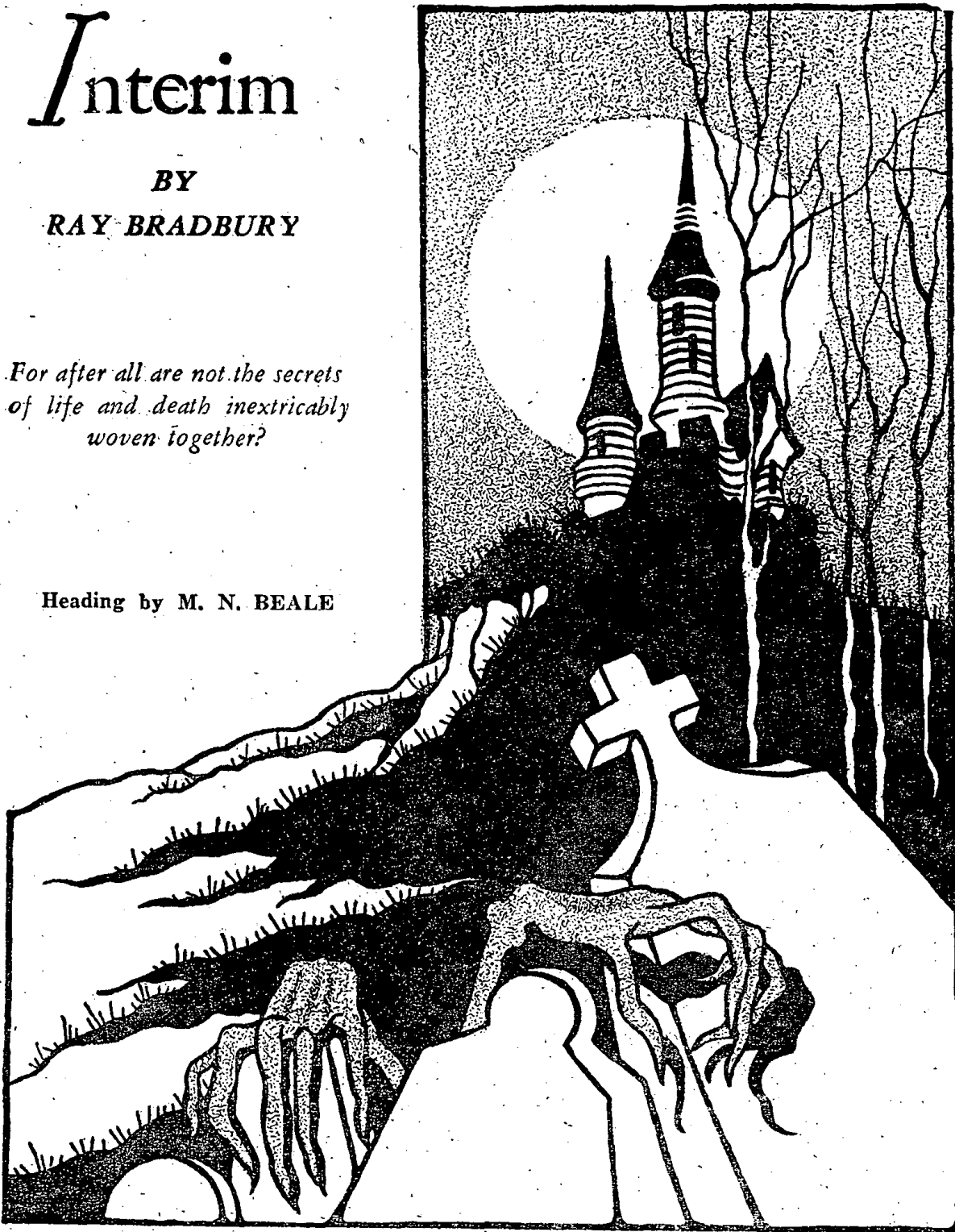


Interim

BY
RAY BRADBURY

*For after all are not the secrets
of life and death inextricably
woven together?*

Heading by M. N. BEALE



THE rustle went through the land from one end to the other; and the land was not very large — being bounded on the east and west by poplars, sycamores and great oaks and shrubs, and held on north and south by wrought iron and mortared brick. From one end of this land to the other, shortly before dawn, the

rustling traveled. One bird, about to sing, silenced itself, and there was a kind of dim pulsing and a whispering under the earth.

The coffins, each a womb for silent, stiffened contents, each deep, each separate, were being slowly and certainly beat upon. The lids and sides of the deep boxes gave off slow, even, muffled beats.

The earth bore each sound on and on. It started at one dark box and the code beat and beat, passing on to the next box where a new, tired dry hand would repeat the message slowly and tiredly. So it went, until the deep-buried ones all heard and slowly began to understand.

After a time it was like a great heart beating under the earth. The systolic murmuring continued as the sun readied itself beyond the horizon.

The bird upon the tree crooked its beady-eyed head, waiting.

The heart beat on.

"Mrs. Lattimore."

Slowly and painfully the beating spelled out the name.

(She was the one buried up on the north end, under the moss-tree, a year ago, just before the planned birth of her child, remember her? so pretty, she was!)

"Mrs. Lattimore."

The heart-beat pounded, dim and far under the compressed sod.

"Have," asked the heart-beat sluggishly. "You," asked the heart-beat tiredly. "Heard," it asked. "What," it asked. "Is happening," it continued. "To her?" it concluded.

The heart-beat paused dramatically. And the thousand cold contents of a thousand deep boxes waited for the answer to the slow, slow, beating question.

The sun hung just beyond the far blue hills. The stars shone coldly.

Then, evenly, quietly, slowly, beat after beat, systolic thudding upon thudding, the answer to the question sounded. The land trembled with it, and repeated it, again and again, pounding and pounding away into a shocked and buried silence.

"Mrs. Lattimore."

The pulsing deep under.

"Will have."

Slowly, slowly

"Her child today:"

And then a quick, amazing staccato, as of a thousand hands battering the lids in questioning hysteria:

"What'll it possibly be like? How can this thing be? What will it resemble? Why? Why? Why!"

The pounding faded. The sun rose.

Deep under, as the bird sang, deep under the stone where Mrs. Lattimore's name appeared, there was a scrabbling and a twisting and a strange sound from her buried, earth-moist box.

