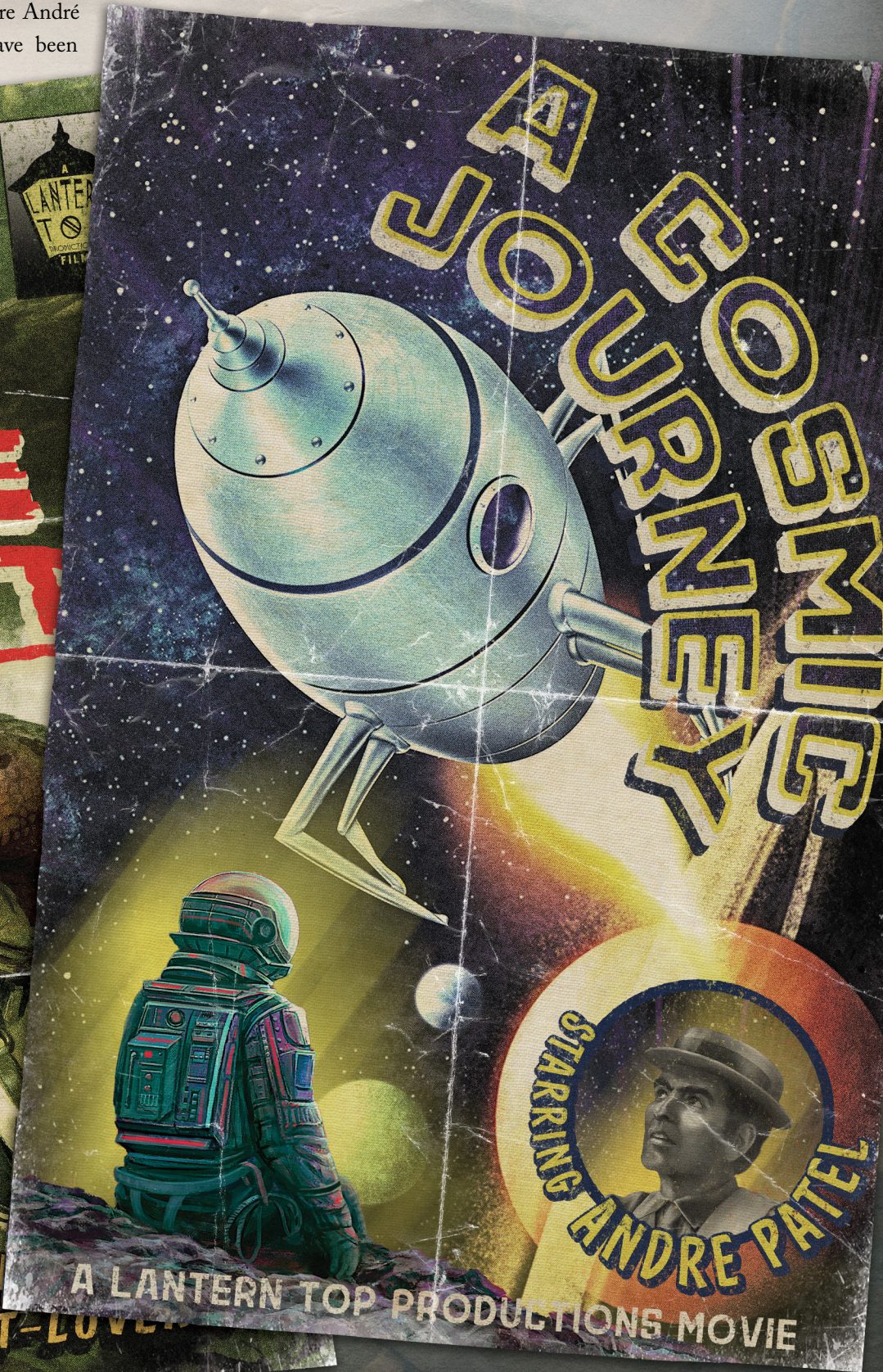
The door clicked shut behind him before he could utter even a word of protest. A key clicked in the lock. That more than anything made him concerned, not for himself, but for Deschamps. He hurried toward the chair, nerves squeezing his throat.

The photographer was gray and slumped and old, a far cry from the debonair figure André had admired. He couldn't have been more than forty, but

he looked twice that age. He dozed, cheek propped up on one hand, drool dripping from his chin.

André licked suddenly dry lips before gently shaking the sleeping man's shoulder.

"Monsignor Deschamps," he said. "Sir, are you quite well?"





He trailed off, his attention caught by a flicker of movement against the wall behind one of the backdrops. Was someone spying on them even now? He pulled the fabric aside to reveal a series of photographs hung in silver frames. In the center was a photo of Deschamps himself, sitting in this very room. But the black-and-white image was no static portrait; it moved like a film. The Deschamps in the photo screamed in wordless torment, black liquid leaking from his eyes like tears. As André watched in disbelief, the man in the photograph tore at his hair, rocking back and forth as if in pain. He had scoffed at

The photographer jerked awake, panic in his eyes. He grabbed onto André's arm, bony fingers digging into flesh.

"Get out!" he exclaimed. "Get out as soon as you can."

Fear came off him in waves. André's instincts had been right; there *was something* fishy about those so-called servants. He didn't know what they planned, but he wasn't about to take it lying down. He'd spent years playing the hero, and even if he'd been acting, he'd learned a thing or two.

"Not without you," he said. "What in the devil is going on here? Scratch that; you can explain later. Let us get out of here first, and then we can chat."

"There is no escape for me. I sold my soul to *le diable* long ago."

"Don't be silly." André thought quickly. "Let's take a photo or two. Then you can ask for a costume change; I've brought some along in the car. They'll let me out for that, yes? I will make my escape and return with reinforcements. You can count on me; I swear it!"

"No!" Deschamps went white, clutching at his chest. "No photos! Never again!"

"But monsignor..." began André.

The Picture of Dorian Gray when he first read it, but now, as the horror of those tormented photos soaked into him, he could not deny his growing fear.

The other photos moved too. André didn't recognize any of the subjects, but they all seemed to share Deschamps' pain. They rocked and screamed and beat fists on the ground, black tears streaming from their eyes. If André allowed them to take his photograph, would he become part of this disconcerting display?

"*Mon dieu*," he murmured. "What dark witchcraft is this?"

The door opened before the photographer could respond. André jerked the curtain back over the photos and whirled to face the disconcerting household staff as they entered. If they realized what he knew, there was no telling what they'd do.

"There you are!" he said, pretending excitement. "Since the interview is to be about my latest picture, I ought to be in costume. Good thing I brought my spacesuit along, isn't it? If you'll see me back to my car, we can get those photos done in a jiffy."

The maids exchanged a look as the butler shook his head.

"That suit is fine," he said.

"Don't worry; it'll only take a moment. I'm used to the need for quick costume changes. In the movies, time is money, you know. Do take me back to my car so we can get on with it."

After another moment's hesitation, they complied, locking Deschamps away again before leading André out of the house. His heart pounded so loud that he thought they must hear it as he fished for his keys. The butler still followed close on his heels. André waited until he was next to the car before stomping on the butler's foot and hitting him with a well-placed elbow to the breadbasket just like he'd done in *A Cosmic Journey*. While the man gasped for air, André dashed into the car.

He threw the vehicle into gear and stomped on the gas, barely missing the maids as they tried to block his escape. Gravel flew as he sped down the driveway, nearly colliding with a thick tree trunk in his desperation to get away. He jerked the wheel just in time, missing the tree by inches and spinning out into the leaves.

His breath came in panicked gasps as he looked around for his pursuers.

The driveway was empty, the house boarded up and crumbling.

How could that be?

Weeds choked the entryway, the rotted remains of the door hanging by a single hinge. He must have dreamed the whole thing. But it had been so vivid! He was tempted to take a look around but couldn't force himself to get out of the car.

Clearly, he was working himself too hard if he was having full-on hallucinations. That was the only explanation that made sense. Perhaps he ought to talk to someone – Alice...? No, she might have him replaced. Betsy? He'd heard the rumors about her. Did he want to become tainted with the same brush?

Better to forget it had ever happened, so he would do just that. But his hands wouldn't stop shaking as he drove home.

