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Edited by
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SPACE, TIME & CRIME

edited by Miriam Allen deFord

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I believe it was Sam Moskowitz who praised *Caves of Steel,* by Frederik Pohl and the late Cyril Kornbluth, for "accomplishing the impossible by successfully combining detective stories with science fiction."

As a matter of fact, that intermixture is so far from impossible that it has (as this book attests) attracted a great many of the best known writers in both fields. And it is natural that this should be so. Both mystery and science fiction are concerned primarily with X, the unknown quantity. In the mystery story—both the detective and the suspense story—X is the criminal; in science fiction X may be, for example, life on planets other than ours, life in the future, life in an alternate parallel universe, or some other extrapolation of known scientific fact into imaginative probability. The interest in the unknown, but knowable, which moves the mystery story writer moves the science fiction writer as well. In consequence, both writers often turn out to be the same person.

But the mere passing inclusion of a criminal factor in a science fiction piece is not enough. As Cele Goldsmith remarks in an editorial in *Amazing Stories* (January, 1962) crime presented "only as an adjunct to a trick" or gimmick is a common feature in science fiction; much rarer are crime and the detection of crime "rooted in the social structure of the fictional environment, where the motivations of both sleuth and quarry all grow out of the postulated society."

Thus, individual resistance to opposition is a commonplace of science fiction as it is of all fiction—and of all life. But simply to include as part of one's plot forms of violence—killing, assault, rape, which are crimes in all civilized communities—does not, strictly speaking, come under this special heading of science fiction which is also inherently crime fiction. For murder to be a crime, we must assume a society in which the life of the individual is considered of value; for theft to be a crime, one in which the ownership of private property is protected. What may be criminal here and now may be highly moral elsewhere and elsewhen, and vice versa. The injection of the crime-theme into any of the standard situations of science fiction thus assumes a civilized (or at the least a high barbaric) society with some form of law—without which there can *be* no crime.

Roughly, the treatment of crime in science fiction may be divided into two aspects, which we may call *alien criminology* and *alien penology.*

The former may be, say, the straight account of a murder on civilized Antares II, or in 3164 on Earth, or in an America in which the South won the Civil War. (It must, of course, be a basic part of the story.) The latter posits a whole criminal procedure as developed to meet the requirements of an alien environment or of an extrapolated future era.

But if a writer is going to use court trials and legal penalties as an essential part of science fiction, he must hew reasonably close to fundamental legal principles of the past or present in the only world we are, as yet, personally acquainted with. For instance, merely arbitrarily announcing that on Whoozis traitors are fed to the vicious Go-Go, or that on Wotchermaycallit the only punishable crime is being polite to your mother-in-law, or that in 6250 murderers are rewarded by being given all the property of their victims, may be fantasy, of a kind, but it is not science fiction. Science fiction has to deal with plausible personalities in rational situations, with whom the reader may feel empathy no matter how strange their outward form. The criminology or penology of the story may be as far-out as the author pleases, but it *must* treat actual crime—i.e., the breaking of a specific society's rules for its own protection—and the punishment must not only fit the crime, but must also fit a comprehensible social milieu.

Alien penology especially is a fascinating subject for science fiction. Whether it concern itself with the interesting penal system of Cygnus IV (instanced by the case of Flohut, who deliberately failed to revive his seventh wife from her annual deep-freeze); or with the strange quirks of the Anglo-French code in that alternate universe where Napoleon won Waterloo and re-annexed England to France; or with the sobering details of how much better they will manage things in some time of the remote future when the best of our present penal system will be known to historians only as an unbelievable phenomenon of the bad old days before true civilization began—it constitutes a genuine challenge to the writer.

The contributors to this book have met that challenge. You will find here stories of crime and punishment in other worlds and in the future; stories of the present and the past seen in a new configuration, like isotopes of a familiar element; stories that defy description short of reciting their plots. Every one of them is at the same time true science fiction and a true crime story. Sometimes, (as in R. Bretnor's story of extra-sensory perception coupled with lust for power) the crime is one not punishable by today's laws but a crime just the same against its helpless victim; sometimes (as in James McKimmey's and Avram Davidson's) it uncovers a society's own crime against itself—the crime that Hitler taught us to think of as genocide, but which is almost as dreadful whether it display itself as conquest and tyranny or as injustice and theft.

Science fiction has always been honorably distinguished by its exposure and condemnation of xenophobia, and nowhere more than in these two last-mentioned stories.

Some of these stories are frightening, some are grim, some are satirical, and one at least is very funny. Most of them could have been published interchangeably in a magazine devoted to mystery or in one devoted to science fiction—though in actuality only one did appear first in a magazine in the former category. And one more thing may be said of them: they are all *stories*, readable, entertaining, and often gripping.

Mystery and science fiction have always had one oddity in common: each has devoted addicts who refuse to read any other kind of fiction. I hope there will be readers of this book who never before read any science fiction, and other readers who never before read any crime stories. And I hope—and believe—that both will find out to their pleasure how much they have been missing.

Miriam Allen deFord.

CRISIS, 1999

By Fredric Brown

The little man with the sparse gray hair and the inconspicious bright red suit stopped on the corner of State and Randolph to buy a micronews, a Chicago Sun-Tribune of March 21st, 1999. Nobody noticed him as he walked into the corner superdrug and took a vacant booth. He dropped a quarter into the coffee-slot and while the conveyor brought him his coffee, he glanced at the headlines on the tiny three-by-four-inch page. His eyes were unusually keen; he could read those headlines easily without artificial aid. But nothing on the first page or the second interested him; they concerned international matters, the third Venus rocket, and the latest depressing report of the ninth moon expediion. But on page three there were two stories concerning crime, and he took a tiny micrographer from his pocket and adjusted it to read the stories while he drank his coffee.

Bela Joad was the little man's name. His right name, that is; he'd gone by so many names in so many places that only a phenomenal memory could have kept track of them all, but he had a phenomenal memory. None of those names had even appeared in print, nor had his face or voice ever been seen or heard on the ubiquitous video. Fewer than a score of people, all of them top officials in various police bureaus, knew that Bela Joad was the greatest detective in the world.

He was not an employee of any police department, drew no salary or expense money, and collected no rewards. It may have been that he had private means and indulged in the detection of criminals as a hobby. It may equally have been that he preyed upon the underworld even as he fought it, that he made criminals support his campaign against them. Whichever was the case, he worked for no one; he worked against crime. When a major crime or a series of major crimes interested him, he would work on it, sometimes consulting beforehand with the chief of police of the city involved, sometimes working without the chief's knowledge until he would appear in the chief's office and present him with the evidence that would enable him to make an arrest and obtain a conviction.

He himself had never testified, or even appeared, in a courtroom. And while he knew every important underworld character in a dozen cities, no member of the underworld knew him, except fleetingly, under some transient identity which he seldom resumed.

Now, over his morning coffee, Bela Joad read through his

micrographer the two stories in the Sun-Tribune which had interested him. One concerned a case that had been one of his few failures, the disappearance—possibly the kidnaping—of Dr. Ernst Chappel, professor of criminology at Columbia University. The headline read, NEW LEAD IN CHAPPEL CASE, but a careful reading of the story showed the detective that the lead was new only to the newspapers; he himself had followed it into a blind alley two years ago, just after Chappel had vanished. The other story revealed that one Paul (Gyp) Girard had yesterday been acquitted of the slaying of his rival for control of North Chicago gambling. Joad read that one carefully indeed. Just six hours before, seated in a biergarten in New Berlin, Western Germany, he had heard the news of that acquittal on the video, without details. He had immediately taken the first stratoplane to Chicago.

When he had finished with the micronews, he touched the button of his wrist model timeradio, which automatically attuned itself to the nearest timestation, and it said, just loudly enough for him to hear "Nine-oh-four." Chief Dyer Rand would be in his office, then.

Nobody noticed him as he left the superdrug. Nobody noticed him as he walked with the morning crowds along Randolph to the big, new Municipal Building at the corner of Clark. Chief Rand's secretary sent in his name—not his real one, but one Rand would recognize—without giving him a second glance.

Chief Rand shook hands across the desk and then pressed the intercom button that flashed a blue not-to-be-disturbed signal to his secretary. He leaned back in his chair and laced his finger across the conservatively small (one inch) squares of his mauve and yellow shirt. He said, "You heard about Gyp Girard being acquitted?"

"That's why I'm here."

Rand pushed his lips out and pulled them in again. He said, "The evidence you sent me was perfectly sound, Joad. It should have stood up. But I wish you had brought it in yourself instead of sending it by the tube, or that there had been some way I could have got in touch with you. I could have told you we'd probably not get a conviction. Joad, something rather terrible has been happening. I've had a feeling you would be my only chance. If only there had been some way I could have got in touch with you—"

"Two years ago?"

Chief Rand looked startled. "Why did you say that?"

"Because it was two years ago that Dr. Chappel disappeared in New York."

"Oh," Rand said. "No, there's no connection. I thought

maybe you knew something when you mentioned two years. It hasn't been quite that long, really, but it was close."

He got up from behind the strangely-shaped plastic desk and began to pace back and forth the length of the office.

He said, "Joad, in the last year—let's just consider that period, although it started nearer two years ago—out of every ten major crimes committed in Chicago, seven are unsolved. Technically unsolved, that is; in five out of those seven we know who's guilty but we can't prove it. We can't get a conviction.

"The underworld is beating us, Joad, worse than they have at any time since the Prohibition era of seventy-five years ago. If this keeps up, we're going back to days like that, and worse.

"For a twenty-year period now we've had convictions for eight out of ten major crimes. Even before twenty years ago —before the use of the lie-detector in court was legalized, we did better than we're doing now. 'Way back in the decade of 1970 to 1980, for instance, we did better than we're doing now by more than two to one; we got convictions for six out of every ten major crimes. This last year, it's been three out of ten.

"And I know the reason, but I don't know what to do about it. The reason is that the underworld is beating the lie-detector!"

Bela Joad nodded. But he said mildly, "A few have always managed to beat it. It's not perfect. Judges always instruct juries to remember that the lie-detector's findings have a high degree of probability but are not infallible, that they should be weighed as indicative but not final, that other evidence must support them. And there has always been the occasional individual who can tell a whopper with the detector on him, and not jiggle the graph needles at all."

"One in a thousand, yes. But, Joad, almost every underworld big-shot has been beating the lie-detector recently."

"I take it you mean the professional criminals, not the amateurs."

"Exactly. Only regular members of the underworld—professionals, the habitual criminals. If it weren't for that, I'd think—I don't know what I'd think. Maybe that our whole theory was wrong."

Bela Joad said, "Can't you quit using it in court in such cases? Convictions were obtained before its use was legalized. For that matter, before it was invented."

Dyer Rand sighed and dropped into his pneumatic chair again. "Sure, I'd like that if I could do it. I wish right now that the detector never *had* been invented or legalized. But don't forget that the law legalizing it gives *either* side the opportunity to use it in court. If a criminal knows he can beat it,

he's going to demand its use even if we don't. And what chance have we got with a jury if the accused demands the detector and it backs up his plea of innocence?"

"Very slight, I'd say."

"Less than slight, Joad. This Gyp Girard business yesterday. I know he killed Pete Bailey. You know it. The evidence you sent me was, under ordinary circumstances, conclusive. And yet I knew we'd lose the case. I wouldn't have bothered bringing it to trial except for one thing."

"And that one thing?"

"To get you here, Joad. There was no other way I could reach you, but I hoped that if you read of Girard's acquittal, after the evidence you'd given me, you'd come around to find out what had happened."

He got up and started to pace again. "Joad, I'm going mad. *How* is the underworld beating the machine? That's what I want you to find out, and it's the biggest job you've ever tackled. Take a year, take five years, but crack it, Joad.

"Look at the history of law enforcement. Always the law has been one jump ahead of the criminal in the field of science. Now the criminals—of Chicago, anyway—are one jump ahead of *us.* And if they stay that way, if we don't get the answer, we're headed for a new dark age, when it'll no longer be safe for a man or a woman to walk down the street. The very foundations of our society can crumble. We're up against something very evil and very powerful."

Bela Joad took a cigarette from the dispenser on the desk; it lighted automatically as he picked it up. It was a green cigarette and he exhaled green smoke through his nostrils before he asked, almost uninterestedly, "Any ideas, Dyer?"

"I've had two, but I think I've eliminated both of them. One is that the machines are being tampered with. The other is that the technicians are being tampered with. But I've had both men and machines checked from every possible angle and can't find a thing. On big cases I've taken special precautions. For example, the detector we used at the Girard trial; it was brand-new and I had it checked right in this office." He chuckled. "I put Captain Burke under it and asked him if he was being faithful to his wife. He said he was and it nearly broke the needle. I had it taken to the courtroom under special guard."

"And the technician who used it?"

"I used it myself. Took a course in it, evenings, for four months."

Bela Joad nodded. "So it isn't the machine and it isn't the operator. That's eliminated, and I can start from there."

"How long will it take you, Joad?"

The little man in the red suit shrugged. "I haven't any idea."

"Is there any help I can give you? Anything you want to start on?"

"Just one thing, Dyer. I want a list of the criminals who have beaten the detector and a dossier on each. Just the ones you're morally sure actually committed the crimes you questioned them about. If there's any reasonable doubt, leave them off the list. How long will it take you to get it ready?"

"It's ready now; I had it made up on the chance that you'd come here. And it's a long report, so I had it microed down for you." He handed Bela Joad a small envelope.

Joad said, "Thank you. I won't contact you till I have something or until I want your cooperation. I think first I'm going to stage a murder, and then have you question the murderer."

Dyer Rand's eyes went wide. "Whom are you going to have murdered?"

Bela Joad smiled. "Me," he said.

He took the envelope Rand had given him back to his hotel and spent several hours studying the microfilms through his pocket micrographer memorizing their contents thoroughly. Then he burned both films and envelope.

After that Bela Joad paid his hotel bill and disappeared, but a little man who resembled Bela Joad only slightly rented a cheap room under the name of Martin Blue. The room was on Lake Shore Drive, which was then the heart of Chicago's underworld.

The underworld of Chicago had changed less, in fifty years, than one would think. Human vices do not change, or at least they change but slowly. True, certain crimes had diminished greatly but on the other hand, gambling had increased. Greater social security than any country had hitherto known was, perhaps, a factor. One no longer needed to save for old age as, in days gone by, a few people did.

Gambling was a lush field for the crooks and they cultivated the field well. Improved technology had increased the number of ways of gambling and it had increased the efficiency of ways of making gambling crooked. Crooked gambling was big business and underworld wars and killings occurred over territorial rights, just as they had occurred over such rights in the far back days of Prohibition when alcohol was king. There was still alcohol, but it was of lesser importance now. People were learning to drink more moderately. And drugs were passé, although there was still some traffic in them.

Robberies and burglaries still occurred, although not quite so frequently as they had fifty years before.

Murder was slightly more frequent. Sociologists and criminologists differed as to the reason for the increase of crime in this category.

The weapons of the underworld had, of course, improved, but they did not include atomics. All atomic and subatomic weapons were strictly controlled by the military and were never used by either the police or by criminals. They were too dangerous; the death penalty was mandatory for anyone found in possession of an atomic weapon. But the pistols and guns of the underworld of 1999 were quite efficient. They were much smaller and more compact, and they were silent. Both guns and cartridges were made of superhard magnesium and were very light. The commonest weapon was the .19 calibre pistol—as deadly as the .45 of an earlier era because the tiny projectiles were explosive. And even a small pocket-pistol held from fifty to sixty rounds.

But back to Martin Blue, whose entrance into the underworld coincided with the disappearance of Bela Joad from the latter's hotel.

Martin Blue, as it turned out, was not a very nice man. He had no visible means of support other than gambling and he seemed to lose, in small amounts, almost more often than he won. He almost got in trouble on a bad check he gave to cover his losses in one game, but he managed to avoid being liquidated by making the check good. His only reading seemed to be the Racing Microform, and he drank too much, mostly in a tavern (with clandestine gambling at the back) which formerly had been operated by Gyp Girard. He got beaten up there once because he defended Gyp against a crack made by the current proprietor to the effect that Gyp had lost his guts and turned honest.

For a while fortune turned against Martin Blue and he went so broke that he had to take a job as a waiter in the outside room of a Michigan Boulevard joint called Sloppy Joe's, possibly because Joe Zatelli, who ran it, was the nattiest dresser in Chicago—and in the *fin de siècle* era when leopard-skin suits (synthetic but finer and more expensive than real leopard skin) were a dime a dozen and plain pastel-silk underwear was dated.

Then a funny thing happened to Martin Blue. Joe Zatelli killed him. Caught him, after hours, riffling the till, and just as Martin Blue turned around, Zatelli shot him. Three times for good measure. And then Zatelli, who never trusted accomplices, got the body into his car and deposited it in an alley back of a teletheater.

The body of Martin Blue got up and went to see Chief Dyer Rand and told Rand what he wanted done.

"You took a hell of a chance," Rand said.

"Not too much of a chance," Blue said. "I'd put blanks in in his gun and I was pretty sure he'd use that. He won't find out, incidentally, that the rest of the bullets in it are blanks unless he tries to kill somebody else with it; they don't *look*

like blanks. And I had a pretty special vest on under my suit. Rigid backing and padded on top to feel like flesh, but of course he couldn't feel a heartbeat through it. And it was gimmicked to make a noise like explosive cartridges hitting —when the duds punctured the compartments."

"But if he'd switched guns or bullets?"

"Oh, the vest was bulletproof for anything short of atomics. The danger was in his thinking of any fancy way of disposing of the body. If he had, I could have taken care of myself, of course, but it would have spoiled the plan and cost me three months' build-up. But I'd studied his style and I was pretty sure what he'd do. Now here's what I want you to do, Dyer—"

The newspapers and videocasts the next morning carried the story of the finding of a body of an unidentified man in a certain alley. By afternoon they reported that it had been identified as the body of Martin Blue, a small-time crook who had lived on Lake Shore Drive, in the heart of the Tenderloin. And by evening a rumor had gone out through the underworld to the effect that the police suspected Joe Zatelli, for whom Blue had worked, and might pick him up for questioning.

And plainclothesmen watched Zatelli's place, front and back, to see where he'd go if he went out. Watching the front was a small man about the build of Bela Joad or Martin Blue. Unfortunately, Zatelli happened to leave by the back and he succeeded in shaking off the detectives on his trail.

They picked him up the next morning, though, and took him to headquarters. They put the lie-detector on him and asked him about Martin Blue. He admitted Blue had worked for him but said he'd last seen Blue when the latter had left his place after work the night of the murder. The lie-detector said he wasn't lying.

Then they pulled a tough one on him. Martin Blue walked into the room where Zatelli was being questioned. And the trick fizzled. The gauges of the detector didn't jump a fraction of a millimeter and Zatelli looked at Blue and then at his interrogators with complete indignation. "What's the idea?" he demanded. "The guy ain't even dead, and you're asking me if I bumped him off?"

They asked Zatelli, while they had him there, about some other crimes he might have committed, but obviously—according to his answers and the lie-detector—he hadn't done any of them. They let him go.

Of course, that was the end of Martin Blue. After showing before Zatelli at headquarters, he might as well have been dead in an alley for all the good he was going to do.

Bela Joad told Chief Rand, "Well, anyway, now we *know*."

"What do we know?"

"We know for sure the detector is being beaten. You might conceivably have been making a series of wrong arrests before. Even the evidence I gave you against Girard might have been misleading. But we *know* Zatelli beat the machine. Only I wish Zatelli had come out the front way so I could have tailed him; we might have the whole thing now instead of part of it."

"You're going back? Going to do it all over again?"

"Not the same way. This time I've got to be on the other end of a murder, and I'll need your help on that."

"Of course. But won't you tell me what's on your mind?"

"I'm afraid I can't, Dyer. I've got a hunch within a hunch. In fact, I've had it ever since I started on this business. But will you do one other thing for me?"

"Sure. What?"

"Have one of your men keep track of Zatelli, of everything he does from now on. Put another one on Gyp Girard. In fact, take as many men as you can spare and put one on each of the men you're fairly sure has beaten the detector within the last year or two. And always from a distance; don't let the boys know they're being checked on. Will you?"

"I don't know what you're after, but I'll do it. Won't you tell me *anything?* Joad, this is important. Don't forget it's not just *a* case; it's something that can lead to the breakdown of law enforcement."

Bela Joad smiled. "Not quite that bad, Dyer. Law enforcement as it applies to the underworld, yes. But you're getting your usual percentage of convictions on nonprofessional crimes."

Dyer Rand looked puzzled. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Maybe everything. It's why I can't tell you anything yet. But don't worry." Joad reached across the desk and patted the chief's shoulder, looking—although he didn't know it—like a fox terrier giving his paw to an airedale. "Don't worry, Dyer. I'll promise to bring you the answer. Maybe I won't be able to let you keep it."

"Do you really know what you're looking for?"

"Yes. I'm looking for a criminologist who disappeared well over two years ago. Dr. Ernst Chappel."

"You think—?"

"Yes, I think. That's why I'm looking for Dr. Chappel."

But that was all Dyer could get out of him. Bela Joad left Dyer Rand's office and returned to the underworld.

And in the underworld of Chicago a new star arose. Perhaps one should call him a *nova* rather than merely a star, so rapidly did he become famous—or notorious. Physically, he

was rather a small man, no larger than Bela Joad or Martin Blue, but he wasn't a mild little man like Joad or a weak jackal like Blue. He had what it took, and he parlayed what he had. He ran a small night club, but that was just a front. Behind that front things happened, things that the police couldn't pin on him, and—for that matter—didn't seem to know about, although the underworld knew.

His name was Willie Ecks, and nobody in the underworld had ever made friends and enemies faster. He had plenty of each; the former were powerful and the latter were dangerous. In other words, they were both the same type of people.

His brief career was truly—if I may scramble my star-nova metaphor but keep it celestial—a meteoric matter. And for once that hackneyed and inaccurate metaphor is used correctly. Meteors do not rise—as anybody who has ever studied meteorology, which has no connection with meteors, knows. Meteors fall, with a dull thud. And that is what happened to Willie Ecks, when he got high enough.

Three days before, Willie Ecks's worst enemy had vanished. Two of his henchmen spread the rumor that it was because the cops had come and taken him away, but that was obviously malarkey designed to cover the fact that they intended to avenge him. That became obvious when, the very next morning, the news broke that the gangster's body had been found, neatly weighted, in the Blue Lagoon at Washington Park.

And by dusk at that very day rumor had gone from bistro to bistro of the underworld that the police had pretty good proof who had killed the deceased—and with a forbidden atomic at that—and that they planned to arrest Willie Ecks and question him. Things like that get around even when its not intended that they should.

And it was on the second day of Willie Ecks's hiding-out in a cheap little hotel on North Clark Street, an old-fashioned hotel with elevators and windows, his whereabouts known only to a trusted few, that one of those trusted few gave a certain knock on his door and was admitted.

The trusted one's name was Mike Leary and he'd been a close friend of Willie's and a close enemy of the gentleman who, according to the papers, had been found in the Blue Lagoon.

He said, "Looks like you're in a jam, Willie."

"——, yes," said Willie Ecks. He hadn't used facial depilatory for two days; his face was blue with beard and bluer with fear.

Mike said, "There's a way out, Willie. It'll cost you ten grand. Can you raise it?"

"I've got it. What's the way out?"

"There's a guy. I know how to get in touch with him; I ain't used him myself, but I would if I got in a jam like yours. He can fix you up, Willie."

"How?"

"He can show you how to beat the lie-detector. I can have him come around to see you and fix you up. Then you let the cops pick you up and question you, see? They'll drop the charge—or if they bring it to trial, they can't make it stick."

"What if they ask me about—well, never mind what—other things I may have done?"

"He'll take care of that, too. For five grand he'll fix you so you can go under that detector clean as—as clean as hell."

"You said ten grand."

Mike Leary grinned. "I got to live too, don't I, Willie? And you said you got ten grand, so it ought to be worth that much to you, huh?"

Willie Ecks argued, but in vain. He had to give Mike Leary five thousand-dollar bills. Not that it really mattered, because those were pretty special thousand-dollar bills. The green ink on them would turn purple within a few days. Even in 1999 you couldn't spend a purple thousand-dollar bill, so when it happened Mike Leary would probably turn purple too, but by that time it would be too late for him to do anything about it.

It was late that evening when there was a knock on Willie Ecks's hotel room door. He pressed the button that made the main panel of the door transparent from his side.

He studied the nondescript-looking man outside the door very carefully. He didn't pay any attention to facial contours or to the shabby yellow suit the man wore. He studied the eyes somewhat, but mostly he studied the shape and conformation of the ears and compared them mentally with the ears of photographs he had once studied exhaustively.

And then Willie Ecks put his gun back into his pocket and opened the door. He said, "Come in."

The man in the yellow suit entered the room and Willie Ecks shut the door very carefully and locked it.

He said, "I'm proud to meet you, Dr. Chappel."

He sounded as though he meant it, and he did mean it.

It was four o'clock in the morning when Bela Joad stood outside the door of Dyer Rand's apartment. He had to wait, there in the dimly luminous hallway, for as long as it took the chief to get out of bed and reach the door, then activate the one-way-transparent panel to examine his visitor.

Then the magnetic lock sighed gently and the door opened.

Rand's eyes were bleary and his hair was tousled. His feet were thrust into red plastic slippers and he wore neonylon sleeping pajamas that looked as though they had been slept in.

He stepped aside to let Bela Joad in, and Joad walked to the center of the room and stood looking about curiously. It was the first time he'd ever been in Rand's private quarters. The apartment was like that of any other well-to-do bachelor of the day. The furniture was unobtrusive and functional, each wall a different pastel shade, faintly fluorescent and emitting gentle radiant heat and the faint but constant caress of ulraviolet that kept people who could afford such apartments healthily tanned. The rug was in alternate one-foot squares of cream and gray, the squares separate and movable so that wear would be equalized. And the ceiling, of course, was the customary one-piece mirror that gave an illusion of height and spaciousness.

Rand said, "Good news, Joad?"

"Yes. But this is an unofficial interview, Dyer. What I'm going to tell you is confidential, between us."

"What do you mean?"

Joad looked at him. He said, "You still look sleepy, Dyer. Let's have coffee. It'll wake you up, and I can use some myself."

"Fine," Dyer said. He went into the kitchenette and pressed the button that would heat the coils of the coffee-tap. "Want it laced?" he called back.

"Of course."

Within a minute he came back with two cups of steaming *café royale*. With obvious impatience he waited until they were seated comfortably and each had taken his first sip of the fragrant beverage before he asked, "Well, Joad?"

"When I mean it's unofficial, Dyer, I *mean* it. I can give you the full answer, but only with the understanding that you'll forget it as soon as I tell you, that you'll never tell another person, and that you won't act upon it."

Dyer Rand stared at his guest in amazement. He said, "I can't promise that! I'm chief of police, Joad. I have my duty to my job and to the people of Chicago."

"That's why I came here, to your apartment, instead of to your office. You're not working now, Dyer; you're on your own time."

"But—"

"Do you promise?"

"Of course not."

Bela Joad sighed. "Then I'm sorry for waking you, Dyer." He put down his cup and started to rise.

"Wait! You can't do that. You can't just walk out on me!"

"Can't I?"

"All right, all right, I'll promise. You must have some good reason. Have you?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll take your word for it."

Bela Joad smiled. "Good," he said. "Then I'll be able to report to you on my last case. For this is my last case, Dyer. I'm going into a new kind of work."

Rand looked at him incredulously. "What?"

"I'm going to teach crooks how to beat the lie-detector."

Chief Dyer Rand put down his cup slowly and stood up. He took a step toward the little man, about half his weight, who sat at ease on the armless, overstuffed chair.

Bela Joad still smiled. He said, "Don't try it, Dyer. For two reasons. First, you couldn't hurt me and I wouldn't want to hurt you and I might have to. Second, it's all right; it's on the up and up. Sit down."

Dyer Rand sat down.

Bela Joad said, "When you said this thing was big, you didn't know how big. And it's going to be bigger; Chicago is just the starting point. And thanks, by the way, for those reports I asked you for. They are just what I expected they'd be."

"The reports? But they're still in my desk at headquarters."

"They were. I've read them and destroyed them. Your copies, too. Forget about them. And don't pay too much attention to your current statistics. I've read them, too."

Rand frowned. "And why should I forget them?"

"Because they confirm what Ernie Chappel told me this evening. Do you know, Dyer, that your *number* of major crimes has gone down in the past year by an even bigger percentage than the percentage by which your convictions for major crimes has gone down?"

"I noticed that. You mean, there's a connection?"

"Definitely. Most crimes—a very high percentage of them—are committed by professional criminals, repeaters. And Dyer, it goes even farther than that. Out of several thousand major crimes a year, ninety percent of them are committed by *a few hundred professional criminals.* And do you know that the number of professional criminals in Chicago has been reduced by almost a third in the last two years? It *has.* And that's why your number of major crimes has decreased."

Bela Joad took another sip of his coffee and then leaned forward. "Gyp Girard, according to your report, is now running a vitadrink stand on the West Side; he hasn't committed a crime in almost a year—since he beat your lie-detector." He touched another finger. "Joe Zatelli, who used to be the roughest boy on the Near North Side, is now

running his restaurant straight. Carey Hutch. Wild Bill Wheeler— Why should I list them all? You've got the list, and it's not complete because there are plenty of names you haven't got on it, people who went to Ernie Chappel so he could show them how to beat the detector, and then didn't get arrested after all. And nine out of ten of them—and that's conservative, Dyer—*haven't committed a crime since!*"

Dyer Rand said, "Go on. I'm listening."

"My original investigation of the Chappel case showed me that he'd disappeared voluntarily. And I knew he was a good man, and a great one. I knew he was mentally sound because he was a psychiatrist as well as a criminologist. A psychiatrist's *got* to be sound. So I knew he'd disappeared for some good reason.

"And when, about nine months ago, I heard your side of what had been happening in Chicago, I began to suspect that Chappel had come here to do his work. Are you beginning to get the picture?"

"Faintly."

"Well, don't faint yet. Not until you figure how an expert psychiatrist can help crooks beat the detector. Or have you?"

"Well—"

"That's it. The most elementary form of hypnotic treatment, something any qualified psychiatrist could do fifty years ago. Chappel's clients—of course they don't know who or what he is; he's a mysterious underworld figure who helps them beat the rap—pay him well and tell him what crimes they may be questioned about by the police if they're picked up. He tells them to include every crime they've ever committed and any racket they've even been in, so the police won't catch them up on any old counts. Then he—"

"Wait a minute," Rand interrupted. "How does he get them to trust him that far?"

Joad gestured impatiently. "Simple. They aren't confessing a single crime, even to him. He just wants a list that *includes* everything they've done. They can add some ringers and he doesn't know which is which. So it doesn't matter.

"Then he puts them under light waking-hypnosis and tells them they are not criminals and never have been and they have never done any of the things on the list he reads back to them. That's all there is to it.

"So when you put them under the detector and ask them if they've done this or that, they say they haven't and they *believe* it. That's why your detector gauges don't register. That's why Joe Zatelli didn't jump when he saw Martin Blue walk in. He didn't know Blue was dead—except that he'd read it in the papers."

Rand leaned forward. "Where is Ernest Chappel?"

"You don't want him, Dyer."

"Don't *want* him? He's the most dangerous man alive today!"

"To whom?"

"To *whom?* Are you crazy?"

"I'm not crazy. He's the most dangerous man alive today—to the underworld. Look, Dyer, any time a criminal gets jittery about a possible pinch, he sends for Ernie or goes to Ernie. And Ernie washes him whiter than snow and in the process tells him *he's not a criminal.*

"And so, at least nine times out of ten, he quits being a criminal. Within ten or twenty years Chicago isn't going to *have* an underworld. There won't be any organized crimes by professional criminals. You'll always have the amateur with you, but he's a comparatively minor detail. How about some more *café royale?"*

Dyer Rand walked to the kitchenette and got it. He was wide awake by now, but he walked like a man in a dream.

When he came back, Joad said, "And now that I'm in with Ernie on it, Dyer, we'll stretch it to every city in the world big enough to have an underworld worth mentioning. We can train picked recruits; I've got my eye on two of your men and may take them away from you soon. But I'll have to check them first. We're going to pick our apostles—about a dozen of them—very carefully. They'll be the right men for the job."

"But, Joad, look at all the crimes that are going to go unpunished!" Rand protested.

Bela Joad drank the rest of his coffee and stood up. He said, "And which is more important—to punish criminals or to end crime? And, if you want to look at it moralistically, *should* a man be punished for a crime when he doesn't even remember committing it, when he is no longer a criminal?"

Dyer Rand sighed. "You win, I guess. I'll keep my promise. I suppose—I'll never see you again?"

"Probably not, Dyer. And I'll anticipate what you're going to say next. Yes, I'll have a farewell drink with you. A straight one, without the coffee."

Dyer Rand brought the glasses. He said, "Shall we drink to Ernie Chappel?"

Bela Joad smiled. He said, "Let's include him in the toast, Dyer. But let's drink to all men who work to put themselves out of work. Doctors work toward the day when the race will be so healthy it won't need doctors; lawyers work toward the day when litigation will no longer be necessary. And policemen, detectives, and criminologists work toward the

day when they will no longer be needed because there will be no more crime."

Dyer Rand nodded very soberly and lifted his glass. They drank.

CRIMINAL NEGLIGENCE

By J. Francis McComas

Warden Halloran smiled slightly. "You expect to have criminals on Mars, then?" he asked. "It that why you want me?"

"Of course we don't, sir!" snapped the lieutenant-general. His name was Knox. "We need men of your administrative ability—"

"Pardon me, general," Lansing interposed smoothly; "I rather think we'd better give the warden a—a more detailed picture, shall we say? We have been rather abrupt, you know."

"I'd be grateful if you would," Halloran said.

He watched the lanky civilian as Lansing puffed jerkily on his cigar. A long man, with a shock of black hair tumbling over a high, narrow forehead, Lansing had introduced himself as chairman of the project's co-ordinating committee . . . whatever that was.

"Go ahead," grunted Knox. "But make it fast, Doctor."

Lansing smiled at the warden, carefully placed his cigar in the ashtray before him and said, "We've been working on the ships night and day. Both the dust itself and its secondary effects are getting closer to us all the time. We've been so damned intent on the job—it's *really* been a race against time—that only yesterday one of my young men remembered the Mountain State Penitentiary was well within our sphere of control."

"The country—what's left of it—has been split up into regions," the general said. "So many ships to each region."

"So," Lansing went on, "learning about you meant there was another batch of passengers to round up. And when I was told the warden was yourself—I know something of your career, Mr. Halloran—I was delighted. Frankly," he grinned at Knox, "we're long on military and scientific brass and damned short on people who can manage other people."

"I see." Halloran pressed a buzzer on his desk. "I think some of my associates ought to be in on this discussion."

"Discussion?" barked Knox. "Is there anything to discuss? We simply want you out of here in an hour—"

"Please, general!" the warden said quietly.

If the gray-clad man who entered the office at that moment heard the general's outburst, he gave no sign. He stood stiffly in front of the warden's big desk, a little to one side of the two visitors, and said, "Yessir, Mr. Halloran?"

"Hello, Joe. Know where the captain is?"

"First afternoon inspection, sir." He cocked an eye at the

clock on the wall behind Halloran. "Ought to be in the laundry about now."

The warden scribbled a few words on a small square of paper. "Ask him to come here at once, please. On your way, please stop in at the hospital and ask Doctor Slade to come along, too." He pushed the paper across the desk to the inmate. "There's your pass."

"Yessir. Anything else, Warden?" He stood, a small, square figure in neat gray shirt and pants, seemingly oblivious to the ill-concealed stares of the two visitors.

Halloran thought a moment, then said, "Yes . . . I'd like to see Father Nelson and Rabbi Goldsmid, too."

"Uh, Father Nelson's up on the Row, sir. With Bert Doyle."

"Then we'll not bother him, of course. Just the others."

"Yessir. On the double."

Lansing slouched around in his chair and openly watched Joe Mario walk out. Then he turned back to Halloran and said, "That chap a—a trusty, Warden?"

"To a degree. Although we no longer use the term. We classify the inmates according to the amount of responsibility they can handle."

"I see. Ah . . ." he laughed embarrassedly, "this is the first time I've been in a prison. Mind telling me what his crime was?"

Halloran smiled gently. "We try to remember the man, Dr. Lansing, and not his crime." Then he relented. "Joe Mario was just a small-time crook who got mixed up in a bad murder."

Lansing whistled.

"Aren't we wasting time?" growled the general. "Seems to me, Warden, you could be ordering your people to pack up without any conference. You're in charge here, aren't you?"

Halloran raised his eyebrows. "In charge? Why, yes . . . in the sense that I shape the final decisions. But all of my assistants contribute to such decisions. Further, we have an inmate's council that voices its opinion on certain of our problems here. And we—my associates and I—listen to them. Always."

Knox scowled and angrily shifted his big body. Lansing picked up his cigar, relit it, using the action to study the warden unobtrusively. Hardly a presence to cow hardened criminals, Lansing thought. Halloran was just below middle height, with gray hair getting a bit thin, eyes that twinkled warmly behind rimless glasses. Yet Lansing had read somewhere that a critic of Halloran's policies had said the penologist's thinking was far ahead of his time . . . too far, the critic had added.

As Joe Mario closed the warden's door behind him, two inmates slowed their typing but did not look up as he neared

their desks. A guard left his post at the outer door and walked toward Mario. The two of them stopped beside the desks.

"What's the word, Joe?" the guard asked.

Mario held out his pass.

"Gotta round up the captain, Doc Slade and the Jew preacher," he said.

"All right. Get going."

"What do those guys want?" asked a typist as he pulled the paper from his machine.

Mario looked quickly at the guard and as quickly away from him.

"Dunno," he shrugged.

"Somethin' about the war, I bet," grunted the typist.

"War's over, dope," said the other. "Nothin' behind the curtain now but a nice assortment of bomb craters. All sizes."

"Go on, Joe," ordered the guard. "You heard something. Give."

"Well . . . I heard that fat general say something about wanting the warden outa here in a hour."

The typewriters stopped their clacking for a bare instant, then started up again, more slowly. The guard frowned, then said, "On your way, Joe." He hesitated, then, "No use to tell you to button your lip, I guess."

"I'm not causing any trouble," Mario said, as the guard opened the door and stood aside for him to pass into the corridor.

Okayed for entrance into the hospital wing, Joe Mario stood outside the railing that cut Dr. Slade's reception area off from the corridor that led to the wards. An inmate orderly sat behind the railing, writing a prescription for a slight, intelligent-looking man.

Mario heard the orderly say, "All right, Vukich, get that filled at the dispensary. Take one after each meal and come back to see us when the bottle's empty. Unless the pain gets worse, of course. But I don't think it will."

"Thanks, doc," the patient drawled.

Both men looked up then and saw Mario.

"Hi, Joe," the orderly smiled. "What's wrong with you? You don't look sick!"

"Nothin' wrong with me that a day outside couldn't cure."

"Or a *night*," laughed Vukich.

Mario ran a hand over his sleek, black hair. "Better a night, sure," he grinned back. Then he sobered and said to the orderly, "Warden wants to see the doc. Right away."

"Mr. Halloran sick?"

"Naw . . . it's business. Urgent business."

"Real urgent, Joe? The doc's doing a pretty serious exam."

Mario paused, then said, "You guys might as well know about it. There's a general and a civilian in the warden's office.

They're talkin' about something outside. Warden wants the doc in on it."

Sudden tension flowed out among the three men. Down the hall, a patient screamed suddenly in the psycho ward. The three of them jerked, then grinned feebly at one another.

Vukich said slowly, "Well, you don't start playing catch with atom bombs without dropping a few. Wonder what it's like . . . out there?"

"We haven't *heard* that it's any different," the orderly's voice lacked conviction.

"Don't be silly," Vukich said flatly. "Ever since they moved the dames from Tehama into C block we've known *something* happened."

"Get the doc," Mario said. "I've got to be on my way."

"Me, too." Vukich's thin, clever face looked thoughtful.

The others stared blankly at him and said nothing.

As Alfred Court, Captain of the prison, strode down the flower-bordered path that led from the shops unit past A block to the administration building, a side door in A block clanged open and a sergeant came out. The sergeant turned without seeing his superior and walked hurriedly toward the administration wing.

"Hey, sarge!" Court called. "What's the hurry?"

The sergeant whirled, recognized the captain and quickly saluted.

"Glad to see you, sir," he said. "Just the man I was looking for!"

"Good enough. What's on your mind? Better tell me as we go; the warden's in a hurry to see me."

The two men walked abreast, both big, although Court lacked any trace of the sergeant's paunch. As they walked and talked, their eyes darted continually about, unconsciously checking the appearance of the buildings, the position of the guard in the gun tower, the attitude of a very old inmate who was meticulously weeding a flower bed.

"Captain, you going to let the men out for their yard time?"

Court's pace slowed. "Why not?"

"No real reason . . . *now*. But there's trouble in the air, sir. I can smell it. The whole place is buzzing . . . with *something*."

"With what?"

"I can't put my finger on it. But all the men know there's some pretty big shots—at least one general, they say—in the warden's office, right now. There's a hot rumor that there's trouble outside—some sort of disaster."

Court laughed shortly. "That damned Mario! He's going to lose a nice job if he doesn't keep his mouth shut!"

"None of them keep their mouths shut, Captain."

"Yes . . . well, I don't know what's up, myself. I'm heading for that conference right now. I'll ask the warden about letting the men out of their cells. What's their attitude?"

The sergeant's broad, red face grew more troubled.

"Uh . . . the men aren't hostile, Captain. They seem worried, nervous . . . kind of scared. If somebody at the top—the warden or yourself—could convince them things were as usual outside . . . they'd quiet down, I'm sure."

They were now thirty feet from the door to the administration building, a door that opened for but one man at a time. The officers stopped.

"Things are *not* normal outside," Court growled, "and you damn' well know it. I've been wondering how long this prison could go on—as if there were still a state's capital, with its Adult Authority, its governor, its Supreme Court. My God! D'you think every man jack here doesn't know a visit from the Authority's long overdue!"

"Yeah . . ."

"Well, I'll go in, Sarge, and see what's what. If you *don't* hear from me, stick to routine."

"Right, Captain."

He remained where he was while Captain Court walked slowly toward the door, both hands well in sight. A pace from the door he stopped and exchanged a few words with someone watching him through a barred peephole. After a moment, the door slid open and he walked into the building.

He was the last to arrive at the warden's office. Lansing gazed at him in fascination. Goldsmid had been a Golden Gloves champion middleweight before he had heeded the call of the Law, and he looked it. Dr. Slade was the prototype of all overworked doctors. But Court was a type by himself. Lansing thought he'd never seen a colder eye. Yet, the captain's lean face—so unlike the warden's mild, scholarly one—was quiet, composed, unmarked by any weakness of feature or line of self-indulgence. A big, tough man, Lansing mused, a very tough man. But a just one.

"I've a problem, Warden," Court said when the introductions were over. "Something we should decide right away."

"Can't it wait?" Knox said irritably.

Lansing almost choked with stifled laughter when Court just glanced briefly at Knox, then said quietly to the warden, "Sergeant Haines has just advised me that the inmates know about these gentlemen's visit and they're . . . restless. I wonder if we shouldn't keep the men in their cells this afternoon."

"Blast it!" roared Knox. "Can't you people keep a secret?"

"There are no secrets in prison, General," Halloran said mildly. "I learned that my first week as a guard, twenty years ago." To Court he said, "Sit down, Alfred. Unless you dis-

agree strongly, I think we'll let the men out as usual. It's a risk, yes, but right now, the closer we stick to normal routine, the better."

"You're probably right, sir."

Court sat down and Halloran turned to his two visitors.

"Now, gentlemen," he smiled, "we're at your disposal. As I told you, my two associate wardens aren't here. Mr. Briggs is in town and Mr. Tate is home ill. Doctor McCall, our Protestant clergyman, is also home, recovering from a siege with one of those pesky viruses. But we here represent various phases of our administration and can certainly answer all of your questions."

"Questions!" Knox snorted. "We're here to tell you—not ask—"

"General, General," soothed Lansing. He looked across the desk at Halloran and shrugged slightly. The warden twinkled. "General Knox is a trifle—ah, overblunt, but he's telling you the essential truth of the situation. We've come to take you away from here. Just as soon as you can leave."

"Hey?" cried Slade. "Leave here? The devil, man, I've got to take out a gall bladder this afternoon!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," murmured Goldsmid. "I thought the war was over. . . ."

"This is all nonsense!" There was an ominous note in Knox's hoarse voice. "Do you people realize you're now under the authority of the Fifth Defense Command?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" cried Lansing. "Let's be sensible about all this!' He pointed his cigar at the fuming soldier. "General, these gentlemen have every right to know the situation and we'll save time if you'll permit me to give them a quick briefing."

"All right! All right!"

"Well, then." Lansing crossed his long legs, glanced nervously about the room, and said, "The world as we know it is done with. Finished. In another week it will be completely uninhabitable."

"Hey," grunted Slade. "You Lansing, the physicist?"

"That's right, Doctor."

"Um. Didn't place you at first. Well, what's going to end this lousy old world of ours?"

"Well," Lansing answered, "we wiped out our late antagonists with skill and despatch. But, in the end, they outsmarted us. Left behind some sort of radioactive dust which . . . *spreads.* It's rolling down on us from Chicago and up from Texas. God knows what other parts of the country are like—we haven't had time to discuss it with them on the radio."

Goldsmid muttered something in Hebrew.

"Isn't that lack of communication rather odd?" asked the warden.

"Not so very. We've been too busy building rocket ships."

"Rocket ships!" Court was jarred out of his icy calm.

"You mean space ships?" cried the doctor.

"Yes, Slade, they do," murmured the warden.

"Precisely," Lansing said. "When it looked as if the cold war would get rather warm, the allied governments faced up to the fact that our venerable planet might become a—ah, a battle casualty. So, in carefully selected regions, rather extensive preparations were made for a hurried departure from this sector of the universe."

"Oh, come to the point, damn it!" Knox exploded. "All you people need to know is that one of those regions is this area of the Rocky Mountains, that the ships are built and ready to go, and that you're to get aboard. Fast!"

"That," nodded Lansing, "is it."

The four prison officials looked at each other. Halloran and Court sat quiet; Goldsmid slowly dropped his eyes to the ground and his lips moved. Slade scratched his chin.

"Going to Mars, hey?" he asked abruptly.

"That's our destination."

The doctor chuckled. "Comic bok stuff," he chortled.

"No, it isn't," Halloran said. "We've ben expecting something like this for a long time. Haven't we?"

"Indeed we have," Goldsmid said. "Expecting, but not quite believing."

Halloran looked thoughtfully at the physicist. "Doctor Lansing, these ships of yours . . . they're pretty big, I take it?"

"Not as big as we like. They never are. But they'll do. Why?"

"I should remind you that we have well over two thousand inmates here."

"Inmates!" barked the general. "Who the devil said anything about your inmates? Think we'll take a lot of convicts to Mars! Populate it with killers, thieves—"

"Who does go, then?" Halloran did not raise his voice but Knox looked suddenly uneasy.

"Why—uh, your operating personnel," he replied gruffly. "Your guards, clerks . . . hell, man, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid that is out," Goldsmid said. "For me, that is." He stood up, a heavy-shouldered middleweight running a little to fat. "Excuse me, Warden, my counselling period's coming up."

"Sit down, Pete," Halloran said quietly. "We haven't finished this conference."

"I admire your sentiments, Rabbi," Lansing said hurriedly, "but surely you realize that we can't take any criminal elements to—ah, what will be our new world. And we do have a special need for you. We've plenty of your co-religionists

among our various personnel, but we don't have an ordained minister for them."

"Afraid my first responsibility is here." Goldsmid's voice was quite matter-of-fact.

"So's mine," grunted Slade. "Warden, even if the world ends tomorrow, I've got to get Squeaker Hanley's gall bladder out today. No point in my hanging around any longer is there?"

"Of course there is," Halloran answered. He took a package of cigarettes from his pocket, selected one, and lit it. He exhaled smoke and looked speculatively at Lansing. The scientist felt himself blushing and looked away.

Halloran turned to Court.

"Quite a problem, isn't it, Alfred," he said. "I suppose these gentlemen are right in keeping the inmates off their ships. At any rate, *we* can't argue the matter . . . so let's do what we're asked. I think you'd better plan to get the guards out of here tonight, at shift change. Might pass the word to their wives now, so they can start packing a few essentials. Doc," he turned to Slade, "before you get your greedy hands on Squeaker's gall bladder, you'd better round up your staff and have them make the proper arrangements."

"Okay, I'll put it up to them."

"You'll *not* put it up to them," the warden said sharply. "You'll *order* them to be ready when the general, here, wants them."

"I'll give no orders," Slade said grimly.

"Just a minute," interposed Court. "Sir, aren't you going?"

"Of course not. But that's neither here nor there—"

The loud clangor of a bell pealed through the room. The two visitors jumped.

"My God!" cried Knox. "What's that?"

"Yard time," Halloran smiled. "The men are allowed two hours out in the yard, now. They exercise, play games, or just sit around and talk."

"Oh."

"Did I understand you correctly, Warden Halloran?" Lansing's bony face was pale now. "Do you refuse to come with us?"

When the bell rang, Joe Mario had been standing near the door to the warden's office, ostensibly filing reports. Now, he closed the drawer with a bang, stretched, and started toward the outside door.

"Where are you going?" the guard asked suspiciously.

"The yard. Where else?"

"You hear anything in the Warden's office?"

"Not a word," Mario said virtuously. "I was too busy doin' my work. Anyway, you gotta let me out. My team's got a ball game set for this afternoon."

"Oh . . . all right." He looked at the typists. "How about you two? Want out?"

The two men glanced quickly at each other, then shoved back their chairs and got up from their desks.

"Sure," one of them grinned, "I guess we'll take a little air."

Lansing had the feeling he used to have occasionally, back in his university days when he lectured on freshman physics. As if he were talking to a class of deaf students. For, like the hapless freshmen, Warden Halloran was quite obviously not listening to him. But the scientist plunged on. "For God's sake, sir," he said hoarsely, "we need you. We *will* need you! I'm a scientist—I know nothing of the problems of—ah, community living. Neither does Knox. He's accustomed to major crises—and solving them by giving orders. But both of us know there'll come a time when people won't take orders—"

"Absolutely correct," Knox said unexpectedly. "Once we get settled on Mars, the military takes a back seat. And—I mean this, Lansing—*I'll* be damn' glad of it. When the people get their towns built they'll need some gents with the right kind of know-how to help them, show them—"

"That's all very interesting, General, but it's not for me."

"Why not, for God's sake?"

Halloran snubbed out his cigarette, looked up at the general and at the scientist. He smiled briefly. "It's just my job, gentlemen . . . let's not discuss the matter any further."

"By God, we will!" barked Knox. "I told you you were under the jurisdiction of the Fifth Defense Command and you are. If I want to, I can send a tank company over here and drag you to those ships!"

"He's right, you know," Lansing said.

Court stood up and took one step toward the general.

"Alfred!" the warden did not lift his voice, but Court stopped. "General Knox," Halloran went on in a conversational tone, "you're being a bit of bully, you know, and in this prison we've all been—ah, conditioned against bullies." He looked down at his desk and frowned. "However, I'll admit that your position requires that I elaborate my reasons for staying here. Well, then. As I see it, your people, your—ah, colonists, can help themselves. Most of *my* people, the inmates here, can't. A long time ago, gentlemen, I decided I'd spend my life helping the one man in our society who seemingly can't help himself, the so-called criminal. I've always felt that society owes a debt to the criminal . . . instead of the other way around."

He hesitated, grinned apologetically at Captain Court. "I'm sermonizing again, eh, Alfred? But," he shrugged, "if I must

get dramatic about it I can only say that my life's work ends only with my . . . death."

"It's quite a rough job, you know," Goldsmid remarked. "This is a maximum security institution. Too many of the inmates have disappointed the warden. But he keeps trying and we've learned to follow his example."

"Our psychiatric bunch have done some mighty interesting things," beamed Slade, "even with cases that looked absolutely hopeless."

"None of them can be saved now," muttered Lansing.

"That is in the hands of God," Goldsmid replied.

"Well," Halloran said gently, "still going to send those tanks after me, General?"

"Uh . . . no . . . I won't interfere with a man doing his duty."

Lansing cleared his throat, looked slowly from the somber-faced clergyman, to the fidgeting medico, to the burly captain, still staring impassively at the general, to, finally, the quiet, smiling warden. "Gentlemen," he said slowly, "it occurs to me that the situation hasn't actually registered on you. The earth is really doomed, you know. This dust simply won't tolerate organic life. In some way—we haven't had time to to discover how—it's self-multiplying, so, as I said, it spreads. Right now, not a tenth of this entire continent—from the pole down to the Panama Canal—is capable of supporting any kind of life as we know it. And that area is diminishing hourly."

"No way of checking it?" Slade asked. His tone was one of idle curiosity, nothing else.

"No. It's death, gentlemen. As deadly as your—ah, gallows."

"We use the gas chamber," Halloran corrected him. His mouth twisted. "More humane, you know."

There was brief quiet, then the warden said, "Well . . . now that we've finished philosophizing, let's get back to the matter at hand. We can have everyone that's going ready to leave by seven tonight. Will that be satisfactory?"

"It'll have to be," Knox grunted.

"Thank you." Halloran reached for his phone, then dropped his hand on his desk. "I'd like to ask you a question," he said. 'Perhaps it's presumptuous, but I'm rather curious about the—er, last workings of our government. Tell me, don't you really have room for our inmates? You haven't told us how many ships you've built. Or how big they are."

Lansing looked at Knox. The general flushed, then stared at the floor. Lansing shrugged tiredly.

"Oh, we've plenty of room," he sighed. "But . . . our orders are to take only those completely fit to build a new world. We've—well, we have practiced a lot of euthanasia lately."

"Judges," murmured Goldsmid.

"If you had come sooner," there was no anger in Halloran's voice, "couldn't you have selected some of our people, those that I—all of us know are ready for rehabilitation . . . even on another planet?"

"Perhaps. But no one remembered there was a prison nearby."

The warden looked at the rabbi. Goldsmid raised his heavy shoulders in an ancient Hebraic gesture.

"That was always the trouble, wasn't it, Pete?" Halloran murmured. "People never remembered the prisons!"

The telephone beside him shrilled loudly, urgently.

The inmate mopping the floor of Condemned Row's single corridor slowed in front of Bert Doyle's cell. Doyle was slated for a ride down the elevator that night to the death cell behind the gas chamber. At the moment, he was stretched out on his bunk, listening to the soft voice of Father Nelson.

"Sorry to interrupt," the inmate said, "but I thought you'd like to know that all hell's busting loose down in the yard."

Father Nelson looked up.

Doyle, too, looked interested. "A riot?" he asked.

"Yessiree, bob!"

"Nonsense!" snapped the priest. "This prison doesn't have riots!"

"Well, it's sure as hell got one, now. 'Scuse me, Father, but it's the truth. The men grabbed four or five yard guards and the screws in the towers don't dare shoot!"

He gave up all pretence of work and stood, leaning on his mop-handle, his rheumy old eyes glowing with a feverish excitement.

Nelson stood up.

"Will you excuse me, Bert?" he asked. "I'd better see if I can help the warden."

Doyle, too, sat up, swung his feet to the steel floor, stood up and stretched. "Sure," he said. His hard face was pale but otherwise he seemed quite calm. "You've been a great help, Father." He looked quizzically at the old inmate. "You lying, Danny? Sems to me the boys have got nothing to beef about here."

"Heh, they sure have now."

"What?"

"Well, I got this from a guy who got it from Vukich who heard it from Joe Mario. Seems there's a big-shot general and some kinda scientist in Mr. Halloran's office." He shifted his grip on the mop-handle. "You gents maybe won't believe this, but it's what Joe heard 'em say to the warden. Outside is all covered with radium and this general and this here scientist are goin' to Mars an' they want the warden to go along.

Leavin' us behind, of course. That's what the boys are riotin' about."

Bert Doyle burst into harsh laughter.

"Danny! Danny!" he cried. "I've been predicting this! You've gone stir-bugs!"

"Ain't neither!"

"Just a moment, Bert," Nelson whispered. Aloud he said, "Dan, go call the guard for me, please." When the old man had shuffled out of earshot the priest said to the condemned man, "It could be true, Bert. By radium, he means radioactive material. And there's no reason space ships can't get to Mars. We'd reached the moon before the war started, you know."

Doyle sank back on his bunk.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he breathed.

"Bert!"

Doyle grinned sheepishly. "Force of habit." Then, more soberly, "So they're off to Mars, eh? Father, you better get the hell down there and pick up your reservations!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" The priest's voice softened and he patted the killer's shoulder. "I will go down and see what's what, Bert. And I'll be back just as soon as the men have quieted down. That is, if they *are* creating a disturbance."

The footsteps of the approaching guard sounded loud in the corridor. Doyle frowned a little.

"When you come back, Father, you'll tell me the truth? No kidding, now!"

The guard stood in front of the door of heavy steel bars. Father Nelson looked down at the man on the bunk.

"I'll tell you everything, Bert. I swear it."

"Uh, Father?" the guard's voice was nervous . . . and embarrassed.

"Yes, Perkins?"

"I—I can't let you out right now. Orders from the warden. Not a cell door opens till I hear from him direct."

Doyle chuckled.

"Might as well sit down, Father," he said, "and make yourself comfortable. . . ."

"What will you do?" cried Lansing.

"Go out and talk to them, of course," replied Halloran. He arose from his desk, a calm, unhurried man.

"Look," growled Knox, "you get me through to the town. Some of our people are still there. I'll order out as many soldiers as you want. On the double!"

Halloran flushed. "Would it ease your conscience, General," he grated, "if you killed off my men instead of leaving them . . . behind? Now, you will please keep quiet. You'll be perfectly safe!"

"What will we do with them, sir?" Court gestured at Lansing and Knox.

Halloran strode from behind his desk to the opposite end of the room. As he twirled the dials of a wall safe he said, "They'll have to remain here, for now. The men have got between this building and the gate office." The safe swung open and he reached far inside and took out a sub-machine gun. "Here," he held the weapon out to Court. "If I don't come back, use this to get them to the gate office."

"Damn me!' cried Slade. "Didn't know you had an arsenal in here!"

"No one else did, either, except Alfred. Now Doc, I think you and Pete had better stay here."

Slade and Goldsmid pulled themselves out of their chairs as one man. Their timing was perfect.

"No you don't, hero!" growled Slade.

"Warden," Goldsmid said, "perhaps *I* could talk to the men . . ."

The warden smiled and walked toward the door. There he stopped and said to Court, "Switch on the speaker system, Alfred. I'll take the portable mike from the next office. While I'm out there, get word to all custodial and operating personnel that they will be permitted to leave tonight. Meantime, I hope they will stay on their jobs. Better phone Mr. Tate and Doctor McCall, have someone try to locate Mr. Briggs, be sure and call Dr. Slade's staff."

"Right, sir."

The three men left the office. Court, the gun cradled under one arm, picked up the phone and spoke into it. His voice was low, crisp monotone. After a while, he replaced the receiver and stood quiet, staring impassively at the others.

"You might say the warden's career has been twenty years of futility," he muttered. Lansing and Knox felt he wasn't actually speaking to them. "Now me, I'm a screw of the old school. Hardboiled, they say. *I* never expected a thing from a con . . . and cons have lied to him, politicians have broken their promises . . . but the liars have loved him and the dumbest dope in the legislature has respected him."

"Will he—be all right?" Lansing asked.

Court shrugged. "Who knows? You handled this very badly," he said dispassionately. "Five minutes after you stepped through the main gate every inmate in the place knew you were here and started wondering. Why the devil didn't you write—make arrangements to see the warden outside?"

"I'm sorry," Lansing said. "We knew very little about prisons."

Court laughed shortly. "You'd better learn," he said grimly.

"Anyway we can see what's going on?" rumbled Knox. "And how about that speaker business?"

"There's a window in the next office . . . come along."

They crouched at the window, the fat Knox wheezing a little, because Court had ordered them to keep out of sight of the rioters. They saw Halloran, Slade and Goldsmid at his heels, walking out into the small courtyard that lay between them and safety. Over the wall speaker came a sullen roar, something very like the ragged blast of a rocket whose timing is off. A few gray-clad men in the courtyard saw the approaching warden, surged toward him, screaming at their fellows in the big yard behind them.

Halloran ignored the clutching hands. He held the mike up and they heard him say, "There's no point in my talking with you unless you will be quiet and listen." He paused. The roar slowly subsided into an angry mutter. "Thanks. That's better." Now, they could see Slade's head but both Halloran and the rabbi were hidden by the swirl of gray figures that swept around the three officials.

"Now," the warden went on, "it seems that you have something to say to me. Good enough. But why the devil didn't you send word through your council, instead of roughing up guards, damaging property, yelling your heads off and generally behaving like a bunch of spoiled brats? Go on, tell me! Why?"

Someone's scream came clearly over the mike. "The world's coming to an end! They're leaving us here to die!"

"Yeah!" the mike picked up another voice. "How about that?"

Before the wordless, mindless roar could rise again, the warden barked, "Oh, hush up!" And they were quiet.

"My God," breathed Lansing.

"Now," Halloran's voice was easy, assured, "I want to make sure that all of you hear me. So, I'm coming out in the center of the yard. Rabbi Pete Goldsmid and Doc Slade insist on coming with me, although," he chuckled, "I understand Squeaker Hanley's screaming for the doc to cut out his gall bladder." A few of the men laughed. "All right, here I come. And you fellows behind me, keep off the wire. I don't want this mike to go dead and have to yell my lungs out."

They saw the eddy of men around him move slowly through the broken gate and out of their sight.

'What in God's name will he tell them?" muttered Knox.

"Whatever—they'll believe it," Court said. The courtyard before them was now empty. He stared thoughtfully out the barred window, then said, "Think you could get to the gate office pretty soon, now. . . ."

"No, damn it!" snarled Knox. "I want to see what happens to that gutty so-and-so!"

Lansing grinned nervously. "Somehow, Captain, I feel it won't be necessary for us to sneak out of here."

They listened again while assorted thieves, murderers, rapists, men—save for an innocent few—whose hands were consistently raised against their fellows' peace and property, heard their jailor tell them that their world, a world that many of them remembered but dimly, was coming to an end. The screaming broke out again when Halloran spoke of the Mars-bound ships, and, for a moment, the three in the office thought he had lost control. But the amplifiers prevailed and Halloran laughed and said, "Anyway, we're not going to Mars—"

"*You* can go!"

The man who yelled that was apparently very close to the warden within his view, for they heard him say, "Chrisman, you're a fool—as usual! Would I bother to come out here and talk to you if I could go?"

That got them. That, they understood. If a guy didn't scram from a hot spot when he could . . . well, then, he couldn't scram in the first place. So, the warden was stuck, just like they were.

Later, perhaps, a few of them might figure out why.

"Now, let's have no more interruptions," Halloran said. "*I* don't think there's any need to go. Neither does the doc, here, or the rabbi. We're all staying—because the desert to the south of us has stopped the spread of this dust and it seems it can't cross the rivers, either. So, we're safe enough."

"But that's not true," groaned Lansing.

Court glanced at him. "Would you tell them different?" he said coldly.

"No. . . ."

Halloran said, "Well, that's that. Life is a little difficult outside and so the people out there want to try to get to Mars. Believe me, that's a trip I want someone else to make first. But if they think life will be easier on those deserts—why, let them go. But God help them—they'll need it."

He paused. Knox tried to catch Lansing's eye, but the scientist's face was blank, unseeing.

"What do *we* do?" This voice was not hysterical, just seriously questioning.

"*You* should do darned well. Life should be easy enough for *you*. You've got your own farms, your livestock, laundry, hospital, shops—everything a man can need. So, take over and run things to suit yourselves."

A unanimous gasp whistled over the speaker. Then, they all cried just one word.

"Us?"

"Why not? Don't you think you can?"

Silence, broken by strange, wistful mutterings.

"I'd suggest this," Halloran said. "Let's follow our normal routine tonight—no lock-ups, of course—and tomorrow, you

fellows take over. I'll help you in any way I can. But it will be *your* job. Perhaps after breakfast tomorrow, you ought to have a mass meeting. Under the supervision of your council, I'd say. You can't keep going without some kind of order, you know."

Again silence.

"My God," whispered Lansing, "he makes it all sound so *real*."

"Any questions?" Halloran asked.

"Hey, Warden! How about the dames?"

"The ladies will join you tomorrow morning." He chuckled. "I imagine they'll be able to handle you all right!"

A joyous, obscene roar.

"However," Halloran raised his voice, "I'd like to remind you fellows that a successful community needs . . . *families!*"

There was a long quiet, then, broken finally by an inmate who asked, "Warden, how about the guys up on the Row?"

"Well," Halloran's voice lost all humor, "you can start ripping out the gas chamber whenever you're ready to. I'll see that you get the tools."

The swell of applause was so loud in the office that Court hastily turned down the speaker's volume.

"All right," Halloran said when they had quieted down, "that's about it. You're free now, till supper-time. I'd suggest all of you start right now, thinking about your future. . . ."

Outside the main gate, first Knox, then Lansing shook hands with the gray-faced warden.

"Trucks'il be in town at seven for your people," Knox muttered. He gave a windy sigh. "It's all fouled up. As usual. Damn it, we need people like you, sir!"

Lansing looked at Halloran for a long time, trying to see behind the mask of exhaustion. "I'm a mannerless fool," he said at last. "But Mr. Halloran, would you tell me what you're thinking? I mean, really. thinking? Even if it's rough on us!"

Halloran laughed softly. "I wasn't thinking about you at all, Doctor Lansing. I was—and am—regretting that what I told the men couldn't be the truth. It's too bad they'll have so short a time. It would be very interesting to see what they would do with . . . *life*."

Knox scowled. "Seems like they haven't done much with it so far."

"Come along, General," Lansing said quietly. "You don't understand. None of us do. We never did."

THE TALKING STONE

By Isaac Asimov

The asteroid belt is large and its human occupancy small. Larry Vernadsky, in the seventh month of his year-long assignment to Station Five, wondered with increasing frequency if his salary could possibly compensate for a nearly solitary confinement seventy million miles from Earth. He was a slight youth, who did not bear the look of either a spationautical engineer or an asteroid man. He had blue eyes and butter-yellow hair and an invincible air of innocence that masked a quick mind and an isolation-sharpened bump of curiosity.

Both the look of innocence and the bump of curiosity served him well on board the *Robert Q.*

When the *Robert Q.* landed on the outer platform of Station Five, Vernadsky was on board almost immediately. There was an eager delight about him which, in a dog, would have been accompanied by a vibrating tail and a happy cacophony of barks.

The fact that the captain of the *Robert Q.* met his grins with a stern, sour silence that sat heavily on his thick-featured face made no difference. As far as Vernadsky was concerned the ship was yearned-for company and was welcome. It was welcome to any amount of the millions of gallons of ice or any of the tons of frozen food concentrates stacked away in the hollowed-out asteroid that served as Station Five. Vernadsky was ready with any power-tool that might be necessary, any replacement that might be required for any hyperatomic motor.

Vernadsky was grinning all over his boyish face as he filled out the routine form, writing it out quickly for later conversion into computer notation for filing. He put down ship's name and serial number, engine number, field generator number and so on, port of embarkation ("asteroids, damned lot of them, don't know which was last" and Vernadsky simply wrote "Belt" which was the usual abbreviation for "asteroid belt"); port of destination ("Earth"); reason for stopping ("stuttering hyperatomic drive.")

"How many in your crew, Captain?" asked Vernadsky, as he looked over ship's papers.

The Captain said, "Two.—Now how about looking over the hyperatomics? We've got a shipment to make." His cheeks were blue with dark stubble, his bearing that of a hardened and life-long asteroid miner, yet his speech was that of an educated, almost a cultured, man.

"Sure." Vernadsky lugged his diagnostic kit to the engine

room, followed by the captain. He tested circuits vacuum degree, force-field density with easy-going efficiency.

He could not help wondering about the captain. Despite his own dislike for his surroundings he realized, dimly, that there were some who found fascination in the vast emptiness and freedom of space. Yet he guessed that a man like this captain was not an asteroid miner for the love of solitude alone.

He said, "Any special type of ore you handle?"

The captain frowned and said, "Chromium and manganese."

"That so?—I'd replace the Jenner manifold, if I were you."

"Is that what's causing the trouble?"

"No, it isn't. But it's a little beat-up. You'd be risking another failure within a million miles. As long as you've got the ship in here—"

"All right. Replace it. But find the stutter, will you?"

"Doing my best, Captain."

The captain's last remark was harsh enough to abash even Vernadsky. He worked a while in silence, then got to his feet. "You've got a gamma-fogged semi-reflector. Every time the positron beam circles round to its position the drive flickers out for a second. You'll have to replace it."

"How long will it take?"

"Several hours. Maybe twelve."

"What? I'm behind schedule—"

"Can't help it." Vernadsky remained cheerful. "There's only so much I can do. The system has to be flushed for three hours with helium before I can get inside. And then I have to calibrate the new semi-reflector and that takes time. I could get it almost right in minutes but that's only almost right. You'd break down before you reached the orbit of Mars."

The captain glowered. "Go ahead. Get started."

Vernadsky carefully maneuvered the tank of helium on board the ship. With the ship's pseudo-grav generators shut off, it weighed virtually nothing, but it had its full mass and inertia. That meant careful handling if it were to make turns correctly. The maneuvers were all the more difficult since Vernadsky himself was without weight.

It was because his attention was concentrated entirely on the cylinder that he took a wrong turn in the crowded quarters and found himself momentarily in a strange and darkened room.

He had time for one startled shout and then two men were upon him, hustling his cylinder, closing the door behind him.

He said nothing, while he hooked the cylinder to the intake valve of the motor and listened to the soft, soughing noise as the helium flushed the interior, slowly washing absorbed radioactive gases into the all-accepting emptiness of space.

Then curiosity overcame prudence and he sad, "You've got a silicony aboard ship, Captain. A big one."

The captain turned to face Vernadsky slowly. He said in a

voice from which all expression had been removed, "Is that right?"

"I saw it. How about a better look?"

"Why?"

Vernadsky grew imploring, "Oh, look, Captain, I've been on this rock over half a year. I've read everything I could get hold of on the asteroids, which means all sorts of things about the siliconies. And I've never seen even a little one. Have a heart."

"I believe there's a job here to do."

"Just helium-flushing for hours. There's nothing else to be done till that's over. How come you carry a silicony about, anyway, Captain?"

"A pet. Some people like dogs. I like siliconies."

"Have you got it talking?"

The captain flushed. "Why do you ask?"

"Some of them have talked. Some of them read minds, even."

"What are you? An expert on these damn things?"

"I've been reading about them. I told you. Come on, Captain. Let's have a look."

Vernadsky tried not to show that he noticed that there was the captain facing him and a crewman on either side of him. Each of the three was larger than he was, each weightier, each (he felt sure) was armed.

Vernadsky said, "Well, what's wrong? I'm not going to steal the thing. I just want to see it."

It may have been the unfinished repair job that kept him alive at that moment. Even more so, perhaps, it was his look of cheerful and almost moronic innocence that stood him in good stead.

The captain said, "Well, then, come on."

And Vernadsky followed, his agile mind working and his pulse definitely quickened.

Vernadsky stared with considerable awe and just a little revulsion at the gray creature before him. It was quite true that he had never seen a silicony, but he had seen trimensional photographs and read descriptions. Yet there is something in a real presence for which neither words nor photographs are substitutes.

Its skin was of an oily, smooth grayness. Its motions were slow, as became a creature who burrowed in stone and was more than half stone itself. There was no writhing of muscle beneath that skin; instead it moved in slabs as thin layers of stone slid greasily over one another.

It had a general ovoid shape, rounded above, flattened below, with two sets of appendages. Below were the "legs" set radially. They totaled six and ended in sharp flinty edges, rein-

forced by metal deposits. Those edges could cut through rock, breaking it into edible portions.

On the creature's flat undersurface, hidden from view unless the silicony were overturned, was the one opening into its interior. Shredded rocks entered that interior. Within, limestone and hydrated silicates reacted to form the silicones out of which the creature's tissues were built. Excess silica re-emerged from the opening as hard white pebbly excretions.

(How extraterrologists had puzzled over the smooth pebbles that lay scattered in small hollows within the rocky structure of the asteroids until the silicones were first discovered. And how they marveled at the manner in which the creatures made silicones—those silicon-oxygen polymers with hydrocarbon side-chains —perform so many of the functions that proteins performed in terrestrial life.)

From the highest point on the creature's back came the remaining appendages, two inverse cones hollowed in opposing directions and fitting snugly into parallel recesses running down the back, yet capable of lifting upward a short way. When the silicony burrowed through rock, the "ears" were retracted for streamlining. When it rested in a hollowed-out cavern, they could lift for better and more sensitive reception. Their vague resemblance to a rabbit's ears made the name of *silicony* inevitable. The more serious extraterrologists, who referred to such creatures habitually as *Siliconeus asteroidea,* thought they might have something to do with the rudimentary telepathic powers the beasts possessed. A minority had other notions.

The silicony was flowing slowly over an oil-smeared rock. Other such rocks lay scattered in one corner of the room and represented, Vernadsky knew, the creature's food supply. Or at least, it was its tissue building supply. For sheer energy, he had read, that alone would not do.

Vernadsky marveled. "It's a monster. It's more than a foot across."

The captain grunted non-committally.

"Where did you get it?" asked Vernadsky.

"One of the rocks."

"Well, listen, two inches is about the biggest anyone's found. You could sell this to some museum or university on Earth for a couple of thousand dollars, maybe."

The captain shrugged. "Well, you've seen it. Let's get back to the hyperatomics."

His hard grip was on Vernadsky's elbow and he was turning away, when there was an interruption in the form of a slow and slurring voice, a hollow and gritty one.

It was made by the carefully modulated friction of rock against rock and Vernadsky stared in near horror at the speaker.

It was the silicony, suddenly become a talking stone. It said, "The man wonders if this thing can talk."

Vernadsky whispered, "For the love of space. It does!"

"All right," said the captain, impatiently. "You've seen it and heard it, too. Let's go now."

"And it reads minds," said Vernadsky.

The silicony said, "Mars rotates in two four hours three seven and one half minutes. Jupiter's density is one point two. Uranus was discovered in the year one seven eight one. Pluto is the planet which is most far. Sun is heaviest with a mass of two zero zero zero zero zero zero—"

The captain pulled Vernadsky away. Vernadsky, half walking backward, half stumbling, listened with fascination to the fading bumble of zeroes.

He said, "Where does it pick up all that stuff, Captain?"

"There's an old astronomy book we read to him. Real old."

"From before space-travel was invented," said one of the crew members in disgust. "Ain't even a fillum. Regular print."

"Shut up," said the captain.

Vernadsky checked the outflow of helium for gamma radiation and, eventually, it was time to end the flushing and work in the interior. It was a painstaking job, and Vernadsky interrupted it only once for coffee and a breather.

He said, with innocence beaming in his smile, "You know the way I figure it, Captain? That thing lives inside rock, inside some asteroid all its life. Hundreds of years, maybe. It's a damn big thing, and it's probably a lot smarter than the run-of-the-mill silicony. Now you pick it up and it finds out the universe isn't rock. It finds out a trillion things it never imagined. That's why it's interested in astronomy. It's this new world, all these new ideas it gets in the book and in human minds, too. Don't you think that's so?"

He wanted desperately to smoke the captain out, get something concrete he could hang his deductions on to. For this reason he risked telling what must be half the truth. (The lesser half, of course.)

But the captain, leaning against a wall with his arms folded, said only, "When will you be through?"

It was his last comment and Vernadsky was obliged to rest content. The motor was adjusted finally to Vernadsky's satisfaction, and the captain paid the reasonable fee in cash, accepted his receipt and left in a blaze of ship's hyper-energy.

Vernadsky watched it go with an almost unbearable excitement. He made his way quickly to his subetheric sender.

"I've got to be right," he muttered to himself. "I've *got* to be."

Patrolman Milt Hawkins received the call in the privacy of his home-station on Patrol Station Asteroid No. 72. He was

nursing a two-day stubble, a can of iced beer, and a film-viewer, and the settled melancholy on his ruddy, wide-cheeked face was as much the product of loneliness as was the forced cheerfulness in Vernadsky's eyes.

Patrolman Hawkins found himself looking into those eyes and was glad. Even though it was only Vernadsky, company was company. He gave him the big hello and listened luxuriously to the sound of a voice without worrying too strenuously concerning the contents of the speech.

Then suddenly amusement was gone and both ears were on the job and he said, "Hold it. Ho—ld it. What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you been listening, you dumb cop? I'm talking my heart out to you."

"Well deal it out in smaller pieces, will you? What's this about a silicony?"

"This guy's got one on board. He calls it a pet and feeds it greasy rocks."

"Huh? I swear, a miner on the asteroid run would make a pet out of a piece of cheese if he could get it to talk back to him."

"Not just *a* silicony. Not one of these little inch jobs. It's over a foot across. Don't you get it? Space, you'd think a guy would know something about the asteroids, living out here."

"All right. Suppose you tell me."

"Look, greasy rocks build tissues but where does a silicony that size get its energy from?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"Directly from—Have you got anyone around you right now?"

"Right now, no. I wish there were."

"You won't in a minute. Siliconies get their energy by the direct absorption of gamma rays."

"Says who?"

"Says a guy called Wendell Urth. He's a big-shot extraterrologist. What's more, he says that's what the silicony's ears are for." Vernadsky put his two forefingers to his temples and wiggled them. "Not telepathy at all. They detect gamma radiation at levels no human instrument can detect."

"Okay. Now what?" asked Hawkins. But he was growing thoughtful.

"Now this. Urth says there isn't enough gamma radiation on any asteroid to support siliconies more than an inch or two long. Not enough radioactivity. So here we have one a foot long, a good fifteen inches."

"Well—"

"So it has to come from an asteroid just riddled with the stuff, lousy with uranium, solid with gamma rays. An asteroid with enough radioactivity to be warm to the touch

and off the regular orbit patterns so that no one's come across it. Only suppose some smart boy landed on the asteroid by happenstance and noticed the warmth of the rocks and got to thinking. This captain of the *Robert Q.* is no rock-hopping ignoramus. He's a shrewd guy."

"Go on."

"Suppose he blasts off chunks for assay and comes across a giant silicony. Now he *knows* he's got the most unbelievable strike in all history. And he doesn't need assays. The silicony can lead him to the rich veins."

"Why should it?"

"Because it wants to learn about the universe. Because it's spent a thousand years, maybe, under rock, and it's just discovered the stars. It can read minds and it could learn to talk. It could make a deal. Listen, the captain would jump at it. Uranium mining is a state monopoly. Unlicensed miners aren't even allowed to carry counters. It's a perfect setup for the captain."

Hawkins said, "Maybe you're right."

"No maybe at all. You should have seen them standing around me while I watched the silicony, ready to jump me if I said one funny word. You should have seen them drag me out after two minutes."

Hawkins brushed his unshaven chin with his hand and made a mental estimate of the time it would take him to shave. He said, "How long can you keep the boy at your station?"

"Keep him! Space, he's gone!"

"What! Then what the devil is all this talk about? Why did you let him get away?"

"Three guys," said Vernadsky, patiently, "each one bigger than I am, each one armed, and each one ready to kill, I'll bet. What did you want me to do?"

"All right, but what do we do now?"

"Come out and pick them up. That's simple enough. I was fixing their semi-reflector and I fixed it my way. Their power will shut off completely within ten thousand miles. And I installed a tracer in the Jenner manifold."

Hawkins goggled at Vernadsky's grinning face. "Holy Toledo."

"And don't get anyone else in on this. Just you, me, and the police cruiser. They'll have no energy and we'll have a cannon or two. They'll tell us where the uranium asteroid is. We locate it, *then* get in touch with Patrol Headquarters. We will deliver unto them, three, count them, three, uranium smugglers, one giant-size silicony like nobody on Earth ever saw, and one, I repeat, one great big fat chunk of uranium like nobody on Earth ever saw, either. And you make a lieutenancy and I get promoted to a permanent Earth-side job. Right?"

Hawkins was dazed. "Right," he yelled. "I'll be right out there."

They were almost upon the ship before spotting it visually by the weak glinting of reflected sunlight.

Hawkins said, "Didn't you leave them enough power for ship's lights? You didn't throw off their emergency generator, did you?"

Vernadsky shrugged. "They're saving power, hoping they'll get picked up. Right now, they're putting everything they've got into a sub-etheric call, I'll bet."

"If they are," said Hawkins, dryly, "I'm not picking it up."

"You're not?"

"Not a thing."

The police cruiser spiraled closer. Their quarry, its power off, was drifting through space at a steady ten thousand miles an hour.

The cruiser matched it, speed for speed, and drifted inward.

A sick expression crossed Hawkins' face. "Oh, *no!*"

"What's the matter?"

"The ship's been hit. A meteor. Lord knows there are enough of them in the asteroid belt."

All the verve washed out of Vernadsky's face and voice. "Hit? Are they wrecked?"

"There's a hole in it the size of a barn-door. Sorry, Vernadsky, but this might not look good."

Vernadsky closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He knew what Hawkins meant. Vernadsky had deliberately mis-repaired a ship, a procedure which could be judged a felony. And death as a result of a felony, was murder.

He said, "Look, Hawkins, you know why I did it."

"I know what you've told me and I'll testify to that if I have to. But if this ship wasn't smuggling . . ."

He didn't finish the statement. Nor did he have to.

They entered the smashed ship in full space-suit cover.

The *Robert Q.* was a shambles, inside and out. Without power, there was no chance of raising the feeblest screen against the rock that hit them or of detecting it in time or of avoiding it if they had detected it. It had caved in the ship's hull as though it were so much aluminum foil. It had smashed the pilot room, evacuated the ship's air, and killed the three men on board.

One of the crew had been slammed against the wall by the impact and was so much frozen meat. The captain and the other crewman lay in stiff attitudes, skins congested with

frozen blood-clots where the air, boiling out of the blood, had broken the vessels.

Vernadsky, who had never seen this form of death in space, felt sick, but fought against vomiting messily inside his space-suit and succeeded.

He said, "Let's test the ore they're carrying. It's *got* to be alive." It's *got* to be, he told himself. It's *got* to be.

The door to the hold had been warped by the force of collision and there was a gap half an inch wide where it no longer met the frame.

Hawkins lifted the counter he held in his gauntleted hand and held its mica window to that gap.

It chattered like a million magpies.

Vernadsky said, with infinite relief. "I told you so."

His mis-repair of the ship was now only the ingenious and praiseworthy fulfillment of a citizen's loyal duty and the meteor collision that had brought death to three men merely a regrettable accident.

It took two blaster bolts to break the twisted door loose and tons of rock met their flashlights.

Hawkins lifted two chunks of moderate size and dropped them gingerly into one of the suit's pockets. "As exhibits," he said, "and for assay."

"Don't keep them near the skin too long," warned Vernadsky.

"The suit will protect me till I get it back to ship. It's not pure uranium, you know."

"Pretty near, I'll bet." Every inch of his cockiness was back.

Hawkins looked about. "Well, this tears things. We've stopped a smuggling ring, maybe, or part of one. But what next?"

"The uranium asteroid— Uh-oh."

"Right. Where is it? The only ones who know are dead."

"Space!" And again Vernadsky's spirits were dashed. Without the asteroid itself, they had only three corpses and a few tons of uranium ore. Good, but not spectacular. It would mean a citation, yes, but he wasn't after a citation. He wanted promotion to a permanent Earth-side job and that required something—

He yelled, "For the love of space, the *siliconyl* It can live in a vacuum. It lives in a vacuum all the time and *it* knows where the asteroid is."

"Right!" said Hawkins, with instant enthusiasm. "Where is the thing?"

"Aft," cried Vernadsky. "This way."

The silicony glinted in the light of their flashes. It moved and was alive.

Vernadsky's heart beat madly with excitement. "We've got to move it, Hawkins."

"Why?"

"Sound won't carry in a vacuum, for the love of space. We've got to get it into the cruiser."

"All right. All right."

"We can't put a suit around it with a radio transmitter, you know."

"I said all right."

They carried it gingerly and carefully, their metal-sheathed fingers handling the greasy surface of the creature almost lovingly.

Hawkins held it while kicking off the *Robert Q.*

It lay in the control room of the cruiser now. The two men had removed their helmets and Hawkins was shucking his suit. Vernadsky could not wait.

He said, "You can read our minds?"

He held his breath until finally the gratings of rock surfaces modulated themselves into words. To Vernadsky, no finer sound could, at the moment, be imagined.

The silicony said, "Yes." Then, he said, "Emptiness all about. Nothing."

"What?" said Hawkins.

Vernadsky shushed him. "The trip through space just now, I guess. It must have impressed him."

He said to the silicony, shouting his words as though to make his thoughts clearer, "The men who were with you gathered uranium, special ore, radiations, energy."

"They wanted food," came the weak, gritty sound.

Of course! It was food to the silicony. It was an energy source. Vernadsky said, "You showed them where they could get it?"

"Yes."

Hawkins said, "I can heardly hear the thing."

"There's something wrong with it," said Vernadsky worriedly. He shouted again, "Are you well?"

"Not well. Air gone at once. Something wrong inside."

Vernadsky muttered, "The sudden decompression must have damaged it. Oh, Lord. —Look, you know what I want. Where is your home? The place with the food?"

The two men were silent, waiting.

The silicony's ears lifted slowly, very slowly, trembled and fell back. "There," it said. "Over there."

"Where?" screamed Vernadsky.

"There."

Hawkins said, "It's doing something. It's pointing in some way."

"Sure, only we don't know in what way."

"Well, what do you expect it to do? Give the coordinates?"

Vernadsky said at once, "Why not?" He turned again to the silicony as it lay huddled on the floor. It was motionless now and there was a dullness to its exterior that looked ominous.

Vernadsky said, "The captain knew where your eating-place was. He had numbers concerning it, didn't he?" He prayed that the silicony would understand, that it would read his thoughts and not merely listen to his words.

"Yes," said the silicony in a rock-against-rock sigh.

"Three sets of numbers," said Vernadsky. There would have to be three. Three coordinates in space with dates attached, giving three positions of the asteroid in its orbit about the sun. From these data, the orbit could be calculated in full and its position determined at any time. Even planetary perturbations could be accounted for, roughly.

"Yes," said the silicony, lower still.

"What were they? What were the numbers? —Write them down, Hawkins. Get paper."

But the silicony said, "Do not know. Numbers not important. Eating place there."

Hawkins said, "That's plain enough. It didn't need the coordinates, so it paid no attention to them."

The silicony said, "Soon not—" a long pause, and then slowly, as though testing a new and unfamiliar word, "alive. Soon—" an even longer pause "—dead. What after death?"

"Hang on," implored Vernadsky. "Tell me, did the captain write down these figures anywhere?"

The silicony did not answer for a long minute and then, while both men bent so closely that their heads almost touched over the dying stone, it said, "What after death?"

Vernadsky shouted, "One answer. Just one. The captain must have written down the numbers. Where? Where?"

The silicony whispered, "On the asteroid."

And it never spoke again.

It was a dead rock, as dead as the rock which gave it birth, as dead as the walls of the ship, as dead as a dead human.

And Vernadsky and Hawkins rose from their knees and stared hopelessly at each other.

"It makes no sense," said Hawkins. "Why should he write the coordinates on the asteroid? That's like locking a key inside the cabinet it's meant to open."

Vernadsky shook his head. "A fortune in uranium. The biggest strike in history and we don't know where it is."

H. Seton Davenport looked about him with an odd feeling of pleasure. Even in repose, there was usually something hard about his lined face with its prominent nose. The scar on his right cheek, his black hair, startling eyebrows and dark complexion all combined to make him look every bit the incorruptible agent of the Terrestrial Bureau of Information that he actually was.

Yet now something almost like a smile tugged at his lips as he looked about the large room, in which dimness made the rows of book-films appear endless, and specimens of who-knows-what from who-knows-where bulk mysteriously. The complete disorder, the air of separation, almost insulation, from the world, made the room look unreal. It made it look every bit as unreal as its owner.

That owner sat in a combination armchair-desk which was bathed in the only focus of bright light in the room. Slowly, he turned the sheets of official reports he held in his hand. His hand moved otherwise only to adjust the thick spectacles which threatened at any moment to fall completely from his round and completely unimpressive nubbin of a nose. His paunch lifted and fell quietly as he read.

He was Dr. Wendell Urth, who, if the judgment of experts counted for anything, was Earth's most outstanding extraterrologist. On any subject outside Earth men came to him, though Dr. Urth had never in his adult life been more than an hour's-walk distance from his home on the University campus.

He looked up solemnly at Inspector Davenport. "A very intelligent man, this young Vernadsky," he said.

"To have deduced all he did from the presence of the silicony? Quite so," said Davenport.

"No, no, the deduction was a simple thing. Unavoidable, in fact. A noodle would have seen it. I was referring," and his glance grew a trifle censorious, "to the fact that the youngster had read of my experiments concerning the gamma-ray-sensitivity of *Siliconeus asteroidea.*"

"Ah, yes," said Davenport. Of course, Dr, Urth was the expert on siliconies. It was why Davenport had come to consult him. He had only one question for the man, a simple one, yet Dr. Urth had thrust out his full lips, shaken his ponderous head and asked to see all the documents in the case.

Ordinarily, that would have been out of the question; but Dr. Urth had recently been of considerable use to the T.B.I. in that affair of the Singing Bells of Luna and the singular alibi shattered by moon-gravity, and the Inspector had yielded.

Dr. Urth finished the reading, laid the sheets down on his desk, yanked his shirt sleeve out of the tight confines of his belt with a grunt and rubbed his glasses with it. He stared through the glasses at the light to see the effects of his cleaning, replaced them precariously on his nose and clasped his hands on his paunch, stubby fingers interlacing.

"Your question again, Inspector?"

Davenport said, patiently, "Is it true, in your opinion, that a silicony of the size and type described in the report could only have developed on a world rich in uranium—"

"Radioactive material," interrupted Dr. Urth. "Thorium, perhaps, though probably uranium."

"Is your answer yes, then?"

"Yes."

"How big would the world be?"

"A mile in diameter, perhaps," said the extraterrologist, thoughtfully. "Perhaps even more."

"How many tons of uranium, or radioactive material, rather?"

"In the trillions. Minimum."

"Would you be willing to put all that in the form of a signed opinion in writing."

"Of course."

"Very well then, Dr. Urth," and Davenport got to his feet. He reached for his hat with one hand and the file of reports with the other. "That is all we need."

But Dr. Urth's hand moved to the reports and rested heavily upon them. "Wait. How will you find the asteroid?"

"By looking. We'll assign a volume of space to every ship made available to us and—just look."

"The expense, the time, the effort!—And you'll never find it."

"One chance in a thousand. We might."

"One chance in a million. You won't."

"We can't let the uranium go without some try. Your professional opinion makes the prize high enough."

"But there is a better way to find the asteroid. *I* can find it."

Davenport fixed the extraterrologist with a sudden, sharp glance. Despite appearances, Dr. Urth was anything but a fool. He had personal experience of that. There was therefore just a bit of half-hope in his voice as he said, "How can you find it?"

"First," said Dr. Urth, "my price."

"Price?"

"Or fee, if you choose. When the government reaches the asteroid, there may be another large-size silicony on it. Siliconies are very valuable. The only form of life with solid silicone for tissues and liquid silicone as a circulating fluid. The

answer to the question whether the asteroids were once part of a single planetary body may rest with them. Do you understand?"

"You mean you want a large silicony delivered to you."

"Alive, well; and free of charge. Yes."

Davenport nodded. "I'm sure the government will agree. Now what have you on your mind?"

Dr. Urth said quietly, as though explaining everything, "The silicony's remark."

Davenport looked bewildered. "What remark?"

"The one in the report. Just before the silicony died, Vernadsky was asking it where the captain had written down the coordinates, and it said, 'On the asteroid.' "

A look of intense disappointment crossed Davenport's face. "Great Space, doctor, we know that, and we've gone into every angle of it. Every possible angle. It means nothing."

"Nothing at all, Inspector?"

"Nothing of importance. Read the report again. The silicony wasn't even listening to Vernadsky. He was feeling life depart and he was wondering about it. Twice, it asked 'What after death?' Then, as Vernadsky kept questioning it, it said, 'On the asteroid.' Probably, it never heard Vernadsky's question. It was answering its own question. It thought that after death it would return to its own asteroid—to its home, where it was safe. That's all."

Dr. Urth shook his head. "You are too much a poet, you know. You imagine too much. Come, it is an interesting problem and let us see if you can't solve it for yourself. Suppose the silicony's remark *were* an answer to Vernadsky."

"Even so," said Davenport impatiently, "how would it help? *Which* asteroid? The uranium asteroid? We can't find it, so we can't find the coordinates. Some other asteroid which the *Robert Q.* had used as a home base? We can't find that either."

"How you avoid the obvious, Inspector. Why don't you ask yourself what the phrase 'on the asteroid' means to the silicony. Not to you or to me, but to the silicony."

Davenport frowned. "Pardon me, doctor."

"I'm speaking plainly, What did the word *asteroid* mean to the silicony?"

"The silicony learned about space out of an astronomy text that was read to it. I suppose the book explained what an asteroid was."

"Exactly," crowed Dr. Urth, putting a finger to the side of his snub nose. "And how would the definition go? An asteroid is a small body, smaller than the planets, moving about the sun in an orbit which, generally speaking, lies between those of Mars and Jupiter. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose so."

"And what is the *Robert Q.?*"

"You mean the ship?"

"That's what *you* call it," said Dr. Urth. "The *ship*. But the astronomy book was an ancient one. It made no mention of ships in space. One of the crewmen said as much. He said it dated from before spaceflight. Then what is the *Robert Q.?* Isn't it a small body, smaller than the planets? And while the silicony was aboard wasn't it moving about the sun in an orbit which, generally speaking, lay between those of Mars and Jupiter?"

"You mean the silicony considered the ship as just another asteroid, and when he said, 'on the asteroid,' he meant 'on the ship'."

"Exactly. I told you I would make you solve the problem for yourself."

No expression of joy or relief lightened the gloom on the Inspector's face. "That is no solution, doctor."

But Dr. Urth blinked slowly at him and the bland look on his round face became, if anything, blander and more childlike in its uncomplicated pleasure. "Surely it is."

"Not at all. Dr. Urth, we didn't reason it out as you did. We dismissed the silicony's remark completely. But still, don't you suppose we searched the *Robert Q.?* We took it apart piece by piece, plate by plate. We just about unwelded the thing."

"And you found nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Perhaps you did not look in the right place."

"We looked in *every* place." He stood up, as though to go. "You understand, Dr. Urth? When we got through with the ship there was no possibility of those coordinates existing anywhere on it."

"Sit down, Inspector," said Dr. Urth, calmly. "You are still not considering the silicony's statement properly. Now the silicony learned English by collecting a word here and a word there. It couldn't speak idiomatic English. Some of its statements, as quoted, show that. For instance, it said, 'the planet which is most far' instead of 'the farthest planet.' You see?"

"Well?"

"Someone who cannot speak a language idiomatically either uses the idioms of his own language translated word by word or else he simply uses foreign words according to their literal meaning. The silicony had no spoken language of its own so it could only make use of the second alternative. Let's be literal, then. He said, *'on* the asteroid,' Inspector. *On* it. He didn't mean on a piece of paper, he meant on the ship, literally."

"Dr. Urth," said Davenport patiently, "when the Bureau

searches, it searches. There were no mysterious inscriptions *on* the ship, either."

Dr. Urth looked disappointed. "Dear me, Inspector, I keep hoping you will see the answer. Really, you have had so many hints."

Davenport drew in a slow, firm breath. It went hard, but his voice was calm and even once more. "Will you tell me what you have in mind, doctor?"

Dr. Urth patted his comfortable abdomen with one hand and replaced his glasses. "Don't you see, Inspector, that there is one place on board a spaceship where secret numbers are perfectly safe? Where, although in plain view, they would be perfectly safe from detection? Where, though they were being stared at by a hundred eyes, they would be secure?—Except from a seeker who is an astute thinker, of course."

"Where? Name the place!"

"Why, in those places where there happen to be numbers already. Perfectly normal numbers. Legal numbers. Numbers that are supposed to be there."

"What are you talking about?"

"The ship's serial number, etched directly on the hull. *On* the hull, be it noted. The engine number, the field generator number. A few others. Each etched on integral portions of the ship. *On* them, as the silicony said. On the ship."

Davenport's heavy eyebrows rose with sudden comprehension. "You may be right—and if you are, I'm hoping we find you a silicony twice the size of the *Robert Q.*'s. One that not only talks, but whistles, 'Up, Asteroids, Forever'!" He hastily reached for the dossier, thumbed rapidly through it and extracted an official T.B.I. form. "Of course we noted down all the identification numbers we found." He spread the form out. "If three of these resemble coordinates . . ."

"We should expect some small effort at disguise," Dr. Urth observed. "There will probably be certain letters and figures added to make the series appear more legitimate. . . ."

He reached for a scratch-pad and shoved another toward the Inspector. For minutes the two men were silent, jotting down serial numbers, experimenting with crossing out obviously unrelated figures.

At last Davenport let out a sigh that mingled satisfaction and frustration. "I'm stuck," he admitted. "I think you're right: The numbers on the engine and the calculator are clearly disguised coordinates and dates. They don't run anywhere near the normal series, and it's easy to strike out the fake figures. That gives us two . . . but I'll take my oath the rest of these are absolutely legitimate serial numbers. What are your findings, doctor?"

"I agree," Dr. Urth nodded. "We now have two coordinates, and we know where the third was inscribed."

"We know, do we? And how—?" The Inspector broke off and uttered an obscenity much older than space-swearing. "Of course! The number on the very ship itself, which isn't entered here—because it was on the precise spot on the hull where the meteor crashed through. . . . I'm afraid there goes your silicony, doctor." Then his craggy face brightened. "But I'm an idiot. The number's gone, but we can get it in a flash from Interplan Registry."

"I fear," said Dr. Urth, "that I must dispute at least the second part of your statement. Registry will have only the ship's original legitimate number—not the disguised coordinate to which the captain altered it."

"The exact spot on the hull . . . ," Davenport muttered. "And because of that chance shot the asteroid may be lost forever. What use to anybody are two coordinates without a third?"

"Well," said Dr. Urth precisely, "conceivably of very great use to a two-dimensional being. But creatures of our dimensions," he patted his paunch, "do require the third . . . which I fortunately happen to have right here."

"In the T.B.I. dossier? But we just checked the list of numbers—"

"*Your* list, Inspector. Your file also includes young Vernadsky's original report. And of course the serial number listed there for the *Robert Q.* is the carefully faked one under which she was then sailing—no point in rousing the curiosity of a repair-mechanic by letting him note a discrepancy."

Davenport reached for a scratch-pad and the Vernadsky list. A moment's calculation and he grinned.

Dr. Urth lifted himself out of the chair with a pleased puff and trotted to the door. "It is always pleasant to see you, Inspector Davenport. Do come again. And remember, the government can have the uranium, but I want the important thing: one giant silicony, alive and in good condition."

He was smiling.

"And preferably," said Davenport, "whistling." Which he was doing himself as he walked out.

THE PAST AND ITS DEAD PEOPLE

By R. Bretnor

When Dr. Flitter came into the room, it seemed as though the past and its dead people came in with him, clinging to him like stale surgery smells, like the cold sweat of ancient autopsies. He would come in, his moving bones tight in their tailored shrouds of thin, gray flesh and stiffly pressed brown cloth. He would cross the big Turkey carpet to his chair, dropping frayed bedside courtesies much as a tired cleaning woman at the day's dark end drops her concealing dust-rag on a stain.

He was a perfect gentleman. That was what Mrs. Weatherbleak herself had said when she first rented him Judge Ullbright's room. So, every evening after supper, when her *nice* boarders came down into the parlor for an hour or two, he was admitted to their company. He was admitted to the treaty by which they lived. Even after the television set had been turned on, when laughter and the posturings on its screen showed him withdrawn into the past which was a part of him, the others there betrayed no interest, carefully.

Mrs. Emily Molbert thought this strange. Each evening, alone at her end of the red davenport, fingering her bangles and her necklaces, she smiled and let her tongue click its discreet resentment against her teeth, while her eyes, two hungry stones in the seamed kewpie face below her blondined hair, turned warily to watch him and to probe and probe the sealed wound of his privacy.

What his past was, who its dead people were, she did not know; her second sight was not as keen as that. But she had recognized it instantly, on the first evening of his residence, when he was introduced to all of them. Breathless, hugging her treasure to her, she had heard Mr. Hiram Puny snicker nervously, and cough to cover it. She had seen Mrs. Puny working her little hands against her knees. She had observed Miss Luckmeyer, shivering, draw closer to George Giele on the bamboo love seat by the fireplace. And she had waited, knowing that each had felt what she herself had seen, until the doctor took his leave, until the door was closed.

Then Mrs. Weatherbleak, shaping the powdered creases of her face into a smile, exclaimed, "How nice it's going to be for all of us, having the Doctor here, almost as if the poor Judge was back again. You don't find many gentlemen like them, not nowadays."

Everyone smiled and nodded back at her, paying tribute to her social acumen; and Mrs. Emily Molbert snatched at the opportunity.

She leaned a little forward; her beads and bangles clicked excitedly.

"Now I just *wonder,*" she said into the air.

She listened to the furniture transform their first reaction into sound, into the squeaking protest of bamboo, the consumptive gasp of Mrs. Weatherbleak's high-crowned chair, the cry of springs crushed under worn velour. She felt the quick, converging pressure of their eyes.

Mrs. Weatherbleak's smile tightened at either end. "Why, Mrs. Molbert, dear, what *do* you mean?"

And Mrs. Emily Molbert's thin, flat voice flapped through the room.

"What do I *mean?* I mean you just can't tell, that's all. That is, about *people.* Oh, I'm not saying he isn't perfectly all right. It's not for me to judge. But I do think there's something *odd* about him." Between each two sentences, her tongue flicked forward at them, like a bird's. "I had a neighbor once who was like that. A Mr. Bauer, he said his name was, living right there in Long Beach, next door to us. You would've thought he was as nice a man as you could wish to meet. That's what my husband said, and all the neighbors too. But *I* could tell. I could see he was hiding something right away. And afterward they all agreed how right I was, because it wasn't his real name at all, and he was wanted by the police for something *dreadful* —something I wouldn't even talk about—back in St. Louis, I think it was."

She stopped. They looked at her. She felt their sudden malice thrusting out, to isolate her, to guard against their own awareness of what she had laid bare.

Mrs. Weatherbleak's smile had dropped away, leaving her mouth a puckered plum afloat on curds of flesh. Moving her head slowly forward, she said, "Now, *dear,* we mustn't start imagining things. You're just upset. We all know Dr. Flitter comes from a fine old family, and that he's had some wonderful experiences, living down in Australia all those years. Anyway, San Diego isn't like Long Beach, *dear,* where you can't tell who you'll get."

"How well we know it, Mrs. Weatherbleak." At their end of the red davenport, Mrs. Hiram Puny nodded and sniffed. "It was those Long Beach men who cheated us whren Mr. Puny was in real estate. But I'm sure that Dr. Flitter isn't at all like that. I'm sure he's very nice."

"Hey," Mr. Puny said. "That's right. you bet."

Miss Luckmeyer, who taught music at the Junior High School, semed interested in Mrs. Emily Molbert's thighs. Almost, but not quite, loosening the skein of discipline that held her face, she stared at them, touching caressing fingers to her own, touching their private opulence in a contemptuous comparison. "I think I get it," she announced. "The doctor's cul-

tured. He's got an education. That makes him a suspicious character—a pervert, probably. My God!"

Mrs. Weatherbleak tittered coyly. George Giele, guffawing, suggested that maybe in Australia the doctor had run a big abortion mill for kangaroos. Mrs. Hiram Puny, with a squeal, hastily put her fingers in her ears.

And Mrs. Emily Molbert, missing none of this, embraced her disappointment angrily, and grinned at them. *I'm every bit as good as they,* she told herself, *at least I'm a married woman, the dirty bitch-bitch-bitch, that is too what she is, and anyhow she'll never find a man who'll leave her fixed for life like my LaVern did me, so there!* She thought of her brother, the chiropractor, doing more real good than all those doctors did, making just as good money too. *All right, then, go ahead, be against me.* She grinned at them. *You take your precious doctor, see if I care, you'll find out for yourselves, oh yes you will, and then we'll see—*

"It would be *such* a shame," said Mrs. Weatherbleak, refabricating a section of her smile, "if anything should happen so our little group couldn't all meet down here the way we have. We're such good friends, we mustn't spoil it."

"No, indeed," clucked Mrs. Hiram Puny. "Live and let live, I always say."

For a moment only, Mrs. Emily Molbert grinned at the cold threat of their exclusion, their mirror to reflect her emptiness. Abruptly, she bit her lip. The words came from her like moth cadavers spilling from a lamp. "I—I didn't mean that he was shady, or—or anything. Why, I'd be simply the last person to say that, even if I couldn't tell what a fine man he was as well as anybody. I guess I thought there'd been, well, maybe a sorrow in his life. My goodness, I was just *wondering,* that's all."

She finished. There was quiet. Each stick of furniture let out its sudden sigh.

"I'm *so* glad you explained, *dear.*" Mrs. Weatherbleak, wheezing, beamed at everyone. "It simply goes to show—we must express ourselves more *clearly,* mustn't we?"

After that, Mrs. Emily Molbert had kept her speculations to herself, nourishing them behind a palisade of nods and smiles and simpering pliancy. It was like when she used to stay with LaVern's ma, she told herself; the people here were every bit the same. Each evening in the parlor, assaying their residuum of antipathy, she postured, flattered, agreed with all of them, and sucked the warming thought that someday *they'd* be sorry, just wouldn't they.

Meanwhile, she was not idle. Wherever Dr. Flitter walked, the past and its dead people went with him; and now, at every opportunity, her path crossed theirs. Sometimes, when his

door was open and Marilene, the maid, was making up his bed, she would stop democratically to pass the time of day, to let her eyes feed on the twisted coverlet, the scattered books, and the few mismated toilet articles on the bare bureau. More often, when the door was closed, she paused, holding her breath, on tiptoe lest he hear, to read his thumbtacked card: EDMUND FLITTER, M.D., with (*no longer practicing*) heavily penciled underneath. And sometimes, when he took his walk up Laurel Street over Cabrillo Bridge into the park, discreetly and at a distance she followed him.

The autumn months moved by; and Mrs. Emily Molbert, at least once a day, impatiently took inventory of her gains. They were not many. Her covert sifting of the morning mail had brought no great reward—one letter from New Zealand, from Dunedin, too thick for her to hold against the light, addressed to him in an untidy spiderweb of ink, printed up in its corner with the names of BAXTER & MORDECAI, SOLICITORS. And all the rest of her researches had given not much more. He walked into the park. Always alone, he sat upon a bench, staring for hours through the squawking gulls who circled down to scavenge at her feet. Occasionally, as he returned, he stopped in at the liquor store. At rare intervals, he went downtown to the National Bank.

These were the things he did, not normal things like going to shows, or over to Coronado for the day, or even to the dog track like LaVern. At night, she guessed, he holed up in his room, secretly drinking, reading his odd books—*Jude the Obscure, The Light of Asia, A Guide to Queensland and to New South Wales*. Once, greatly daring, first making sure that no one was around, she had bent quickly to the keyhole of his door—and he was sitting there, bowed in his darkness against the window frame. And she had seen, as always, that he was not alone.

The thinning autumn cooled. The sloven chill of southern winter came, went, and came again. It dragged a dirty sky across the town for Christmas and New Year's—a sky that sagged and stayed, dribbling down endlessly through the sad branches of the palms.

Those January afternoons were times of trial for Mrs. Emily Molbert. She spent them in her room, garbed in the bridal pink of pom-pom slippers and nylon negligee, starting to rearrange the smaller things she owned, starting to fix her hair some smart new way, opening and closing dressing-table drawers, stopping before her mirror to flirt and smile and snatch its momentary echo of assurance.

Even her radio, crooning, chattering, caressing her with oleaginous commercials, could not entice her from her own distraction. Right now, downstairs (she would feel sure) Mr. and Mrs. Hiram Puny sat in the parlor with Mrs. Weather-

bleak, talking about her maybe, or watching the TV. And like as not *he* was down there with them, hiding whatever awful thing he had to hide, and sort of laughing at her secretly because the others wouldn't let her find it out.

Then, at the thought, she would look suddenly at buttons, brooches, bracelets, strings of beads, half-sorted on the bed; sweep them together, tangle them, thrust them into their bags and cardboard boxes; get up and quickly walk across the room; sit at the mirror, coyly tilt her head, exchanging grins and nods and confidences.

In all that time, she hadn't learned a thing; it was unfair, and it was *their* fault, too—protecting him. (She would turn languidly, raising her left hand, posing its fingers to display their rings.) Well, *they*'d find out. Even when she was just a little girl, she'd seen things other people couldn't see. Hadn't that woman preacher at the Message Chapel in Santa Monica told her she could be real psychic if she studied to? (Here she would laugh conspiratorially.) They just werent fooling her one bit. That Luckmeyer thing, with her big words, the bitch, the dirty bitch, and her big hot behind. And Mrs. Weatherbleak, the fat old nasty *pig*. Oh, they were up to something, the both of them, pretending to be extra nice to her the last few days, trying to trap her into saying something she oughtn't to, looking for an excuse to close the parlor to her evenings, or even make her pack her trunk and move. (At this, her hand, forgotten suddenly, would clutch unguided at lipstick, perfume, rouge; and she would daub it on.) Just let them try, was all. She could show both of them a thing or two—oh, yes, she could. . . .

It was on such an afternoon, at half past three, that Mrs. Weatherbleak knocked gently at her door. She recognized the knock. She sat up, hand halted in mid-air, hastily reassuming her brittle armor of gentility. "Yes?" she called out. "Who is there?"

"It's me, dear—Mrs. Weatherbleak. You aren't too busy, dear?"

There was a pause while Mrs. Emily Molbert's mirrored image showed its teeth, before she turned her head. "Well, goodness—well, just a minute, then."

She moved the objects on the dressing table back and forth. She crossed the room to snap and snap again the fastenings of her trunk, to turn the radio down. She threw her flower-embroidered, long-fringed Chinese shawl over the bedspread; twitched its sleek surface straight. At last, daring to wait no longer, she unlatched the door. "I didn't mean to keep you such a time. It's just there always seems so much to do. But do come in. I was just saying to myself how I'd like company—"

Mrs. Weatherbleak entered, still puffing from the stairs, wearing her Sunday smile, clucking apology; and Mrs. Emily Molbert, between their words, fussed her into the big upholstered chair; then primly, daintily, sat down herself on the hard-cushioned dressing table stool, where she could press her knees together bone to bone, and feel the mirror's cold encouragement behind her back.

Their talk was light and back-and-forth at first, about the weather, about how Mrs. Weatherbleak had owned a lovely shawl like that, only not so big and with a dragon on it instead of flowers . . . and Mrs. Molbert waited, tense for whatever menace law beneath, small, subtle, fanged.

It had been weeks, said Mrs. Weatherbleak, since they had had a real good visit by themselves, now hadn't it? In her position, there were so *many* things to think about; why, every time she turned around, it seemed, the cook was wasting perfectly good food, or one of those two boys up on the third floor had brought a woman in—not that *she* interfered in people's lives; it was their business what they did, unless there were complaints; she always tried to look the other way, and not to judge, if they were just *discreet* . . .

She paused. The bar-pin on her bosom tossed and quaked. Her giggle came, metallic, moistureless.

". . . dis*creet*," she giggled, "well, like Miss Luckmeyer is—"

She stopped; the parched sound ceased; her eyes, small in their creased and powdered nests, went wide. "Oh, *my!*" she said, touching a finger to her truant lips. "I shouldn't have said *that.*" And then she snickered. "But I know *you* won't say a word about it, will you, dear?"

She had revealed no secret scandal, nothing which was not common knowledge in the house. But she herself had breached the covenant, tearing a way through all its silences. This was no accident; this was no careless slip of cautious tongue—

Oh no, oh no, oh no—

For just an instant, unbelievingly, Mrs. Emily Molbert's body refused to breathe, straitjacketing her lungs convulsively in its cruel cage, letting her hands clutch in like claws upon themselves. Then it released her. Gasping, she echoed the dry giggle with her own. "I—I *never* would of dreamed it!" she exclaimed. "I never would. Why, he's a married man, even if that wife of his does stay back East. My goodness me!" Her head came jerking forward on its neck. "But don't you worry, Mrs. Weatherbleak. I'll keep it to myself. You can trust *me.*"

"Dear, I *know* I can. I'm a good judge of human nature too, even if sometimes I can't say all I think—in my position, dear. And that's why I came up. I knew *you'd* understand." She sighed. "I try not to complain. I wouldn't even now if it was just those boys, because their class of people aren't worth troubling with—I'd as soon tell them to pack their things as look

at them. But it's more than that—" She leaned a little forward in the chair; she darted a precautionary glance toward the door; she let her voice drop confidentially. "It's more than that. *It's Dr. Flitter, dear.*"

The words hung there between them, ripe peaches, pearls. Above, around them, silence spread its wings, its invitation into throbbing darknesses where, an ice-gray dagger safe to the hungry hand, all terror lay.

Mrs. Molbert trembled; tightly as any trembling lover, she hugged herself. Now she was armed against him, against them all. She made her mouth a circle of surprise. "I can't *believe* it," she cried out. "I mean, he's such a *perfect gentleman.*"

Hastily, Mrs. Weatherbleak twitched back her slipping mask of friendliness. "You're quite right, dear. That's what he *seems* to be. And you're like me—you just can't bring yourself to think the worst of anyone, even if you've seen through them all along. It's very sweet of you, it really is. But there are times—" She shook her head. "—when we don't dare close our eyes to things, much as we'd like to, dear. When people start in acting *queerly* . . .—well, it's better to find out about them, isn't it?"

Mrs. Emily Molbert experienced two temptations—to thrust again, or to learn at once what lay behind all this, what had occurred. The second was the stronger. She left her place, came tripping to the bed, saying. "Goodness me, one does have to *protect* oneself, especially nowadays"; and, sitting down a cozy arm's-length from Mrs. Weatherbleak, she let her naked eagerness expose itself. "So he's been acting *queer*—imagine that! *Wh-what has he done?*"

Mrs. Weatherbleak reached out an udder of a hand to pat her knee. "It isn't so much what he's done as just the way he's been behaving, dear—"

Then, her voice sugar-coated, intimate, she went on to relate how Dr. Flitter sat in his room at night, all by himself and in the dark, thinking she didn't even dare to guess what kind of thoughts, and—well, that simply wasn't *natural,* was it now? Also, right in the parlor with the rest of them, when the TV was on with a Jack Benny show or something good like that, he'd act like he was looking *through* it at—at something else; why, even poor Mr. Puny'd noticed it. And he was so secretive, too, never saying a word about himself, at least about his past. And then there was the time when Mrs. Puny, waking up, had gone out to the bathroom in her dressing gown, and found him in the hall, just sort of *lurking* there. And—

Mrs. Molbert listened as though it all were fresh and new to her. On tenterhooks, she waited for the clue, the item of significant intelligence which would illuminate the rest.

Finally, Mrs. Weatherbleak said that that was all. "Except one thing," she said, "and really, dear, I hate to mention it. I

mean, because money isn't everything, especially here, where we're such good friends. But you see, dear, along about November the doctor started falling way behind, until he owed me almost for six weeks. It wasn't until Christmas he paid up. And now *again*." There was a momentary hardening of her mouth; her eyes were button-bright. "Not that I *care*," she said. "Why, even now I'd never mention it if Mr. Giele's friend down at the bank hadn't told about his account being closed, and if it hadn't been for all those other things. Maybe he's having money troubles, or maybe he's simply spending it as fast as it comes in. I just don't know. But it's a bad sign, dear; it always is."

"How right you are!" Mrs. Emily Molbert cried. "It's the *first* sign. You just can't be too careful from now on, his money coming from abroad like that, and his being practically a foreigner. And if he's not *responsible*—well, you can't tell *what* he'll do. Believe me, these doctors are the worst of all when they go wrong. I saw a movie once—"

Mrs. Weatherbleak interrupted her, patting her knee again. "I know *exactly* what you mean. Don't think I haven't thought of it. They can buy morphine and all kinds of things, and poison too; and once when Marilene was fixing up his room she saw that little bag of his left open, and—dear, I'd never talk to anyone but you like this—inside was a *syringe*." She paused an instant, observing the effect. "Well, you can just imagine how I feel, with the whole house to think about, and all my dearest friends right on the same floor with him. Of course, I'm not suggesting he's an *addict*, or anything like that. But there's something in his past, dear, just as you pointed out—something he wants to hide. And, as you said, we must protect ourselves. So that's one reason I dropped by to see you, dear, because you're such a judge of character, and *notice* things. I wondered if . . . ?"

She stopped, cocking her head, leaving the question tempting, incomplete.

The point of Mrs. Molbert's tongue flicked slyly out. *The nerve of her*, she thought, *the dirty old fat pig, the nerve, after how she treated me, like trash, that's how—you think I'll tell you anything, you fat old pig?—not me, not till I'm good and ready, ha-ha-ha, maybe not even then—you can just sweat—but I'll find out about him, yes I will!* She smirked. She rose. "I've noticed several things," she said aloud. "Of course I have. But I don't think I really ought to say *right now*. Until we know some more, that is. Until we're *sure*."

Betraying just a touch of self-control, Mrs. Weatherbleak hoisted her velvet bulk out of the chair. "Well, *dear*, I'm sure that you know best. And we can talk about it all some other time, when you're ready, dear. I'd be the last person to ask you to say anything you might feel sorry for."

In profile, hand on pink nylon hip, Mrs. Emily Molbert smiled mysteriously. "Now, don't you worry, Mrs. Weatherbleak," she whispered. "People like that get just what they deserve. I *know*. When the time comes, I'll help you all I can, I really will."

After that, Mrs. Weatherbleak said that their little talk had done her *so* much good, and it was nice to know that she had someone in the house to turn to, someone who understood, and they must have another visit very soon.

They parted in a cloud of mutual compliments; and, having closed the door, Mrs. Molbert stood there close to it until the heavy footsteps had turned off down the hall onto the stairs.

Then, darting to the bed, she snatched her Chinese shawl, swirled it around her. One shoulder high, she minced across the room, swaying her hips, dancing a step or two. She stopped before the mirror. Pushing her pelvis forward, lifting a corner of the shawl seductively, she struck a pose. Over her shining triumph of embroidered flowers, over her sudden wealth, she grinned and grinned.

When Dr. Flitter came into a room, it seemed as though the past and its dead people came in with him, surrounding him invisibly, constraining his attention to themselves. It was as though some cunning coroner had cut a sickly segment from the corpse of time, kept it like chicken-tissue half alive, grafted it to him indissolubly—a private Resurrection Day, a day without a nightfall or a dawn, full of the discourse of old agonies, full of dead deeds which walked, and could not die, and cried to be undone.

He would come in, stretched pale skin fitting the narrow framework of his skull with none to spare, thin graying hair brushed flat, precise brown suit moved by his straight small bones. He would come in, into the parlor or the dining room, his vanquished eyes regarding no one there, nodding his head in short, sharp, clockwork nods. "Good *evening*," he would say, "good *evening*," sounding the word as if it were a verb. "I hope your back is better, Mrs. Puny? I'm sure it will be. Yes, of course it will." He would sit down among them, unaware of any change in their relationship, of the converging glances that discussed the wearing threads around his tie's neat knot, or pointed out that his clean linen was not quite as clean as it had always been, or darted back and forth at fancied signs of dissipation and physical decay. He would sit down to dinner in their midst, seemingly unaware that Mrs. Emily Molbert had moved up to sit at Mrs. Weatherbleak's right hand across from him, or that the portion on his plate was somewhat smaller than it used to be.

It was not long before the general conversation passed him by. Red-necked George Giele no longer winked at him when telling an off-color doctor joke, or shouted questions at him

about life expectancies. Miss Luckmeyer no longer looked to him for polite punctuating murmurs when she explained Art, Music, or Psychology. Mr. Hiram Puny ceased favoring him with tips on Loma Portal real estate, and Mrs. Puny stopped asking his advice for her sciatica.

Mrs. Weatherbleak had not confided in them, not explicitly. But they had felt the atmospheric change; they had observed how Mrs. Molbert's status had improved; hints, signs, and their shared comparisons had soon instructed them. And now they spoke to Mrs. Molbert in the hall, asked her opinion on questions of the day, listened attentively when she chose to tell of the fine life she had led in Long Beach before LaVern passed on. They did not mention Dr. Flitter to her—no, not yet—but, in the parlor and the dining room, they watched her watching him. Not seeing what she saw, they now no longer could deny that it was there, a shadow at the rim of consciousness, his, his alone, enclosed upon him and upon himself, taunting them all to rape its secrecy. When she addressed him, as she often did, their voices dropped, their conversations died, their eyes abandoned her and turned to him.

On these occasions, Mrs. Emily Molbert would signal her intention cleverly, smiling with teeth and lips, glancing from side to side, tapping a nail against her necklaces. She would wait quietly until silence came. Then she would speak, sending her words experimentally, like long, blind probes, into the tissues of his time, his world.

"Doctor, wasn't that just an awful case in Hollywood? You must have heard of it—the girl who killed that other girl, I mean. She did it with a knife, and now she says she can't remember anything at all, or why she did it even, and the police can't seem to find out anything, even though they've been questioning that doctor she was working for. The papers didn't say so, but Walter Winchell thinks he gave her *dope*, or hypnotized her into doing it. I thought I'd ask you, because it's interesting and you're a doctor too. Do *you* believe a doctor would do a thing like that? I mean . . ."

Or:

"My goodness me, I wish I'd done a lot of traveling, to foreign countries like you have, that is. But then I guess I've never had a *reason* to. I guess it's like LaVern used to say—people who lead a decent life where they belong don't need to go and live with foreigners, unless they've got a real good business there, of course. Anyhow, I know that I'd get homesick all the time, it being so far and all. Didn't *you,* Doctor? Didn't you ever wish you could come home?"

So she would question him; and all the others there would watch, alert for some reaction, for a clue. And he would raise his eyes, slowly, as though he could not focus them, and answer her. Pronouncing each word patiently, he would explain

that he had been away; he had lost touch; he hadn't practiced medicine for several years; he had retired. Or, irritatingly, as though she hadn't asked him anything at all, he would agree with her: "Yes, Mrs. Molbert, I'm sure you must be right. Yes, I'm sure you are."

And always, then, for an exasperating shred of time, the opaque barrier to his past would thin, and she would see the vague, dead, faceless people moving there, and feel the ancient conflicts feeding themselves on new adversities. Then this would pass; he would be there in front of her, mocking the sudden tremor of her hands, the moist intensity of her desire. And she would have to satisfy herself on such poor substitutes as Mrs. Puny's repressed hysteric squeal, or a glimpse of George Giele tapping his forehead openly as he leaned over to whisper in Miss Luckmeyer's ear.

During those intervening weeks, the quickened pulse of her existence ebbed and flowed, like a new desert rivulet fed by uncertain springs. There were the gay, exciting afternoons when Mrs. Weatherbleak invited her to tea, listened to everything she had to say, held out her rhinestone bribes of naughty confidence, and, ponderously sly, fished for whatever secrets she might know. There were the times the Punys asked her in to sit with them, to share their albums of old photographs in the prim parlor-twilight of their room, or took her with them on their halting walks into the fringes of the Park and treated her to soda fountain lunches afterwards. And there was the occasion when George Giele and Miss Luckmeyer gave her a ride out to La Mesa in his big red car, and stopped off at a cocktail lounge, and tried to loosen up her tongue with drinks; *they* soon found out who was too smart for them because she wouldn't take a thing except a little glass of sherry wine.

But there were other days, like the brief spell right after Dr. Flitter paid his bill again, though not in full—days worm-eaten by anxiety, days when each intercepted glance carried its thinly veiled, certain sign of leagues against her, of jokes at her expense, of unseen walls rising to shut her out. Suddenly she would *know* that they all knew she knew no more than they. Suddenly, she would *feel* the quicksand shifting of their sympathy from her to—*him*. And one night she dreamed that his rich uncle from Australia—a strangely stick-like, fierce tall man all dressed in black, with a big diamond in his tie and a great black moustache—had come to him and paid off everything; and Mrs. Weatherbleak had turned her out so he could have her room; and all their faces, as they stared at her, were cold and blank and bare; and none of them would speak to her again—

She had awakened, to find her knuckles hammering her clenched teeth, bruising themselves, bruising her dry lips. Pant-

ing, she had lain there, trapped in the nightmare's awful certainty, until the comfort of self-pity welled to set her free; and even then enough was left so that she had to rise, turn on the lights, and find an all-night station with hillbilly band music to listen to.

Then suddenly, on a sweet April day, the tension ceased. Her wish was answered. She received everything she had waited for.

As soon as she sat down to breakfast, she saw that something terribly important had come up. Mrs. Weatherbleak was too alert, too obviously on edge; her manner did not suit the surly hour. Twice, eyes full of meaning, she whispered how she especially wanted to see Mrs. Molbert right after they were through; and she rushed them through the meal so fast that Mrs. Puny complained because she couldn't eat her soft-boiled egg. Finally, when all the rest were safely gone, they found each other in the hall.

Like a great tortoise, gesturing secrecy, Mrs. Weatherbleak drew her head down and in. "It's Marilene," she said. "Her sister called. Told me she's got some kind of virus flu, and won't be back to work maybe for days. Of course I don't believe a word of it. Most likely she was pregnant—that kind of people are just like rabbits, dear—and tried to do away with it, and now she's ill. But anyhow it's what you might expect. To let us know just before breakfast, when—"

Mrs. Molbert tapped her foot.

"—*when,*" persisted Mrs. Weatherlbleak, "it was too late to get another girl, as you well know. And now I'm stuck with all her work to do, with all these rooms . . . and I was wondering if you'd help me, dear?"

Even then, Mrs. Molbert could not resist the urge to say, "Well now, I don't know how much help I'd be, because in Long Beach I never had to do much housework, really. I always used to have a woman in." Of course, she added, relishing the silent acquiescence with which Mrs. Weatherbleak received this statement, she'd help all she could, except for *nasty* work; and she made it clear that under no conditions would she touch Miss Luckmeyer's room; and Mrs. Weatherbleak assured her that she need not.

"In fact," declared Mrs. Weatherbleak, "if you could do your own, and maybe Dr. Flitter's too, that would be quite enough. You see, dear, because of my position, and with him owing me and all, I'd rather not go in myself; I think it's better, dear. That's why I'd be so much obliged to you. And anyway—"

Their glances met, embraced.

"—you're so *observant,* dear."

That was the signature. Now a new treaty was in force between them, the bond of more than their complicity, a con-

trast of surrender, an instrument admitting dominance. Mrs. Molbert shook as she accepted it. Half fearing her good fortune, she still maintained the protocol which governs such diplomacies, however great or small. Sharply she outlined her minor terms for the invasion: freedom to lock the door while working in his room; a guarantee that he would not return to come upon her without warning there; a promise that he'd never know.

Mrs. Weatherbleak hastily acceded to these demands, as though a moment lost would make the prize dissolve and disappear. She said that he'd gone out; he'd started off toward the park; now was as good a time as any. She fetched a dustpan and a broom. They went upstairs. She unlocked the door, took out the key, put it in Mrs. Molbert's hand. Then, breathing heavily, she went downstairs again to sit as sentinel out on the warm front porch, where from her rocker she could watch Laurel Street.

Mrs. Molbert closed the door behind her back. The blinds were halfway down, and April had not come into the room. She did not mind. She left the windows closed. Her nostrils sipped a mustiness suspended in the air, a nearly imaginary hint of still, stale clothing and undried shaving soap. So might the robber of a treasure-tomb have savored its dead dust, protecting it against the springtime's cleanly breath.

Quickly, she went to work. She took the crumpled flannelette pajamas, the worn-out dressing gown, and hung them up. She tossed the bed together anyhow and tugged it straight; she dabbled with her duster here and there; she flicked the broom; she pushed his slippers underneath the bed, tidied the washstand hurriedly, and then, having performed these gestures, felt free to do what she had come there for.

It took her forty minutes. He had no trunk, and there was almost nothing in his dresser drawers. But there were letters to be read, cold business records of adversity, and bank books to be looked at. And hanging in the closet were his clothes, with pockets to investigate. She looked through all of these, through the two suitcases strapped shut and pushed into the closet's darkest corner, through a loose cardboard box of magazines and shoes. She looked through them methodically, forcing her anxious fingers to put each item back exactly as it was, telling herself that even if she didn't find a thing it wouldn't really matter because neither Mrs. Weatherbleak nor any of the others need ever know, repeating the assurance and taking cold comfort in its hollowness.

And then she found it, under a leather panel inside the ancient alligator bag that held his instruments and medicines: a crushed brown envelope containing two letters from a woman, a woman's photograph in a flat silver frame, a snapshot of the woman and a boy sailing a toy boat in a garden

pond. She sat down on his chair. Around her, all his guarded world rose into being and opened up for her.

She entered it.

She learned who his dead people were, and why they did not rest, and what it was that he had done to them. Each wisp of feeling, each edge-of-vision glimpse: the wavering, shabby threads of her clairvoyance all held true.

Some twenty minutes later, she emerged, and closed the door behind her, and went downstairs, and walked like any starveling fowl whose crop has by a miracle been filled; with a prance, and eager pecking movements of her head, and stone-sharp eyes. But when she reached the porch, where Mrs. Weatherbleak, drumming impatient fingers on the rocker's arms, awaited her, she disciplined these signs of her success. Standing there, looking down upon the powdered fat folding so suddenly into a mask of greed, she thought, *Well! just sitting there like a fat old pig, hoping I've done your dirty work, ha-ha! you wouldn't listen when I told you what kind of man he was, and you were even scared to go up in his room—"it's my position, dear," ha-ha, ha-ha!*

Mrs. Weatherbleak tried no concealment now. Her voice was coarse and loud and ravenous. "What did you *find?"*

What did I find! mocked Mrs. Molbert in her mind's privacy. *Wouldn't you like to know, you fat old thing, just wouldn't you—*

Mrs. Weatherbleak's eyes closed down to penny-slits. She leaned abruptly forward, as though the chair no longer could endure her weight. "Tell me, *dear,"* she said, in a lower voice, a little nervously. "Did you find out about him? What did you find out?"

Mrs. Molbert smiled, showing all her teeth just like a movie queen. Contemptuously, she let the broom and dustpan slide to the floor between the two of them. She sat down in a chair.

Holding the smile, she said, "Why, Mrs. Weatherbleak! Surely you don't think I'd be one to *pry?"*

They stared at one another silently. Mrs. Weatherbleak sagged back into the rocker. Her lips moved, but no sound came. After a time, her glance averted to cover up the lie, she muttered that she never would have even thought a thing like that, especially about her very *dearest* friend.

And Mrs. Molbert, knowing that no one was deluded, sat still, and smiled, and deeply drank from the dark, opened vein of hatred pulsing there.

There are those among us who are immune to tragedy. They are pitiless where its comprehension would demand pity of them, idiot-blind to the inwardness even of its bull-ring drama. They are aware of others' pain only as a narcotic

more and more diluted, less and less adequate to slake their thirst for pain.

Mrs. Emily Molbert was one of these. Now that she had forced her way into this world, now that she could walk with the dead people there, she saw no tragedy at all in its persistence or even in those unchangeable events which doomed it to existence while he lived. She saw no tragedy, but she saw Right and Wrong, and they were easy to identify, as easy as they always were for her. Besides, people who had a psychic gift like hers were different. They were, well, more like *instruments*. That made her duty clear. It was not just to watch. It was to teach a lesson, she told herself, that's what it was.

Her manner changed. No longer did she need to cast her questions into an underwater darkness. Now every thrust was certain; each barb was sure to sting. Now, too, she faced a new and fascinating problem: he must be made aware of her superior insight without suspecting what really had occurred, while simultaneously the others in the house had, indirectly, to be apprised of the reality.

In this she was successful. Evenings, in the parlor, when she leaned forward to speak a word to him, their faces turned into the precious shapes of envy at her knowledge, rage at her still not sharing it, and imagination's lust to conjure up some sort of substitute.

She spiced her speech with many a weighty pause, with many a glance aside. Always, she touched his world tangentially, to strike without exhibiting what she was striknig at. Out of her reservoir of righteousness, she found him questions regarding those obligations which a doctor has towards his patients, his family, himself. She spoke to him about the power of life and death; about those ill-considered deeds which, once done, can never be erased; about that retribution which must inevitably, under Mosaic Law, strike the transgressor down.

Her religious tenets were obscure; as a body, they may perhaps best be described as a cineramic heresy of Calvinism. Nevertheless, the points she chose to make struck home. That was quite obvious. Dr. Flitter ignored her no longer. It was as though, subconsciously aware that she had breached his world, he was forbidden now by common courtesy to deny her presence. He listened gravely to her, seemingly as affected by her words as he could have been by those of the most inspired theologian. He often sat beside her in the parlor, or outside on the porch; he walked with her downstairs, or through the hall. And when she spoke to him, he answered her respectfully, as if to pay the simple dues of comradeship.

As the days passed, Mrs. Weatherbleak and her friends learned only that something dark had happened in that sur-

viving past with which Mrs. Emile Molbert taunted them. They learned that it was something dark with death, which he had done, which weighed upon him now eternally. They watched. Hating Mrs. Molbert, they envied her. They watched her lacerating him, making him bleed invisibly, wearing him thin. They listened to him say, "But, Mrs. Molbert, why are you sure that God is not forgiving? I find it difficult to understand." And heard her answer him, "It says right in the Bible, *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,* that's what it says."

And Mrs. Molbert, anticipating no immediate crisis because he'd paid his bill in part again, fobbed off their tricks and hints and questionings, and settled down to relish her reward, being polite just when she wanted to, and being as overbearing as they used to be, and planning to herself how if he finally had to move away she'd let them know a little at a time.

Then, on the eleventh day, a Friday, down in the parlor after supper, something occurred which was to change all her plans. They had this wonderful news program on TV, with headline personalities right there to answer questions like why they got divorced, or about juvenile delinquency, or who was going to win the East-West game. It started with two Navy sailors who had been trapped for days in a sunken submarine, and a lady who had tried to sell a champion Boxer puppy to Sir Winston Churchill, with the nice letter she'd received; and then the man who ran the program told them in an excited voice that he had something special for them. "Down from *Ver*mont, folks," he said, "we bring you *Dr. Lionel Apperson—"*

He paused. Everyone sat still. Each head turned slowly to stare at Mrs. Molbert and at Dr. Flitter, sitting only an arm's-length from each other.

"—Dr. Lionel Apperson, who a hung jury has *again* failed to convict of the crime of *murder."*

Half to herself, half to the room at large, Mrs. Puny said, "Oh, dear, I've read about him. It isn't at all nice. I'm sure I'd rather look at something else."

"Nonsense," replied Mrs. Molbert firmly, "you can't just turn your back to things, not once they've happened." She peered at Dr. Flitter. He was more finely drawn than he had ever been; his lower lids hung loosely forward just a little, too tired to hold his eyes. She peered at him; her tongue flicked sharply forward once or twice; she said, "It's always better to look things in the face. *You* know that, don't you, Dr. Flitter? You've found that out."

And, "Yes," he answered, "yes, I suppose I have," as though he only suddenly had realized it at her words.

George Giele raised his eyebrows, but no one else said anything at all; and meanwhile the unctuous television voice kept on, explaining what they all already knew, what Dr.

Lionel Apperson had done. Then, finally, "—and now, *in person*, Dr. Apperson!"

Dr. Apperson's face filled the screen, slab-sided, with too big an Adam's apple, pale skin, round eyes blinking perpetually. He spoke. He admitted freely that he had killed Thomas Warren, senile, blind, bedridden, in constant, agony; that he had killed him with an overdose of morphine. But he denied that it was murder. It was intended as an act of mercy, he declared. It was his duty as a doctor and a man. He had just heard the State had given up; that he would not be tried again. He thought that this was evidence of his sincerity.

He spoke, and the unctuous voice returned to prepare the way for the commercial. Mrs. Molbert sat erect, her knees together, governing the room. She smiled at everyone. "Well," she declared, "at least he *thought* he was doing the right thing."

She saw a tremor move Dr. Flitter's bones.

"And anyhow it was an old, old man," she said, "so it's not quite so bad. Wouldn't it have been terrible if it had been a *child?*"

Mrs. Hiram Puny wrung her small hands and squealed.

And Mrs. Molbert peered into his world, seeing it clearly just like in 3-D, and saw the people there, the dead alive, doing what they had done, again, again. She caught her breath; excitement clutched her heart. Taking advantage of the burst of music that followed the commercial, she leaned towards him. "At least it wasn't any of his kin," she said, in a voice which only he could hear; and smiled. "And he was sober, too. Well, there are some things he won't have on his conscience, anyhow. I know I wouldn't want a thing like that on mine. Would *you?*"

Dr. Flitter rose. He stood there swaying; his mouth struggled silently.

Mrs. Molbert was pleasantly aware that everybody now was watching them. She licked her lips. "If I'd done anything like that," she said, "I'd cut my heart out. That's just what I'd do."

She said it loudly, clearly, so that all could hear. For an instant, Dr. Flitter stared at her. Tears formed in the open runnels of his lower lids, and flowed down over the tight skin of his cheeks. Then he found his voice. *"No,"* he cried, *"no, no, no."*

While they watched, he stumbled from the room.

And, as he did so, George Giele turned on her savagely. "Oh, for Christ's sake!" he shouted. "Why don't you let the poor guy alone?"

As Miss Luckmeyer patted his forearm, shushing him, Mrs. Emily Molbert made a mental note that she'd fix him, just wouldn't she, when the time came.

Not long before, Mrs. Molbert would have quailed at the very thought of their avoiding her; now she gloried in it. It wouldn't last, she knew; and, lying in bed that night, she told herself that she had put the fear of God in all of them, not just in him. The night was warm; the scented air soft-moving; occasionally a night-bird, disturbed perhaps by lovers stirring, would stir a moment, then sing itself to sleep. Mrs. Molbert slept the sleep of conscious virtue, rose to a slumbering, half-awakened morning, drowsed through a pleasant breakfast. She observed disapprovingly that Dr. Flitter, as he often did, had not come down, and she discovered with some satisfaction that the others still shied away from her a little bit. After breakfast, she headed for the porch, and halfway there her awakening was completed.

A screaming woman can awaken anyone; and Marilene's screams, starting on the second floor, increased in volume as she fled downstairs. Even after Mrs. Weatherbleak came panting from the kitchen and grabbed her by the arm, she did not stop. It took Janice, the big colored cook, with her great strength, to quiet her down, and start her talking any kind of sense. But Mrs. Emily Molbert already knew that Dr. Flitter, by some desperate act, had ended his travail; only the details remained to be revealed.

She drew back tactfully beside the banister. She watched and listened. The Punys joined her. Marilene sobbed her story out on Janice's soft shoulder. Miss Luckmeyer showed up, wearing her green peignoire. Marilene, on the thin edge of hysteria, told how she'd thought he was in the bathroom because he didn't answer to her knock, and how she'd opened up his door to get his dirty sheets—and there he was; he'd gone and killed himself; and he was dead; and there was blood all over every—everything—

Janice quieted her again, and made her go lie down. Then Mrs. Weatherbleak and Janice went upstairs; and Mrs. Molbert heard them gasp, and heard their footsteps halt, when they came to his door. She heard them turn right back without going in; she heard George Giele asking what was wrong, and Mrs. Weatherbleak telling him and asking him to please call the police.

And all the while, outside, the sun shone, and birds of Spring sang forth unheedingly, and a light breeze came floating in from the salt sea. Nor did Mrs. Molbert now forget that these were there; they formed a background pattern for the excitement which had seized her; she did not share the cold shock which, like a sudden, treacherous wave, had swept the house.

The police arrived, some in plain clothes and some in uniform, and two reporters came. They went upstairs, and some

of them came down again, paler than before. They were joined by others; an ambulance drove up. And, when they started to ask questions, Mrs. Weatherbleak pleaded with everyone to tell them only what they really had to know, because, she said, in her position the last thing she wanted was a scandal and all the *nice* people who lived there assured her of their discretion; the others did not count.

To the reporters and the police, Dr. Flitter became a stranger living among strangers. No one knew anything about his past or his affairs. Yes, they all said, he had lived down in Australia or somewhere. Yes, sometimes letters came to him from there. No, he never did seem to have any friends. And yes, Mrs. Weatherbleak declared, maybe he had had money troubles, because she'd had to carry him for quite a while.

They learned no more from Mrs. Molbert than from the rest. Instead, she learned from them. She learned that they'd found ashes in the basin in his room, as though he'd spent those last slow midnight hours murdering with fire the pictures which helped to keep alive a world that had to die with him. She learned that they had found an empty envelope, an empty frame. She learned that she, she alone, now held the remnants of that undead world to do with as she would, to hoard, to hint about, to auction off.

She, with the others, haunted the long hall, picking up scraps of information here and there. Upstairs he lay, dead and with none to mourn. Beside him on the bedside table, his alligator bag lay open, neat and orderly, its shining instruments spread out in rows. He lay there naked, a blood-soaked bath-towel underneath his wound. A hypodermic half-full of a local anaesthetic had been replaced; a fallen scalpel still lay beside his hand. He had gone suddenly insane, the police declared; he had tried to perform some crazy sort of operation on himself.

It was at this point that Mrs. Emily Molbert recalled the words she had spoken only hours before, and knew what he had tried to do.

It was then that she looked around her, and saw the knowledge and the horror and the awe dwelling in Mr. Puny's face, and Mrs. Puny's, and George Giele's, and Miss Luckmeyer's, and Mrs. Weatherbleak's.

Standing in the hall, like any stranger in a crowd watching a total stranger's accident, she watched the basket in which they bore him being carried down the stairs. She waited till it passed beyond the door, until, creaking like an old wicker chair, it had been loaded in the ambulance. Then, feeling their eyes upon her, she almost ran upstairs, ran to her room, seized a few bracelets and two or three more rings. She put them on. She took her Chinese shawl, and draped it round her shoulders. Then she emerged. Slowly and decorously, she came down-

stairs. She swirled the shawl around her narrow hips. She went into the parlor, seating herself on the red davenport. There, smiling a tissuepaper smile, surrounded by the past and its dead people, she waited for the courtship.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNITCH IN TIME

By Mack Reynolds and August Derleth

(Being a recently discovered, hitherto unpublished reminicence of Dr. Lyndon Parker, of 7B Praed Street, London.)

On an autumn afternoon of a year that, for manifest reasons, must remain nameless, there came to the attention of my friend, Mr. Solar Pons, a matter which was surely either the most extraordinary adventure ever to befall a private enquiry agent in or before our time, or an equally extraordinary misadventure, the *raison d'être* of which remains obscure even now, though it might have been born in the circumstances of the moment, for it was one of those days on which London was literally swallowed in a yellow fog, and we had both been confined to our quarters for two days, with no more incident than the arrival of an occasional paper and the unfailing complaint of our long-suffering landlady about Pons' spare appetite.

Even our warm and comfortable quarters, for all that a fire burned at the hearth, had begun to pall on us. Pons had exhausted the microscope; he had abandoned his chemistry set; he had ceased his abominable pistol practice; and for once there was not a single item of correspondence transfixed to the center of the mantelpiece by his knife. He had hardly stopped his restless wandering among the disorderly order of our quarters, and seated himself in his velvet-lined chair, holding forth on the points of difference between Stradivarius and Amati violins, when he rose once more with his empty pipe in his hands.

He was at the fireplace, about to take the shag from the toe of his slipper, tacked below the mantelpiece, when suddenly, he paused. He stood so for a moment, in utter silence, his hawklike face keen with interest, his body seeming actually to lean forward as if to catch the sound that smote upon his ears.

"If I am not mistaken, Parker," he said with unaccustomed gravity, "we are about to have a most unusual visitor."

I had been standing at the window looking out, and had just turned. "Nothing has disturbed this fog for the past half hour," I protested.

"My dear Parker, you are looking in the wrong direction.

The footsteps are approaching from out there, and a little above."

So saying, he turned to face the door with alert expectation in his gray eyes.

I had for some time been conscious of a curious sound, almost as of water sliding at regular intervals against the roof. Apparently this was what Pons had mistaken for the sound of footsteps. Almost at the same moment of this realization, a most peculiar assault was made on the door to our quarters. I had not heard the outer door; in truth, I had heard no step upon the stair. But now a kind of brushing sound broke in upon us; it began at the top of the door, and did not become a recognizable knock until it had descended to midpanel.

Being nearest the door, I moved to open it.

"Pray be cautious, Parker," said Pons. "And spare me your alarm. Unless I am in egregrious error, our visitor is from another world."

I gazed at him, mouth agape. I had heard and marveled at his extraordinary deductions before, but this came from his lips with such calm assurance that I could not doubt his sincerity even while I could not accept his words.

"Come, Parker, let us not keep him waiting."

I threw open the door. There, confronting us, was a strong, healthy man, bronzed by the sun, clad in a fantastic attire of such brilliant hues as to dazzle the eye. His footgear—a strange combination of sandal and slipper—must have made the curious slapping sounds I had at first mistaken for the dripping of water, but which Pons had correctly identified as footsteps, however alien to our previous experience.

Our visitor looked briefly at me and said, "Ah, the famous literary doctor, I presume?" and smiled, as if in jest.

My astonishment at this manner of address, accompanied as it was with an almost insolent amusement, left me momentarily speechless.

"Come in, come in, my dear fellow," said Pons behind me. "Pray overlook Dr. Parker's rudeness. I perceive you have come a long way; your fatigue is manifest. Sit here and relieve yourself of the problem which brings you to these quarters."

Our visitor walked into the room, inclining his head to acknowledge Pons' invitation.

"I hope you will forgive my coming without an appointment," he said, in a somewhat stilted voice, accompanied by florid and Victorian gestures. "I fear I had no alternative. Let me introduce myself—I am Agent Tobias Athelney of the Terra Bureau of Investigation, Planet Terra, of the Solar System League."

Pons' eyes twinkled merrily.

"My dear sir," I could not help interrupting, "levity is all

very well, but this is neither the time nor the place for it. Just where are you from?"

Our visitor had taken the seat to which Pons had waved him. At my words, he stopped short, took a small, violet-covered notebook from an inner fold of his robelike costume, and thumbed through it until he found the place he sought.

"Pray forgive me," he murmured. "If we were still using your somewhat fantastic calendar system, it would be the year 2565 A.D."

Pons, who had been scrutinizing him closely, now leaned back, closed his eyes, and touched his finger tips together. "So you represent yourself as a governmental agent of almost 700 years in the future, Mr. Althelney?" he said. "A traveler in time?"

Our visitor grimaced. "Not exactly, Mr. Pons. To my knowledge, there is no such thing as time travel, or can such travel ever be developed. No, the explanation for my presence here is more elementary. We have recently discovered that the universe is not, indeed, one, but of an infinite number. We have learned that everything that possibly *could* happen *has* happened, *will* happen, and *is* happening. Given an infinite number of alternative universes, you can easily understand how this would be so. To illustrate, Mr. Pons, there are alternate space-time continua in which Napoleon won at Waterloo; there are still others in which Waterloo was a draw; and there are yet others in which the battle was never fought at all—indeed, in which Napoleon was never born!"

I flashed a glance of mounting indignation at Pons, but my companion's face had taken on that dream expression I had learned to associate with intense concentration. Surely it could not be that he was being deceived by this patent mountebank!

"Infinite other universes than this," murmured Pons, "containing other persons identical to myself, and to Dr. Parker, here, who carry on their little lives in much the same manner as we do?"

Our visitor nodded. "That is correct, Mr. Pons. There are still other space-time continua, in which there are no such persons as yourselves, never have been, and never will be." He coughed almost apologetically. "In fact, in this multitude of alternative universes, Mr. Pons, there are some in which you two are fictitious characters, the product of a popular writer's art!"

"Amazing!" exclaimed Pons, adding, with a glance at my dour face, "and yet, not entirely incredible, would you say, Parker?"

"Preposterous!" I answered. "How can you sit there and calmly accept this—this nonsense?"

"Dear me," murmured Pons, "let us not be too hasty, Parker."

"I am sorry to have upset Dr. Parker," said our visitor soberly, "but it is from just such a universe that I have traveled to this. Approximately 700 years before my birth, in my space-time continuum, a series of stories dealing with Mr. Solar Pons and Dr. Lyndon Parker were written, presumably by Dr. Parker, and became the all-time favorites of the literature of deduction."

"Let us assume all this is so," said Pons. "For what purpose have you come?"

"To consult you, Mr. Pons."

"I fancied as much," said my companion with a serene smile. "Though it would seem a long chance indeed to consult a fictitious character."

"Touché!" answered our client. "But a fictitious character in *my* universe and 700 years before my time. But in *this* universe you are very real indeed, and the greatest detective of all time!" He sighed. "You cannot imagine, Mr. Pons, the difficulty of first finding a continuum in which you were *real,* and then, on top of that, one in which you were contemporary."

Pons sat for a moment in silence, stroking the lobe of his left ear. "I submit," he said at last, "since patterns of crime and its detection continually evolve, you are haunting the wrong continuum, Mr. Athelney."

"I think not, Mr. Pons, if you will hear me out."

"Proceed."

"One of our most scientifically advanced bands of criminals is named the Club Cerise, after the favorite color of its leader, Moriarty. They—"

"Moriarty!" exclaimd Pons.

"Yes, Mr. Pons. Moriarty. The name is familiar to you perhaps?"

"Indeed it is!" Pons was silent for a moment, his eyes closed. "You know, Parker," he said after a moment, "I have always felt that one death at the Reichenbach was as false as the other." He sat up in his chair, his gaze now intent on our visitor. "Pray continue, Mr. Athelney! Where my illustrious predecessor could achieve but a stalemate, it seems that you offer me the opportunity for complete victory!"

"Well, then, Mr. Pons," our visitor resumed, "you will not be surprised to learn that Moriarty and his band have managed to escape retribution for some time, and it is in regard to their apprehension that I seek your assistance. The criminal method they have developed is based on the same discovery that allows my presence here. Moriarty and his Club Cerise have been making a practice of invading space-time continua in less developed eras than our own, and, utilizing our most advanced weapons and devices to assure their escape, have been despoil-

ing these universes of their art treasures. Not long ago, for example, they went into a Twentieth Century universe and obtained a Da Vinci, a half dozen Rembrandts, and a priceless collection of Kellys."

Pons' eyes widened a trifle. "You are suggesting that the Irish have developed an artist of the stature of Da Vinci, Mr. Athelney?"

"Indeed, yes. A fellow named Kelly created a work of genius called *Pogo*, which appeared in hundreds of newspapers of his day. These were *Pogo* originals, including some of the very rare pre-strip drawings. With his fabulously valuable treasure, Moriarty and his band managed to return to our own space-time continuum. Obviously, we cannot punish them in our universe, since they have committed no crime there. Under ordinary circumstances, it would be possible to extradite them to the universe they plundered—but there are almost insurmountable complications."

Pons smiled, still giving no evidence of being the slightest troubled by the mad, if ingenious, account of our prospective client. "I daresay 'insurmountable' is the word to describe the problems attendant upon extradition of a group of criminals from a country which doesn't exist in the universe where the crime was committed. I submit that a Twentieth Century nation might be compelled to adopt extraordinary protective measures—if indeed these would be adequate—to deal with criminals seven centuries in advance of the police of that period." But now he shook his head, with a gentle smile on his thin lips. "But we must stop considering these ramifications, or we shall soon find ourselves involved in the higher mathematics of space and time."

"The importance of the problem is greater than might at first be evident," continued our visitor. "Given continued success on the part of Moriarty and his Club Cerise, there can be no doubt that other such bands will soon emulate them, and that eventually endless numbers of space-time pirates will give up other pursuits to devote themselves to the plundering of weaker continua with this type of snitch."

"Snitch?" I repeated.

"Elementary, Parker," murmured Pons impatiently. "Obviously idiomatic for 'theft'."

"The ultimate possibility will not have escaped you, Mr. Pons," continued our client. "Sooner or later, the increasing numbers of criminals would arrive in *this* space-time continuum and in *this* era."

I could not be sure, but it seemed to me that at this suggestion a little color drained from Pons's cheeks. And, if a shudder went through that lean frame, he was again under perfect control within moments. He sat then in silence, his eyes closed, his

head sunk to his chest with his fingertips gently tapping together.

Our visitor waited in silence.

Pons opened his eyes presently and asked, "Pray tell me, Mr. Athelney—do you have income taxes in your world?"

Athelney groaned. "My dear fellow, last year my taxes were unbelievably high. Bureaucracy runs rampant!"

"Capital, capital!" exclaimed Pons. "Why not prosecute Moriarty for tax evasion?"

Our visitor shook his head dolefully. "The criminals of our days are advanced, Mr. Pons. They *pay* their taxes."

Once again Pons retreated into silence, taking time now to light up his calabash. But this time his silence was broken more quickly.

"I have some modest knowledge of British law, Mr. Athelney," said Pons, "but your laws may well differ. What type of social system prevails in your world and time?"

"It is usually referred to as Industrial Feudalism."

"I am not familiar with the term, though I can guess its meaning. Pray elucidate."

"In the same manner that Feudalism evolved from Chattel Slavery, and Capitalism from Feudalism, so Industrial Feudalism has evolved in our continuum from Capitalism. Ownership has contracted until a few princes of finance, a few industrial barons and lords of transportation completely control the government and practically all the wealth."

"Do national boundaries still prevail?"

"Terra is united, but we have loose ties with the other planets of the Solar System."

"Then doubtless you have tariff laws between the various planets."

"Very rigid ones. Last month we apprehended some Martians smuggling duppl berries; they were given ten years."

"I submit you have an obvious trap in which to take Moriarty and his Club Cerise, Mr. Athelney. They must pay import taxes on those art objects. Failure to do so puts them afoul of the law."

Our client smiled broadly. "I do believe, Mr. Pons, you have arrived at a solution of our problem."

He came to his feet.

"I suggest your government pass such tariff restrictions as to make imports from other space-time continua prohibitive. Such a move, in view of the fact that the criminals of your time are so advanced as to pay their taxes, would in all likelihood prevent further depredations."

Though our client was manifestly anxious to be off, he hesitated. "I wish there were some way in which I could remunerate you, Mr. Pons. Unfortunately, we do not use the same sys-

tem of exchange. All I can do is offer profound thanks in the name of my continuum."

"There is surely remuneration enough implied in the promise that we will not be victimized here in our time and world by such as Moriarty," said Pons. "But, stay, Mr. Athelney—I perceive you are still troubled by some aspect of the matter."

Our client turned from the threshold, to which he had walked. He smiled wryly. "I fear, Mr. Pons, that this is but the initial step in our problem. Moriarty, when he learned I was to travel hither in search of the greatest detective of all time, took certain protective measures. He sent one of his own men to another space-time continuum to acquire the services of a most astute lawyer named Randolph Mason."

"Pray be reassured," responded Pons instantly. "I can refer you to a rising young contemporary, who promises to be even greater, and is gaining a challenging reputation in the legal circles of his world. By an odd coincidence, not uncommon to fiction, he bears a similar family name. His given name, I believe, is Perry. My correspondents on the west coast of the United States have given me flattering reports of his talents. You will find him in Los Angeles, I believe. I commend him to your government. Good afternoon, Mr. Athelney."

As soon as the door had closed behind our visitor, I turned to Pons. "Should not one of us slip after him and notify the authorities of his escape?"

Pons walked to the window and looked out into the fog. Without turning, he asked, "You thought him a lunatic, Parker?"

"Surely that was obvious!"

"Was it, indeed!" Pons shook his head. "I sometimes think, Parker, that that happy faculty for observation which seems to come so readily to me encounters obstacles of demoralizing stubborness in you."

"Pons!" I exclaimed hotly, "you cannot have been taken in by this—this mountebank and his hoax?"

"Was he both lunatic and mountebank, then?" asked Pons, smiling in that superior manner which always galled me.

"What does it matter which he was? He was certainly one or the other."

"If a mountebank, what was his motive? If a lunatic, how did he find his way here in this fog, which is surely as thick as any we have ever had? I fear some of us have an unhappy tendency to dismiss the incredible solely because it is incredible to *us*. Tell me, Parker, have you ever contemplated setting forth in the form of fiction these little adventures of mine in the field of ratiocination?"

I hesitated to answer.

"Come, come, Parker, it is evident that you have."

"I confess, I have thought of it."

"You have not yet done so?"

"No, Pons, I swear it."

"You have spoken of your plans to no one?"

"No."

"Our late client spoke of you as a literary doctor. 'The famous literary doctor' were his exact words, I believe. If he were but a lunatic or mountebank, as you will have him, how came he then to know of your innermost hope and ambition in this regard? Or is there some secret communion between lunatics and mountebanks? I perceive, thanks to our Mr. Athelney that, without regard to my wishes, you are destined to become a literary man at the expense of my modest powers."

"Pons, I swear I have never put pen to paper," I cried.

"But you will, Parker, you will. May I remind you of my distinguished predecessor's credo, that when all possible explanations have been shown false, the impossible, no matter how incredible, alone remains? This, I fancy, is one little adventure you will not be able to chronicle without a furtive blush or two."

In this, at last, my companion was correct.

THE EYES HAVE IT

By James McKimmey

Joseph Heidel looked slowly around the dinner table at the five men, hiding his examination by a thin screen of smoke from his cigar. He was a large man with thick blond-gray hair cut close to his head. In three more months he would be fifty-two, but his face and body had the vital look of a man fifteen years younger. He was the President of the Superior Council, and he had been in that post—the highest post on the occupied planet of Mars—four of the six years he had lived here. As his eyes flicked from one face to another his fingers unconsciously tapped the table, making a sound like a miniature drum roll.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Five top officials, selected, tested, screened on Earth to form the nucleus of governmental rule on Mars.

Heidel's bright narrow eyes flicked, his fingers drummed. Which one? Who was the imposter, the ringer? Who was the Martian?

Sadler's dry voice cut through the silence: "This is not just an ordinary meeting then, Mr. President?"

Heidel's cigar came up and was clamped between his teeth. He stared into Sadler's eyes. "No, Sadler, it isn't. This is a very special meeting." He grinned around the cigar. "This is where we take the clothes off the sheep and find the wolf."

Heidel watched the five faces. Sadler, Meehan, Locke, Forbes, Clarke. One of them. Which one?

"I'm a little thick tonight," said Harry Locke. "I didn't follow what you meant."

"No, no, of course not," Heidel said, still grinning. "I'll explain it." He could feel himself alive at that moment, every nerve singing, every muscle toned. His brain was quick and his tongue rolled the words out smoothly. This was the kind of situation Heidel handled best. A tense, dramatic situation, full of atmosphere and suspense.

"Here it is," Heidel continued, "simply and briefly." He touched the cigar against an ash try, watching with slitted shinning eyes while the ashes spilled away from the glowing tip. He bent forward suddenly. "We have an impostor among us, gentlemen. A spy."

He waited, holding himself tense against the table, letting the sting of his words have their effect. Then he leaned back, carefully. "And tonight I am going to expose this imposter. Right here, at this table." He searched the faces again, look-

ing for a tell-tale twitch of a muscle, a movement of a hand, a shading in the look of an eye.

There were only Sadler, Meehan, Locke, Forbes, Clarke, looking like themselves, quizzical, polite, respecting.

"One of us, you say," Clarke said noncommittally, his phrase neither a question nor a positive statement.

"That is true," said Heidel.

"Bit of a situation at that," said Forbes, letting a faint smile touch his lips.

"Understatement, Forbes," Heidel said. "Understatement."

"Didn't mean to sound capricious," Forbes said, his smile gone.

"Of course not," Heidel said.

Edward Clarke cleared his throat. "May I ask, sir, how this was discovered and how it was narrowed down to the Superior Council?"

"Surely," Heidel said crisply. "No need to go into the troubles we've been having. You know all about that. But how these troubles originated is the important thing. Do you remember the missionary affair?"

"When we were going to convert the Eastern industrial section?"

"That's right," Heidel said, remembering. "Horrible massacre."

"Bloody," agreed John Meehan.

"Sixty-seven missionaries lost," Heidel said.

"I remember the Martian note of apology," Forbes said. "'We have worshiped our own God for two-hundred thousand years. We would prefer to continue. Thank you.' Blinking nerve, eh?"

"Neither here nor there," Heidel said abruptly. "The point is that no one *knew* those sixty-seven men were missionaries except myself and you five men."

Heidel watched the faces in front of him. "One case," he said. "Here's another. Do you recall when we outlawed the free selection system?"

"Another bloody one," said Sadler.

"Forty-eight victims in that case," Heidel said. "Forty-eight honorable colonists, sanctioned by us to legally marry any couple on the planet, and sent out over the country to abolish the horrible free-love situation."

"Forty-eight justices of the peace dead as pickerels," Forbes said.

"Do you happen to remember *that* note of apology?" Heidel asked, a slight edge in his voice. He examined Forbes' eyes.

"Matter of fact, yes," said Forbes, returning Heidel's stare steadily. "'You love your way, we'll love ours.' Terribly caustic, what?"

"Terribly," said Heidel. "Although that too is neither here nor there. The point again, no one except the six of us right here knew what those forty-eight men were sent out to do."

Heidel straightened in his chair. The slow grating voice of Forbes had taken some of the sharpness out of the situation. He wanted to hold their attention minutely, so that when he was ready, the dramatics of his action would be tense and telling.

"There is no use," he said, "in going into the details of the other incidents. You remember them. When we tried to install a free press, the Sensible Art galleries, I-Am-A-Martian Day, wrestling, and all the rest."

"I remember the wrestling business awfully well," said Forbes. "Martians drove a wrestler through the street in a yellow jetmobile. Had flowers around his neck and a crown on his head. He was dead, of course. Stuffed, I think. . ."

"All right," snapped Heidel. "Each one of our efforts to offer these people a chance to benefit from our culture was snapped off at the bud. And only a leak in the Superior Council could have caused it. It is a simple matter of deduction. There is one of us, here tonight, who is responsible. And I am going to expose him." Heidel's voice was a low vibrant sound that echoed in the large dining room.

The five men waited. Forbes, his long arms crossed. Sadler, his eyes on his fingernails. Meehan, blinking placidly. Clarke, twirling his thumbs. Locke, examining his cigarette.

"Kessit!" Heidel called.

A gray-haired man in a black butler's coat appeared.

"We'll have our wine now," Heidel said. There was a slight quirk in his mouth, so that his teeth showed between his lips. The butler moved methodically from place to place, pouring wine from a silver decanter.

"Now then, Kessit," Heidel said, when the butler had finished, "would you be kind enough to fetch me that little pistol from the mantel over there?" He smiled outwardly this time. The situation was right again; he was handling things, inch by inch, without interruption.

He took the gun from the old man's hands and said, "One thing more, Kessit. Would you please light the candles on the table and turn out the rest of the lights in the room. I've always been a romanticist," Heidel said, smiling around the table. "Candlelight with my wine."

"Oh, excellent," said Locke soberly.

"Quite," said Forbes.

Heidel nodded and waited while the butler lit the candles and snapped off the overhead lights. The yellow flames wavered on the table as the door closed gently behind the butler.

"Now, then," Heidel said, feeling the tingling in his nerves. "This, gentlemen, is a replica of an antique of the twentieth

century. A working replica, I might add. It was called a P-38, if my memory serves me." He held the pistol up so that the candlelight reflected against the glistening black handle and the blue barrel.

There was a polite murmur as the five men stretched forward to look at the gun in Heidel's hands.

"Crude," Sadler said.

"But devilish looking," Forbes added.

"My hobby," Heidel said. "I would like to add that not only do I collect these small arms, but I am very adept at using them. Something I will demonstrate to you very shortly," he added, grinning.

"Say, now," nodded Meehan.

"That should be jolly," Forbes said, laughing courteously.

"I believe it will at that," Heidel said. "Now if you will notice, gentlemen," he said touching the clip ejector of the pistol and watching the black magazine slip out into his other hand, "I have but five cartridges in the clip. Just five. You see?"

They all bent forward, blinking.

"Good," said Heidel, shoving the clip back into the grip of the gun. He couldn't keep his lips from curling in his excitement, but his hands were as steady as though his nerves had turned to ice.

The five men leaned back in their chairs.

"Now then, Meehan," he said to the man at the opposite end of the table. "Would you mind moving over to your left, so that the end of the table is clear?"

"Oh?" said Meehan. "Yes, of course." He grinned at the others, and there was a ripple of amusement as Meehan slid his chair to the left.

"Yes," said Heidel. "All pretty foolish-looking, perhaps. But it won't be in a few minutes when I discover the bastard of a Martian who's in this group, I'll tell you that!" His voice rose and rang in the room, and he brought the glistening pistol down with a crack against the table.

There was dead silence and Heidel found his smile again. "All right, now I'll explain a bit further. Before Dr. Kingly, the head of our laboratory, died a few days ago, he made a very peculiar discovery. As you know, there has been no evidence to indicate that the Martian is any different, physically, from the Earthman. Not until Dr. Kingly made his discovery, that is."

Heidel looked from face to face. "This is how it happened," he went on. "Dr. Kingly. . ."

He paused and glanced about in false surprise. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen. We might as well be enjoying our wine.

Excellent port. Very old, I believe. Shall we?" he asked, raising his glass.

Five other glasses shimmered in the candlelight.

"Let us, ah, toast success to the unveiling of the rotten Martian who sits among us, shall we?" Heidel's smile glinted and he drank a quarter of his glass.

The five glasses tipped and were returned to the table. Again there was silence as the men waited.

"To get back," Heidel said, listening with excitement to his own voice. "Dr. Kingly, in the process of an autopsy on a derelict Martian made a rather startling discovery. . ."

"I beg your pardon," Forbes said. "Did you say autopsy?"

"Yes," said Heidel. "We've done this frequently. Not according to base orders, you understand." He winked. "But a little infraction now and then is necessary."

"I see," said Forbes. "I just didn't know about that."

"No, you didn't, did you?" said Heidel, looking at Forbes closely. "At any rate, Dr. Kingly had developed in his work a preserving solution which he used in such instances, thereby prolonging the time for examination of the cadaver, without experiencing deterioration of the tissues. This solution was merely injected into the blood stream, and . . ."

"Sorry again, sir," Forbes said. "But you said blood stream?"

"Yes," Heidel nodded. "This had to be done before the cadaver was a cadaver, you see?"

"I think so, yes," said Forbes, leaning back again. "Murdered the bastard for an autopsy, what?"

Heidel's fingers closed around the pistol. "I don't like that, Forbes."

"Terribly sorry, sir."

"To get on," Heidel said finally, his voice a cutting sound. "Dr. Kingly had injected his solution and then. . . . Well, at any rate, when he returned to his laboratory, it was night. His laboratory was black as pitch—I'm trying to paint the picture for you, gentlemen—and the cadaver was stretched out on a table, you see. And before Dr. Kingly switched on the lights, he saw the eyes of this dead Martian glowing in the dark like a pair of hot coals."

"Weird," said Sadler, unblinking.

"Ghostly," said Clarke.

"The important thing," Heidel said curtly, "is that Dr. Kingly discovered the difference, then, between the Martian and the Earthman. The difference is the eyes. The solution, you see, had reacted chemically to the membranes of the eyeballs, so that as it happened they lit up like electric lights. I won't go into what Dr. Kingly found further, when he dissected the eyeballs. Let it suffice to say, the Martian eyeball is a physical element entirely different from our own—at least from those of five of us, I should say."

His grin gleamed. He was working this precisely and carefully, and it was effective. "Now, however," he continued, "it is this *sixth* man who is at issue right now. The fly in the soup, shall we say. And in just a few seconds I am going to exterminate that fly."

He picked up the pistol from the table. "As I told you, gentlemen, I am quite versatile with this weapon. I am a dead shot, in other words. And I am going to demonstate it to you." He glanced from face to face.

"You will notice that since Mr. Meehan has moved, I have a clear field across the table. I don't believe a little lead in the woodwork will mar the room too much, would you say, Forbes?"

Forbes sat very still. "No, I shouldn't think so, sir."

"Good. Because I am going to snuff out each of the four candles in the center of this table by shooting the wick away. You follow me, gentlemen? Locke? Meehan? Sadler?"

Heads nodded.

"Then perhaps you are already ahead of me. When the last candle is extinguished, we will have darkness, you see. And then I think we'll find our Martian rat. Because, as a matter of fact," Heidel lolled his words, "I have taken the privilege of adding to the wine we have been drinking Dr. Kingly's preserving solution. Non-tasting, non-harmful. Except, that is, to one man in this room."

Heidel motioned his gun. "And God rest the bastard's soul, because if you will remember, I have five bullets in the chamber of this pistol. Four for the candles and one for the brain of the sonofabitch whose eyes light up when the last candle goes out."

There was a steady deadly silence while the flames of the candles licked at the still air.

"I think, however," Heidel said, savoring the moment, "that we should have one final toast before we proceed." He lifted his glass. "May the receiver of the fifth bullet go straight to hell. I phrase that literally, gentlemen," he said, laughing. "Drink up!"

The glases were drained and placed again on the table.

"Watch carefully," Heidel said and lifted the pistol. He aimed at the first candle. The trigger was taut against his finger, the explosion loud in the room.

"One," said Heidel.

He aimed again. The explosion.

"Two," he said. "Rather good, eh?"

"Oh, yes," Sadler said.

"Quite," said Forbes.

"Again," said Heidel. A third shot echoed.

"Now," he said, pointing the muzzle at the last candle. "I

would say this is it, wouldn't you, gentlemen? And as soon as this one goes, I'm afraid one of us is going to find a bullet right between his sparkling eyes. Are you ready?"

He squinted one eye and looked down the sights. He squeezed the trigger, the room echoed and there was blackness. Heidel held his pistol poised over the table.

Silence.

"Well," said Forbes finally. "There you have it. Surprise, what?"

Heidel balanced the pistol, feeling his palm go suddenly moist against the black grip, and he looked around at the five pairs of glowing eyes.

"Bit of a shock, I should imagine," Forbes said. "Discovering all of us, as it were."

Heidel licked his lips. "How? *How* could you do this?"

Forbes remained motionless. "Simple as one, you know. Put men on rockets going back to Earth in place of returning colonists. Study. Observe. Learn. Shift a record here and there. Forge, change pictures, all that sort of thing. Poor contact between here and Earth, you know. Not too difficult."

"I'll get one of you," Heidel said, still balancing his pistol tightly.

"Well, possibly," Forbes said. "But no more than one. You have three guns pointed at you. We can see you perfectly, you know, as though it were broad daylight. One shiver of that pistol, and you're dead."

"Why have you done this?" Heidel said suddenly. "*Why?* Everything that was done was for the Martian. We tried to give you freedom and culture, the benefit of our knowledge. . ."

"We didn't like your wrestlers," Forbes said.

Heidel's nostrils twitched, and suddenly he swung the pistol. There was a crashing explosion and then silence.

"Good," said Forbes. "I don't think he got the last one fired."

"You're all right then?" asked Meehan, putting his gun on the table.

"Oh, quite! Rather dramatic altogether, eh?"

"Nerve-tingling," Locke agreed.

Forbes turned in his chair and called, "Oh Kessit!"

The butler opened the door to the darkened room, hesitated, and reached for the light switch.

"No, no," Forbes said, smiling. "Never mind that. Come over here, will you please?"

The butler crossed the room slowly.

"It's all right," Forbes said. "The president will notice nothing whatever, Kessit. Would you mind pouring us all another glass of wine? I'm frightfully crazy about that port, eh?"

There was a murmur of agreeing voices. The butler lifted the silver decanter and filled glasses, moving easily and surely in the darkness.

"Cheers," said Forbes.

"Cheers," said the others, over the clink of glasses.

PUBLIC EYE

By Anthony Boucher

The great criminal lawyer had never looked so smugly self-satisfied, not even just after he had secured the acquittal of the mass murderer of an entire Martian family.

"Yes, gentlemen," he smirked, "I will gladly admit that this century has brought the science—one might almost say the art of criminalistics to its highest peak. Throughout the teeming billions of the system, man continues to obey his primal urge to murder; yet for fifty years your records have not been blotted, if I may indulge in such a pen-and-ink archaism, by one unsolved murder case."

Fers Brin shifted restlessly. He was a little too conscious of the primal urge to murder in himself at the moment. It was just as well that Captain Wark chose that point to interrupt the florid speech.

"Mr. Mase," the old head of the Identification Bureau said simply, "I'm proud to say that's true. Not one unsolved murder among damned near seventy billion people, on nine planets and God knows how many satellites and asteroids; but I'd hate to tell you how many unconvicted murderers."

"Who needs to tell him?" Brin grunted.

"Oh come now," Dolf Mase smiled. "I'm hardly responsible for *all* of them. Ninety per cent or so, I'll grant you; but there are other lawyers. And I'm not at all sure that any of us are responsible. So long as the system sticks to the Terran code, which so fortunately for criminals was modeled on Anglo-American concepts rather than on the Code Napoléon . . ."

Captain Wark shook his grizzled head. "Uh-uh. We'll keep on sticking to the idea that if justice is bound to slip, it's better to free the guilty than convict the innocent. But it kind of seems to us, Mr. Mase, like you've been pushing this 'free the guilty' stuff a little far."

"My dear Captain!"

The patronizing tone was too much for Brin. "Let's cut the politeness, Mase. This is a declaration of war. Let's have it out in the open. Captain Wark represents everything that's official and sound and inescapable. And me—well, as the best damned public eye in the business, I represent everything that's unofficial and half-jetted and just as inescapable. And we're feeding it to you straight. Your quote legal unquote practice amounts to issuing a murder license to anybody with enough credits. You've got three choices: A, you retire;

B, you devote that first rate mind of yours to something that'll benefit the system; C, the Captain and I are going to spend every minute off duty and half of 'em on hunting for the one slip you've made some time that'll send you to the asteroid belt for life."

Dolf Mase shrugged. "I wish you a long life of hunting. There's no slip to find. And no!" he protested as Captain Ward began to speak. "Spare me the moral lecture which I can already read, my dear captain, in those honest steely eyes of yours. I have no desire to devote myself to the good of the system, nor to the good of anyone save Dolf Mase. Such altruism I leave to my revered if somewhat, as you would say, Mr. Brin, 'half-jetted' brother. I suffered enough from his starveling nobility in my younger days—I too declared war, first on him and then on the rest of the seventy billion. . . . Good day, gentlemen—and may tomorrow find waiting in my office a sextuple sex slayer!" With this—and a gust of muted laughter—Dolf Mase left the Identification Bureau.

"You've got to hand it to him," Fers Brin chuckled in spite of himself, as he contemplated the closing panel. "He picked the most unpronounceable damned exit line I ever heard."

"And he pronounced it," the Captain added morosely.

"He never slips," Fers murmured.

The phone buzzed and Captain Wark clicked his switch.

The face on the screen bore an older gentler version of the hawk-beaked, crag-browed Mase features which had so recently been sneering at them. The voice too had the Mase resonance and formality, without the oversharp bite.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said Lu Mase. "Deeply though I regret what I heard, I confess that I needed to hear it."

"It's like I told you, Professor," said the Captain. "He's always hated you and the cream of it all, to him, was making you think that he did his job for the sake of justice."

Fers moved into phone range. "And now that you know, what follows?" he demanded. "There's bound to be something somewhere. The devil himself isn't perfect in deviltry."

On the screen Professor Mase's eyes seemed to stare unseeing at the infinite array of microbooks which lined his study. "There was that time when Dolf was young. . . He'd convinced me that he'd changed. . . And of course you'd have to study the statute of limitations."

"We'll have the best men in the system on it tomorrow," Wark assured him hastily. "Just a minute. I'll turn on the scriber and you can give me the details."

"He's my brother, Captain," Mase said softly.

"Which means how much to him?" Fers snapped.

"Still. . . I'll be in your office tomorrow at nine, Captain."

The screen went dark.

Fers began a little highly creative improvisation in the way of cursing, not unaided by his habit of drinking with space pilots.

But Captain Wark was more sanguine. "What's another day, Brin, when we've got the war launched at last? That was a first-rate job you did of fast-talking the Professor into listening in—and the brilliant Dolf Mase fell into the good old trap of thinking a phone's off when its screen's dead."

"He did't fall," Fers corrected. "He didn't care. He's so so proud of what a big bad villain he is, he's glad to tell the world—but he forgot we might pipe it through to the one man whose opinion of him mattered. There was the slip; now when we learn this past secret. . . . Hell!" he remarked to the clock. "I'm on another of those damned video interviews in fifteen minutes. See you tomorrow—and we'll start cleaning up the system."

The interviewer, Fers observed regretfully, should have had better sense than to succumb to this year's Minoan fashions, especially for broadcast. But maybe it was just as well; he could keep his mind on her conversation.

"Now first of all. Mr. Brin, before you tell us some of your fascinating cases—and you don't know how thrilled I am at this chance to hear all about them—I'm sure our watchers would like to hear something about this unusual job of yours. Just what *is* a public eye?"

Fers began the speech he knew by heart. "We aren't so uncommon; there must be a hundred of us here on Terra alone. But we don't usually come into the official reports; somehow lawyers and judges are apt to think we're kind of—well, unconventional. So we dig up the leads, and the regular boys take over from there."

"Has this system been in use long?"

"About a hundred years or so. It got started in sort of a funny way. You probably know that the whole science of crime detection goes back only a few centuries—roughly to about the middle of the Nineteenth. By around another century, say in Nineteen Fifty, they knew scientifically just about all the basic principles we work on; but the social and political setup was too chaotic for good results. Even within what was then the United States, a lot of localities were what you might call criminalistically illiterate; and it wasn't until the United Nations got the courage and the sense to turn itself into the World Federation that criminalistics began to get anywhere as the scientific defense-weapon of society. After the foundation of the W.F.B.I. man began

to be safe, or nearly so, from the atavistic wolves—which, incidentally, are something I don't think we'll ever get rid of unless we start mutating."

"Oh, Mr. Brin, you *are* a cynic. But how did the public eyes start? You said it was funny."

"It was. It all came out of the freak chance that the head of W.F.B.I. a hundred years ago—he was the legendary Stef Murch—had started out in life as a teacher of Twentieth Century literature. He wrote his thesis on what they used to call *whodunits*—stories about murder and detectives—and if you've ever read any of that damned entertaining period stuff, you know that it was full of something called *private eyes*—which maybe stood for private investigator and maybe came from an agency that called itself The Eye. These characters were even wilder than the Mad Scientists and Martians that other writers then used to dream up; they could outdrink six rocketmen on Terra-leave and outlove an asteroid hermit hitting Venusberg. They were nothing like the real private detective of the period—oh yes, there were such people, but they made their living finding men who'd run out on their debts, or proving marital infidelity."

"I'd like to ask you to explain some of those words, Mr. Brin; but I'm sure our watchers want to get on with the story of *your* life as a public eye."

"Sorry; but it's a period you've got to use its own words for. Anyway, Stef Murch saw that detectives like these *private eyes*, even if they never existed, could be a perfect adjunct to official scientific criminalists and solid trained policemen. We don't wear uniforms, we don't keep office hours, we don't always even make reports or work on definite assignments. Our job's the extras, the screwball twists, the—Look: If you wanted an exact statement of a formula you'd have it written by a Mark, wouldn't you? But suppose you wanted a limerick? We take the cases that have the limerick-type switch to them. We do what we please when and where we please. We play our hunches; and God knows it's scientific heresy to say so, but if you don't get hunches you won't last long at the—"

Suddenly, Brin's image had vanished mysteriously from the screen.

"Mr. Brin! Where are you? Mr. Brin, we're still on the air!"

"Sorry," said Fers Brin off-camera. "Tell your watchers they've had a rare privilege. They've just seen a public eye get a hunch and he's acting on it right now!"

His hunch was, Fers realized later, like most hunches: a rational piecing together of known facts by the unconscious mind. In this instance the facts were that Professor

Mase was a just and humane man, and that his life-long affection for his brother—quite possibly wilful self-delusion—could not vanish overnight. Conclusion: he would give the lawyer one last chance before turning evidence over to Captain Wark, and there was only one way Dolf Mase would react in self-protection.

Resultant hunch: Murder.

The helicab made it from the casting station to the Professor's quiet Connecticut retreat in record time; but the hunch had come too late. It might even have been too late the moment when the screen had gone dark during the earlier conversation with the Professor. For, as the prosecution was to reconstruct the case, Dolf Mase had already remembered where there was evidence of his one slip and was on his way.

It wasn't usual for a public eye to find a body; the eyes were generally called into the case later. It wasn't usual for any man to find the body of a man whom he had liked and respected—and whom he might possibly, with a faster-functioning hunch, have kept alive.

Professor Lu Mase had been killed very simply. His skull had been crushed by a Fifth Dynasty Martian statuette; and long after the bone splinters had driven life from the brain tissue, the killer had continued to strike, pounding with vicious persistence at what he could not make dead enough to satisfy him.

A shard of the statuette had broken off and pierced the throat. A red fountain had spurted up in the room.

It was an old-fashioned, even an archaic murder, and Fers Brin found his mind haunted by a half-remembered archaic line. Something about being surprised that the old man had so much blood . . .

Another level of his mind registered and filed the details of the scene. Another level took him to the phone for the routine call to the criminalistics squad. But the topmost conscious level held neither observation nor reason, but only emotion—grief for the too trusting Professor, rage at Dolf Mase, who had crowned a career of licensing murderers by becoming a murderer himself.

By the time the squad arrived, the Brin emotions were under control, and he was beginning to realize the one tremendous advantage given him by the primitive brutality of the killing. Dolf Mase had forgotten himself—his life-long hatred of his brother and all he represented had boiled over into unthinking fury.

Now, if ever in his life, Dolf Mase must have slipped—and the Professor's death, if it resulted in trapping this damnable sponsor of murder, would not be in vain.

Within an hour Fers knew the nature of the slip.

It was a combination of an old-fashioned accident and the finest scientific techniques of modern criminalistics that forged the perfect evidence against Dolf Mase.

A man was fishing in a rowboat in the Sound. And it was precisely over his boat that the escaping murderer decided he could safely jettison the coat he had worn. The weighted coat landed plump at the fisherman's feet. When he saw the blood he hastily rowed ashore and reported it. The laboratories did the rest.

"You ever read about Alexander Wiener, Fers?" Captain Wark asked later that night. "He damned near invented the whole science of serology. Now he'd be a happy man if he could see how we've sewed up this whole case on this one piece of serological evidence. The blood on the coat is the Professor's; the sweat stains on the collar check with all the clothing we found in Mase's empty apartment. And there's the case in one exhibit."

"It's hard to believe," Fers said, "but only eighty years ago a judge threw out a case that depended strictly on serological identity."

"Sure, and five hundred years ago Faurot had a hell of a time making fingerprint evidence stick. But now we've got, as Wiener foresaw that long ago, enough identifiable type-factors in blood, sweat, mucus, semen and the rest to establish exact personal identity with as much mathematical certainty as a fingerprint. Mase has made his getaway and is lying low for the moment; but the dragnet's out and once we've got him, he's going to face a prosecution case he can't get out of—not even if he gets Dolf Mase for his lawyer!"

It was the bright eyes of a passport inspector, three days later, that spotted the forgery and caused Dolf Mase to be jerked at the last minute, in the guise of a traveling salesman for extra-terrestrial insect sprays, off the Venus rocket. He had shed the salesman's extroverted bonhommie for his normal self-confident arrogance by the time he was booked for murder.

"I'm reserving my defense," was his only remark to everyone from Captain Wark to the Intersystem News Service.

That's where the case should have ended. That way it would have been nice and simple and eminently moral: villainy detected, guilt punished, and science—for there seemed no doubt that Mase's reserved defense was a bluff—triumphant.

Only this was precisely the point at which the case skipped right out of its orbit.

Fers was puzzled by Captain Wark's face on the phone. He'd never seen the rugged old features quite so weirdly taut. He didn't need the added note of urgency in the voice

to make him hyperjet himself down to the Identification Bureau.

All that the Captain said when he arrived was "Look!" and all that he did was to hand Fers a standard fax-floater on a criminal suspect.

This one was from Port Luna. Jon Do, wanted for burglary in hotel. Only identification, one fingerprint lifted from just-polished shoes of victim, who had the curious habit of tucking spare credits away in his footwear for the night.

"So?" Fers asked. "Don't know as I ever saw a fax-floater on a more uninteresting crime."

The third time Captain Wark opened his mouth he managed to speak. "You know it's routine to send all stuff like that here; we've got the biggest file of single prints in the system."

"Yes, daddy," said Fers patiently. "I've heard rumors."

"So I punched the data on a card and put it through, and I got an answer. Know whose print that is?"

Fers looked again at the date of the hotel theft—November nineteenth, the same day his hunch had taken him to Connecticut. "If you're going to say what I'm afraid you are, I'll tell you right now I don't believe it."

"It's a fact. That is the print of the middle finger, left hand, of Dolf Mase! On the day of the murder he was looting a hotel room in Port Luna."

"Look," said Fers. "We live in an Age of Marvels, sure—and I wonder what age Man's ever lived in that he hasn't thought that—but I've got a funny way of only believing what's possible. And our Marvels just plain flat do not God-damned well include being in Connecticut and on the moon within the span of a couple of hours."

"It's the perfect alibi in history, Brin. Alibi means elsewhere, or used to—"

"And how elsewhere can you get? But hell, Captain, we didn't see the murder; but we did see Dolf Mase here in this office just an hour before it. According to your fingerprint, that's equally impossible."

"Mase won't say so. He'll say we never saw him; that we're trying to frame him."

"Which is an idea at that," Fers mused. "Is there any real reason why the defense—"

The Captain smiled grimly. "I was afraid you'd try a little temptation, Brin. And I wasn't sure how well I'd resist. So before I phoned you I sent a spacegram to the Chief of Port Luna."

Fers exploded. "You idiot! You half-jetted hypomoronic—"

"Hold it, Brin. Identification's my job. It's what I know and what I'm good at. If I get a request to identify a print, I damned well identify it."

"Even when you know there must be something phony?"

"There isn't. I know the Port Luna chief. He's a good man. There isn't a known method of forging a print that could get by him. This is for real."

"But we *saw* Mase here!"

The Captain sighed. "You know, Brin, I'm beginning to wonder. . . ."

Brin's temperament is a mercurial one. Suddenly the public eye snapped his fingers and beamed. "The serological evidence! We've got him cold on that coat! And you yourself said blood-typing and sweat-typing are as certain identity evidence now as fingerprints."

"And you yourself said it was only eighty years since a court threw out serology. Which evidence will it believe now? The new-fangled proof, or the fine old proof that ninety per cent of all identity work is based on?"

Fers slumped again. "It *has* to be some kind of gimmick of Mase's. The only other possibility—"

"The only other possibility," said Captain Wark flatly, "is that the whole foundation of the science of identification is one vast lie."

The public eye rubbed his red pate and frowned. "And the only way to find out which," he said softly, "would seem to be at Port Luna. . . ."

Port Luna was erected as the first great non-terrestrial city. It was intended as the great pleasure dome of Man, the dream city of everyone from the millionaire to the stenographer saving up for her vacation by skipping lunches.

But rocket travel developed so rapidly that pleasure-planning Man said to himself, "What's the moon? It's nice to be under; but what do I get out of being *on* it? Let's go to Venus, to Mars—"

And the pleasure dome became the skid road of the system, untended, unrepaired, unheeded. The observatory crew lived under a smaller dome of their own. So did the crews of the space strip. Passengers were rushed from space liners to the Terra Shuttle without even seeing the city of Port Luna. And in the city were the bars and stereos and other needful entertainment for the barracked crews and all the shattered spacemen who drifted back this far but could not quite bring themselves to return to Terra.

It would take a good man, Fers reflected, to be Police Chief in Port Luna.

"The Chief left on the last shuttle," a uniformed sergeant told him. "You must've crossed him. He's gone to Terra to pick up a hotel sneak thief—and say: Guess who our little old Port Luna sneak thief turned out to be?"

Fers sighed, but not audibly. He registered proper amaze-

ment when the sergeant revealed the startling news, registered it so satisfactorily that from then on, as far as the sergeant went, Port Luna was his.

But even the confidential files on the case were no help. The victim was a salesman from Venus, ostensibly traveling in microbooks but suspected—according to a note in the dossier—of peddling Venusian pictures on the side. The amount stolen was approximately what Dolf Mase might charge for five minutes of consultation in his office.

"I'm beginning to get an idea," Fers said slowly. "I don't like it, and I can't get rid of it. Sergeant, I want you to do something for me."

"Sure. I got a kid who's crazy about public eyes. He's gonna get a big blast out of this. What you want I should do?"

"Got some omnidetergent here? Good. Now watch me wash my hands."

"Huh?"

Very carefully Fers scrubbed, rinsed and dried his hands. "Now write down that you saw me do that, and put it through the time stamper. Then lock it in your safe."

"I don't get it."

"I'm not too damned sure I do myself. But I've got to try. Now which way's that hotel?"

The Luna Palace was at the corner of Tsiolkovsky and Oberth, only a short walk from the station. Fers was relieved, both because he hated to walk wearing gravity soles and because he loathed these streets of cut whisky and tenth-run stereos, of cheap beds and cheap bedmates.

The Palace was a barely perceptible cut above the other hives of bedding-cells, exactly right both for the Venusian peddler—who wanted to display a touch of swank to his customers—and for the sneak thief—who would find the pickings too slim elsewhere.

The girl behind the desk might have been the model for whom Minoan designs were revived. Fers was pleased; it was easier to work among attractive surroundings.

"My name's Bets," she stated.

"That's nice," said Fers. "Is the manager in?"

"I get off at five o'clock," Bets announced.

"If that means that he comes on then, maybe I better stick around. Mind if I linger over the desk?"

"Nobody comes in here much," Bets revealed.

"Good place for a spot of quiet brooding then. Bets, I've got me a problem—one they can't solve by criminalistics. One that maybe disproves criminalistics."

"Not even in the lobby," Bets further disclosed.

"And I think I've got the answer," Fers went on. "I'm

almost sure I've got it if I can find out how to prove it. Did you ever read a *whodunit*, Bets?"

"I get kind of hungry around five," Bets admitted.

"I like that period—the Twentieth Century, not around five—partly because of Stef Murch, I guess, and partly because I had a great-great-grandfather who was a *private eye*. I've read a lot and they keep saying they couldn't write a detective story about the 'future'—meaning, say, now—because everything would be different and how could you be fair?"

"I like steaks," Bets proclaimed.

"And the answer I've got is one you could have figured out even in the Twentieth Century. It's a problem that couldn't happen till now, but the answer was in their knowledge. They had a writer named Quinn or Queel or something who used to issue a challenge to the reader, and this would be the place to do it."

"The best steaks are at the Jet," Bets explained.

"Challenge," Fers mused. "What brought Dolf Mase's left middle finger to the Luna Palace? And how am I going to prove it?"

"Only lately," Bets annotated, "there's too many crooks hanging around the Jet so I go to the Spacemen's Grotto."

Fers leaned over the desk and bussed her warmly. "Bless you, Bets," he said. "I knew our conversations were bound to meet eventually! And if this works, you get the biggest steak on the whole damned moon!"

The sergeant looked with some dubiety at the public eye who held on to a chair to steady himself with his right hand while keeping his left hand carefully in the air.

"I don't think," Fers observed, "that I could pass a sobriety test. Call of duty. Got me into a little drinking more along the standards of a *private eye*. But I've got some jobs for you. Got an ultraviolet light, first of all?"

The baffled sergeant followed instructions. Perplexedly he assembled the dossier on the sneak-thief, the time-marked slip from the safe, the ultra-violet lamp.

He flashed the lamp, at Fers' behest, on the public eye's left palm, and stared at the fine set of hitherto invisible fingerprints.

"Notice the middle one," said Fers. "Now look at the sneak-thief's."

After a full minute of grunting study, the sergeant looked up. He might have been staring at a Venusian swamp-doctor in the flesh.

"And remember," Fers went on, "that my hands were scrubbed with omnidetergent three hours ago. I shook hands with that man and got his prints on this invisible fluorescent

film some time in the last three hours. Therefore he's on Luna. Therefore he isn't Dolf Mase, whom your Chief is probably still interviewing on Terra."

"Then—then there's two guys with the same print!" The sergeant looked as if his world were collapsing around him.

"It makes sense," said Fers. "It's crazy but it makes sense. And don't worry—you're still in business. And I wonder whether another drink would save my life or kill me?"

Doggedly the sergeant had fought his way through his bewilderment to the immediate problem. "Where is he? If he's here, I gotta arrest him."

"How right you are. He's at the Jet and his name's Wil Smit."

"That son-of-a-spacesuit! We been trying to pin something on him for years!"

"I thought so. It had to be somebody you'd never actually arrested and printed, or you'd have had him on file and not needed to send out a fax-floater. So when I learned that the Jet was in favor with the criminal set this season, I wandered around there—if you can call it wandering in these damned gravity-soles. I threw around the names of some criminals I know on Terra—little enough to be in his league but big enough to be familiar names out here. I said I needed a guy for a hotel job only it had to be somebody with a clean record. It was around the seventh drink that I met Wil Smit. When we shook on the deal I got all drunk and obstinate and, by God, if I was left-handed, he was going to shake left-handed too."

"But you ain't left-handed. Or are you?" added the sergeant, to whom nothing was certain any longer in a system in which the same print belonged to two different guys.

"Right-handed as a lark," said Fers airily, and then paused to contemplate his statement. He shook his head and went on, "You go get Smit. Suspicion of theft. Book him, print him, and then you'll have him cold. About that time I'll be back and we'll take the next shuttle. Meantime, I've got a date with a couple of steaks at the Spacemen's Grotto."

An urgent spacegram had persuaded the Port Luna Chief to stay on Terra with his presumptive prisoner until the public eye arrived.

"Of course," that prisoner was remarking once again, "I shall refuse to disclose the reason for my presence on Luna, the name under which I traveled thither, or the motive for my invasion of the picture-peddler's room. I shall merely plead guilty and serve my sentence on Luna, while you, my dear Captain Wark, continue to prosecute here on earth the search for the abominable murderer of my beloved brother."

The Lunar Chief gave his old friend a yes-but-what-can-I-do? look.

"Nothing." Captain Wark answered his unspoken query. "You've got your evidence you have to prosecute. But Brin's spacegram hinted—"

"The public eye," Dolf Mase stated, "is a vastly overrated character. The romantic appeal of the unconventional—"

At this point the nascent lecture was interrupted by the entrance of a public eye and a Lunar sneak-thief.

And in another five minutes there occurred one of the historical moments in the annals of criminalistics: the comparison of two identical prints made by two different men.

Wark and the Chief were still poring over the prints, vainly striving to find the faintest classifiable difference, when Fers addressed the lawyer.

"War's over," he said. "And I think it's unconditional surrender for Mase. You try to bring up this Lunar 'alibi' in court and we'll have Smit shuttled down here and produced as a prosecution exhibit. Unless you force us to that, we'll just forget the whole thing; no use announcing this identity-problem until we've adjusted our systems to it. But either way we've got you cold."

"I still," said Dolf Mase smugly, "reserve my defense."

Hours later, Fers Brin was delivering his opinion over a beer.

"Only this time," Fers said, "we know it's a bluff. This fingerprint gimmick was a gift from his own strange gods—he never could have counted on it. All he has left now is some kind of legalistic fireworks and much damned good it'll do him."

"You've done a good job, Brin," Captain Wark said glumly. "We've got Mase nailed down—only . . ."

"Only you can't really rejoice because you've lost faith in the science of identification? Brighten up, Captain. It's OK. Look: it's all because we forgot one little thing. Fingerprint identification worked so beautifully for so many centuries in so many million cases that we came to believe in it as a certainty. We took it as an axiom: There are no identical fingerprints. And we missed the whole point. There never was any such certainty. There were only *infinitely long odds.*

Captain Wark sat up slowly and a light began to gleam in his eyes.

But the Chief said, "Odds?"

"Galton," Fers went on, "is the guy who started it all on a serious criminalistic level. Sir Francis Galton, English anthropologist. It's all in your office; I looked it up again while you were disposing of our print-twins. Quite a character, this Galton; practically founded meteorology and eugenics too. And he figured that the odds on any two fingerprints coinciding on all

the points we used in classification was one in sixty-four billion. For his time this was fine; it was just about the same, for practical police work, as saying one in infinity. But what's the population of the system now?"

"The whole system?" The Chief's eyes were boggling. "Damned near—*seventy billion!*"

"So by now," the Captain exclaimed, "it just about *had* to happen sooner or later!"

"Exactly," said Fers. "From now on a *single* print is *not* identification. It's strong presumptive evidence, but that's all. And it'll usually be enough. Just remember never to feed the defense ammunition by trying to claim that an odds-on chance is an unshakable fact. And you've still got the best possible personal identification in two or more prints. You noticed that all the other fingers on those two men were completely different. Chances on two prints coinciding are about one in forty quadrillion, which is good enough for us. For a while. And we don't have words for the chances on all ten matching up. That works out to the sixtieth power of two times the eightieth power of ten—if you want to see what it looks like, put down a one and write ninety-eight zeroes after it."

Captain Wark looked like himself again. Happily he raised his beer mug in a toast. "I propose we drink to the identification man of the future Inter-Galactic Empire," he proclaimed, "who first discovers two sets of ten matching prints!"

THE INNOCENT ARRIVAL

By Poul and Karen Anderson

The visiphone chimed when Peri had just gotten into her dinner gown. She peeled it off again and slipped on a casual bathrobe —a wisp of translucence which had set the president of Antarctic Enterprises, or had it been the chairman of the board, back several thousand dollars. Then she pulled a lock of lion-colored hair down over one eye, checked with a mirror, rumpled it a tiny bit more and wrapped the robe loosely on top and tight around the hips.

After all, some of the men who knew her private number were important.

She undulated to the phone and pressed its Accept. "Hello-o, there," she said automatically. "So sorry to keep you waiting, I was just taking a bath and—Oh. It's you."

Gus Doran's prawn-like eyes popped at her. "Holy Success," he whispered in awe. "You sure the wires can carry that much voltage?"

"Well, hurry up with whatever it is," snapped Peri. "I got a date tonight."

"I'll say you do! With a Martian."

"Hm?" Peri widened her silver-blue gaze and flapped sooty lashes at him. "You must have heard wrong, Gus. He's the heir apparent of Indonesia, Inc., that's who, and if you called up to ask for a piece of him you can just blank right out again. I saw him first!"

Doran's thin sharp face grinned. "I know what I'd like a piece of," he said. "But you break that date, Peri. Put it off or something. I got this Martian for you, see?"

"So? Since when has all Mars had as much spending money as one big-time marijuana rancher? Not to mention the heir ap—"

"Sure, sure. But how much are those boys going to spend on any girl, even a high-level type like you? Listen, I need you just for tonight, see? This Martian is a whack. Strictly from gone. He is here on official business, but he is a yokel and I do mean hayseed. Like he asked me what the Christmas decorations in all the stores were! And this is the solar nexus of it, Peri, kid." Doran leaned forward as if to climb out of the screen. "He has got a hundred million dollars expense money, and they are not going to audit his accounts at home. One hundred million good green certificates, legal tender anywhere in the United Protectorates. And he has about as much backbone as a piece of steak alga. Kid, if I did not happen to

have a small nephew I would say this will be like taking candy from a baby."

Peri's peaches-and-cream countenance began to resemble peaches and cream left overnight on Pluto. "Badger?" she asked.

"Sure. You and Sam Wendt handle the routine. I will take the go-between angle, so he will think of me as still his friend, because I have other plans for him too. But if we can't shake a million out of him for this one night's work there is something akilter. And your share of a million is three hundred thirty-three—"

"Is five hundred thousand flat," said Peri. "Too bad I just got an awful headache and can't see Mr. Sastro tonight. Where you at, Gus?"

The gravity was not as hard to take as Peter Matheny had expected. Three generations on Mars might lengthen the legs and expand the chest a trifle, but the genes had come from Earth and the organism readjusts. What set him gasping was the air. It weighed like a ton of wool and had apparently sopped up half the Atlantic Ocean. Ears trained to listen through the Martian atmosphere shuddered from the racket conducted by Earth's. The passport official seemed to bellow at him.

"Pardon me for asking this. The United Protectorates welcome all visitors to Earth, and I assure you, sir, an ordinary five-year visa provokes no questions. But since you came on an official courier boat of your planet, Mr. Matheny, regulations force me to ask your business."

"Well . . . recruiting."

The official patted his comfortable stomach, iridescent in neolon, and chuckled patronizingly. "I am afraid, sir, you won't find many people who wish to leave. They wouldn't be able to see the Teamsters Hour on Mars, would they?"

"Oh, we don't expect immigration," said Matheny shyly. He was a fairly young man but small, with a dark-thatched snub-nosed gray-eyed head that seemed too large for his slender body. "We learned long ago no one is interested any more in giving up even second-class citizenship on Earth to live in the Republic. But we only wanted to hire . . . uh, I mean engage . . . an, an adviser. . . . We're not businessmen, we know our export trade hasn't a chance among all your corporations unless we get some—a five-year contract—?" He heard his words trailing off idiotically, and swore at himself.

"Well, good luck." The official's tone was skeptical. He stamped the passport and handed it back. "There, now, you are free to travel anywhere in the Protectorates. But I would advise you to leave the capital and get into the sticks—er-hum,

I mean the provinces—I am sure there must be tolerably competent sales executives in Russia or Congolese Belgium or such regions. Frankly, sir, I do not believe you can attract anyone out of Newer York."

"Thanks," said Matheny, "but you see . . . I . . . we need . . . that is. . . . Oh, well. Thanks. Goodbye." He backed out of the office.

A dropshaft deposited him on a walkway. The crowd, a rainbow of men in pajamas and cloaks, women in Neo-Cretan dresses and goldleaf hats, swept him against the rail. For a moment, squashed to the wire, he stared a hundred feet down at a river of automobiles. *Phobos!* he thought wildly. *If the barrier gives, I'll be sliced in two by a dorsal fin before I hit the pavement!*

The August twilight wrapped him in heat and stickiness. He could see neither stars nor even moon through the city's blaze. The forest of multi-colored towers, cataracting half a mile skyward across more acreage than his eyes reached, was impressive and all that, but—he used to stroll out in the rock garden behind his cottage and smoke a pipe in company with Orion. On summer evenings, that is, when the night temperature wasn't too far below zero.

Why did they tap me for this job? he asked himself in a surge of homesickness. What the hell was the Martian Embassy here for? He, Peter Matheny, was no more than a peaceful little professor of sociodynamics at Devil's Kettle University. Of course, he had advised his government before now, in fact the Red Ankh Society had been his idea, but still he was only at ease with his books and his chess and his mineral collection, a faculty poker party on Tenthday night and an occasional trip to Swindletown—*My God,* thought Matheny, *here I am, one solitary outlander in the greatest commercial empire the human race has even seen, and I'm supposed to find my planet a con man!*

He began walking, disconsolately at random. His lizardskin shirt and black culottes drew glances, but derisive ones: their cut for forty years out of date. He should find himself a hotel, he thought drearily, but he wasn't tired; the spaceport would pneumo his baggage to him whenever he did check in. The few Martians who had been to Earth had gone into ecstasies over the automation which put any service you could name on a twenty-four-hour basis. But it would be a long time before Mars had such machines. If ever.

The city roared at him.

He fumbled after his pipe. *Of course,* he told himself, *that's why the Embassy can't act. I may find it advisable to go outside the law. Please, sir, where can I contact the underworld?*

He wished gambling were legal on Earth. The Constitution of the Martian Republic forbade sumptuary and moral legisla-

tion; quite apart from the rambunctious individualism which that document formulated, the article was a practical necessity. Life was bleak enough on the deserts, without being denied the pleasure of trying to bottom deal some friend who was happily trying to mark the cards. Matheny would have found a few spins of roulette soothing: it was always an intellectual challenge to work out the system by which the management operated a wheel. But more, he would have been among people he understood. The frightful thing about the Earthman was the way he seemed to exist only in organized masses. A gypsy snake oil peddler, plodding his syrtosaur wagon across Martian sands just didn't have a prayer against, say, the Grant, Harding & Adams Public Relations Agency.

Matheny puffed smoke and looked around. His feet ached from the weight on them. Where could a man sit down? It was hard to make out any individual sign, through all that shimmering neon. His eye fell on one distinguished by relative austerity.

THE CHURCH OF YOUR CHOICE
Enter, Rest, and Pray

That would do. He took an upward slideramp through several hundred feet of altitude, stepped past an aurora curtain, and found himself in a marble lobby next to an inspirational newsstand.

"Ah, brother, welcome," said a redhaired usherette in demure black leotards. "The peace that passeth all understanding be with you. The restaurant is right up those stairs."

"I . . . I'm not hungry," stammered Matheny. "I just wanted to sit in—"

"To your left, sir."

The Martian crossed the lobby. His pipe went out in the breeze from an animated angel. Organ music sighed through an open doorway. The series of rooms beyond was dim, Gothic, and interminable.

"Get your chips right here, sir," said the girl in the booth.

"Hm?" said Matheny.

She explained. He bought a few hundred-dollar tokens, dropped a fifty-buck coin down the slot marked CONTRIBUTIONS, and sipped the martini he got back while he strolled around studying the games. It was a good martini, probably sold below cost. He decided that the roulette wheels were either honest or too deep for him. He'd have to relax with a crap game instead.

He had been standing at the table for some time before the rest of the congregation really noticed him. Then it was with awe. The first few passes he had made were unsuccessful, Earth gravity threw him off, but when he got the rhythm of it

he tossed a row of sevens. It was a customary form of challenge on Mars. Here, though, they simply pushed chips toward him. He missed a throw as anyone would at home: simple courtesy. The next time around he threw for a seven just to get the feel. He got a seven. The dice had not been substituted on him.

"I say," he exclaimed. He looked up into eyes and eyes, all around the green table. "I'm sorry. I guess I don't know your rules."

"You did all right, brother," said a middle-aged lady with an obviously surgical nonbodice.

"But—I mean . . . when do we start actually *playing?* What happened to the cocked dice?"

"Sir!" The lady drew herself up and jutted an indignant prow at him. "This is a church!"

"Oh . . . I see . . . excuse me, I, I, I—" Matheny backed out of the crowd, shuddering. He looked around for some place to hide his burning ears.

"You forgot your chips, pal," said a voice.

"Oh. Thanks. Thanks ever so much. I, I, that is—" Matheny cursed his knotting tongue. *Damn it, just because they're so much more sophisticated than I, do I have to talk like a leaky boiler?*

The helpful Earthman was not tall, he was dark and chisel-faced and sleekly pomaded, dapper in blue pajamas with a red zig-zag, a sleighbell cloak and curly-toed slippers. "You're from Mars, aren't you?" he asked in the friendliest tone Matheny had yet heard.

"Yes. Yes, I am. M-my name's Peter Matheny, I, I—" He stuck out his hand to shake and chips rolled over the floor. "Damn! Oh, excuse me, I forgot this was a church. Never mind them! No, please. I just want to g-g-get the hell out of here."

"Good idea. How about a drink? I know a bar downshaft."

Matheny sighed. "A drink I need the very most."

"My name's Doran. Gus Doran. Call me Gus." They walked back to the deaconette's booth and Matheny cashed what remained of his winnings.

"I don't want to, I mean, if you're busy tonight, Mr. Doran—"

"Nah. I am not doing one thing in particular. Besides, I have never met a Martian. I am very interested."

"There aren't many of us on Earth," agreed Matheny. "Just a small embassy staff and an occasional like me."

"I should think you would do a lot of traveling here. The old mother planet and so on."

"We can't afford it," said Matheny. "What with gravitation and distance, such voyages are much too expensive for us to make them for pleasure. Not to mention our dollar

shortage." As they entered the shaft, he added wistfully: "You Earth people have that kind of money, at least in your more prosperous brackets. Why don't you send a few tourists to us?"

"I always wanted to," said Doran. "I would like to see the, what they call, City of Time, and so on. As a matter of fact, I have given my girl one of those Old Martian rings last Ike's Birthday, and she was just gazoo about it. A jewel dug out of the City of Time, like, made a million years ago by a, uh, extinct race . . . I tell you, she *appreciated* me for it!" He winked and nudged.

"Oh," said Matheny. He felt a certain guilt. Doran was too pleasant a little man to deserve— "Of course," he said ritually, "I agree with all the archeologists it's a crime to sell such scientifically priceless artifacts, but what can we do? We must live, and the tourist trade is almost nonexistent."

"Trouble with it is, I hear Mars is not so comfortable," said Doran. "I mean, do not get me wrong, I don't want to insult you or anything, but people come back saying you have given the planet just barely enough air to keep a man alive. And it gets so cold that soon even the dimmest lady tourist gets the idea of that Brass Monkey Memorial you have erected. And there are no cities, just little towns and villages and ranches out in the bush—I mean, you are being pioneers and making a new nation and all that, but people paying half a megabuck for their ticket expect some comfort and, uh, you know."

"I do know," said Matheny. "But we're poor! We're a handful of people trying to make a world of dust and sand and scrub thorn into fields and woods and seas. We can't do it without substantial help from Earth, equipment and supplies —which can only be paid for in Earth dollars—and we can't export enough to Earth to earn those dollars."

By that time they were entering the Paul Bunyan Knotty Pine Bar & Grill, on the 73rd level. Matheny's jaw clanked down. "Whassa matter?" asked Doran. "Ain't you ever seen a ecdysiastic technician before?"

"Uh, yes, but . . . well . . . not in a 3-D image under ten magnifications." Matheny followed Doran past a sign announcing that this show was for purely artistic purposes, into a booth. There a soundproof curtain reduced the noise level enough so they could talk in normal voices.

"What'll you have?" asked Doran. "It's on me."

"Oh, I couldn't let you. I mean—"

"Nonsense. Welcome to Earth! Care for a Thyle and vermouth?"

Matheny shuddered. "Good Lord, no!"

"Huh? But they make Thyle right on Mars, don't they?"

"Yes. And it all goes to Earth and sells at 2000 dollars a fifth. But you don't think we'd *drink* it, do you? I mean, well,

I imagine it doesn't absolutely ruin vermouth. But we don't see those Earthside commercials about how sophisticated people like it so much."

"Well, I'll be a socialist creeper!" Doran's face split in a grin. "You know, all my life I've hated the stuff and never dared admit it?" He raised a hand. "Don't worry, I won't blabbo. But I am wondering, if you control the Thyle industry, and sell all those relics at fancy prices . . . why do you call yourselves poor?"

"Because we are," said Matheny. "By the time the shipping costs have been paid on a bottle, and the Earth wholesaler and jobber and sales engineer and so on, down to the retailer, have taken their percentage, and the advertising agency has been paid, and about fifty separate Earth taxes . . . there's very little profit going back to the distillery on Mars. The same principle is what's strangling us on everything. Old Martian artifacts aren't really rare, for instance, but freight charges and the middlemen here put them out of the mass market."

"Have you not got some other businesses?"

"Well, we do sell a lot of color slides, postcards, baggage labels, and so on to people who like to act cosmopolitan; and I understand our travel posters are quite popular as wall decoration. But all that has to be printed on Earth, and the printer and distributor keep most of the money. We've sold some books and show tapes, of course, but only one has been really successful—*I Was a Slave Girl on Mars*. Our most prominent novelist was co-opted to ghostwrite that one. Again, though, your income taxes took most of the money; authors never have been protected the way a businessman is. We do make a high percentage of profit on those little certificates you see around—you know, the title deeds to one square inch of Mars—but expressed absolutely, in dollars, it doesn't amount to much when we start shopping for bulldozers and thermonuclear power plants."

"How about postage stamps?" inquired Doran. "Philately is a big business, I have heard."

"It was our mainstay," admitted Matheny, "but it's been overworked. Martian stamps are a drug on the market. What we'd like to operate is a sweepstakes, but the antigambling laws on Earth forbid that."

Doran whistled. "I got to give you people credit for enterprise, anyway!" He fingered his mustache. "Uh, pardon me, but have you tried to, well, attract capital from Earth?"

"Of course," said Matheny bitterly. "We offer the most liberal concessions in the Solar System. Any little mining company or transport firm or . . . or anybody . . . who wanted to come and actually invest a few dollars in Mars—why, we'd probably give him the President's daughter as security. No, the Minister of Ecology has a better-looking one. But who's in-

terested? Mars is forty million miles away at closest. We haven't a thing that Earth hasn't got more of. We're only the descendants of a few scientists, a few political malcontents, oddballs who happen to prefer elbow room and a bill of liberties to the incorporated state—what could General Nucleonics hope to get from Mars?"

"I see. Well, what are you having to drink?"

"Beer," said Matheny without hesitation.

"Huh? Look, pal, this is on me."

"The only beer on Mars comes forty million miles, with interplanetary freight charges tacked on," said Matheny. "Tuborg!"

Doran shrugged, dialed the dispenser and fed it coins.

"This is a real interesting talk, Pete," he said. "You are being very frank with me. I like a man that is frank."

Matheny shrugged. "I haven't told you anything that isn't known to every economist."

Of course I haven't. I've not so much as mentioned the Red Ankh, for instance. But in principle, I have told him the truth, told him of our need; for even the secret operations do not yield us enough.

The beer arrived. Matheny engulfed himself in it. Doran sipped at a whiskey sour and unobtrusively set a fresh brew in front of the Martian.

"Ahhh!" said Matheny. "Bless you, my friend."

"A pleasure."

"But now you must let me buy you one."

"That is not necessary. After all," said Doran with great tact, "with the situation as you have been describing—"

"Oh, we're not that poor! My expense allowance assumes I will entertain quite a bit."

Doran's brows lifted a few minutes of arc. "You're here on business, then?"

"Yes. I told you we haven't any tourists. I was sent to hire a business manager for the Martian export trade."

"What's wrong with your own people? I mean, Pete, it is not your fault there are so many rackets . . .uh, taxes . . . and middlemen and agencies and et cetera. That is just the way Earth is set up these days."

"Exactly." Matheny's finger stabbed in the general direction of Doran's pajama top. "And who set it up that way? Earthmen. We Martians are babes in the bush. What chance do we have to earn dollars on the scale we need them, in competition with corporations which could buy and sell our whole planet before breakfast? Why, we couldn't afford three seconds of commercial time on a Lullaby Pillow 'cast. What we need, what we have to hire, is an executive who knows Earth, who's an Earthman himself. Let him tell us what will appeal to your people, and how to dodge the tax bite and . . . and,

well, you see how it goes, that sort of, uh, thing." Matheny felt his eloquence running down and grabbed for the second bottle of beer.

"But where do I start?" he asked plaintively, for his loneliness smote him anew. "I'm just a college professor at home. How would I even get to see—"

"It might be arranged," said Doran in a thoughtful tone. "It just might. How much could you pay this fellow?"

"A hundred megabucks a year, if he'll sign a five-year contract. That's Earth years, mind you."

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Pete," said Doran, "but while that is not bad money, it is not what a high-powered sales scientist gets in Newer York. Plus his retirement benefits, which he would lose if he quit where he is now at. And I am sure he would not want to settle on Mars permanently."

"I could offer a certain amount of, uh, well, lagniappe," said Matheny. "That is, well, I can draw up to a hundred megabucks myself for, uh, expenses and, well . . . let me buy you a drink!"

Doran's black eyes frogged at him. "You might at that," said the Earthman very softly. "Yes, you might at that."

Matheny found himself warming. Gus Doran was a thentic bobber. A hell of a swell chap. He explained modestly that he was a free lance business consultant and it was barely possible he could arrange some contacts . . .no, no, no commission, all done in the interest of interplanetary friendship . . . well, anyhow, let's not talk business now. If you have got to stick to beer, Pete, make it a chaser to akvavit. What is akvavit? Well, I will just take and show you.

A hell of a good bloke. He knew some very funny stories, too, and he laughed at Matheny's, though they were probably too rustic for a big city taste like his.

"What I really want," said Matheny, "what I really want, I mean, what Mars really needs, get me?—is a confidence man."

"A what?"

"The best and slickest one on Earth, to operate a world-size con game for us and make us some *real* money."

"Con man—Oh. A slipstring."

"A con by any other name," said Matheny, pouring down an akvavit.

"Hm." Doran squinted through cigaret smoke. "You are interesting me strangely, my friend. Say on."

"No." Matheny realized his head was a bit smoky. The walls of the booth seemed odd, somehow. They were just leatheroid walls, but they had an odd quality.

"No, sorry, Gus," he said. "I spoke too much."

"Okay. Forget it. I do not like a man that pries. But look, let's bomb out of here, how about it? Go have a little fun."

"By all means." Matheny disposed of his last beer. "I could use some gaiety."

"You have come to the right town, then. But let us get you a hotel room first and some more up to date clothes."

"*Allez,*" said Matheny. "If I don't mean *allons,* or maybe *alors.*"

The drop down to cabramp level and the short ride afterward sobered him; the room rate at the Jupiter-Astoria sobered him still more. *Oh, well,* he thought, *if I succeed in this job no one at home will quibble.* And the chamber to which he and Doran were shown was spectacular enough, with a pneumo direct to the bar and a full-wall transparency to show the vertical incandescence of the towers.

"Whoof!" Matheny sat down. The chair slithered sensuously about his contours. He jumped. "What the dusty hell—Oh." He tried to grin, but his face burned. "I see."

"That is a sexy type of furniture, all right," agreed Doran. He lowered himself into another chair, cocked his feet on the 3-D, and waved a cigarette. "Which speaking of, what say we get some girls? It is not too late to catch them at home, a date here will usually start around 2100 hours earliest."

"What?"

"You know. Dames. Like a certain blonde warhead with twin radar globes and swivel mounting, and she just loves exotics. Such as you."

"Me?" Matheny heard his voice climb to a schoolboy squeak. "Me? Exotic? Why, I'm just a little college professor, I, g-g-g, that is—" His tongue got stuck on his palate. He pulled it loose and moistened uncertain lips.

"You are from Mars. Okay? So you fought bushcats barehanded in an abandoned canal."

"What's a bushcat? And we don't have canals. The evaporation rate—"

"Look, Pete," said Doran patiently. "She don't have to know that, does she?"

"Well, well, no. I guess not. No."

"Let's order you some clothes on the pneumo," said Doran. "I recommend you buy from Schwartzherz, everybody knows he is expensive."

While Matheny jittered about, shaving and showering and struggling with his new raiment, Doran kept him supplied with akvavit and beer. "You said one thing, Pete," he remarked. "About needing a slipstring. A con man, you would call it."

"Forget that. Please. I spoke out of turn."

"Well, you see, maybe a man like that is just what Mars does need. And maybe I have got a few contacts."

"What?" Matheny gaped out of the bathroom.

Doran cupped his hands around a fresh cigarette, not look-

ing at him. "I am not that man," he said frankly. "But in my line I get a lot of contacts, and not all of them go topside. See what I mean? Like if, say, you wanted somebody terminated, and could pay for it, I could not do it. I would not want to know anything about it. But I could tell you a phone number."

He shrugged and gave the Martian a sidelong glance. "Sure, you may not be interested. But if you are, well, Pete, I was not born yesterday. I got tolerance. Like the Good Book says, if you want to get ahead, you have got to think positively. And your mission is pretty important."

Matheny hesitated. If only he hadn't taken that last shot—! It made him want to say yes, immediately, without reservations. And therefore maybe he became over-cautious.

They had instructed him on Mars to take chances if he must.

"I could tell you a thing or two which might give you a better idea," he said slowly. "But it would have to be under security."

"Okay by me. Room service can send us up an oath right now."

"What? But—but—" Matheny hung onto himself and tried to believe that he had landed on Earth less than six hours ago.

In the end he did call room service and the machine was trundled in. Doran swallowed the pill and donned the conditioner helmet without an instant's hesitation. "I shall never reveal to any person unauthorized by yourself whatever you may tell me under security, now or at any other time," he recited. Then, cheerfully: "And that formula, Pete, happens to be the honest-to-zebra truth."

"I know." Matheny stared embarrassed at the carpet. "I'm sorry to . . . to . . . I mean, of course I trust you, but—"

"Forget it. I take a hundred security oaths a year, in my line of work. Maybe I can help you. I like you, Pete, damn if I don't. And of course I might stand to get an agent's cut, if I arrange—Go ahead, boy, go ahead." Doran crossed his legs and leaned back.

"Oh, it's simple enough," said Matheny. "It's only that we already are operating con games."

"On Mars, you mean?"

"Yes. There never were any Old Martians. We erected the ruins fifty years ago for the Billingsworth Expedition to find. We've been manufacturing relics ever since."

"*Huh?* Well, why, but—"

"In this case it helps to be at the far end of an interplanetary haul," said Matheny. "Not many Terrestrial archeologists get to Mars, and they depend on our people to—Well, anyhow—"

"I will be clopped! Good for you!" Doran blew up in laugh-

ter. "That is one thing I would never spill, even without security. I told you about my girl friend, didn't I?"

"Oh, yes, the Little Girl," said Matheny apologetically. "She was another official project."

"Who?"

"Remember Junie O'Brien? The little golden-haired girl on Mars, a mathematical prodigy, but dying of an incurable disease? She collected Earth coins."

"Oh, that. Sure, I remember—Hey! You didn't!"

"Yes. We made about a billion dollars on that one."

"I will be double damned. You know, Pete, I sent her a hundred buck piece myself. . . . Say, how is Junie O'Brien?"

"Oh, fine. Under a different name, she's now our finance minister." Matheny stared out the wall, his hands twisting nervously behind his back. "There were no lies involved. She really does have a fatal disease. So do you and I. Every day we grow older."

"Uh!" exclaimed Doran.

"And then the Red Ānkh Society. You must have seen or heard their ads . . . let me think . . . 'What mysterious knowledge did the Old Martians possess? What was the secret wisdom of the Ancients? Now the incredibly powerful semantics of the Red Ankh (not a religious organization) is available to a select few—' "

"Oh, those. Sure. But aren't they out in California?"

"Just a front," said Matheny. "Actually, that's our largest dollar-earning enterprise." He would have liked to say it was his suggestion originally, but that would have been too presumptuous. He was talking to an Earthman, who had heard everything already.

Doran whistled.

"That's about all, so far," confessed Matheny. "Perhaps a con is our only hope. I've been wondering, maybe we could organize a Martian bucket shop, handling Martian securities, but—Well, I don't know."

"I think—" Doran removed the helmet and stood up.

"Yes?" Matheny faced around, shivering with his own tension.

"I may be able to find the man you want," said Doran. "I just may. It will take a few days and might get a little expensive."

"You mean . . . Mr. Doran—Gus—you could actually—"

"I cannot promise anything yet except that I will try. Now you finish dressing. I will be down in the bar. And I will call up this girl I know. We deserve a celebration!"

Peri was tall. Peri was slim. Peri smoldered when she walked and exploded when she stretched. Her apartment was ivory and ebony, her sea-green dress was poured on, and the Neo-

Cretan mode had obviously been engineered to her personal specifications.

She waved twelve inches of jade cigaret holder, lifted her glass, and murmured throatily: "To you, Pete. To Mars."

"I, I, I," stammered Matheny. He raised his own glass. It slopped over. "Oh, damn! I mean . . . gosh, I'm so sorry, I—"

"No harm done. You aren't used to our gravity yet." Peri extended a flawless leg out of her slit skirt and turned it about on the couch, presumably in search of a more comfortable position. "And it must seem terribly cramped here on Earth, Pete," she continued, "after roaming the desert, hunting, sleeping under the twin moons. Two moons! Why, what girl could resist that?"

"Uh, well, as a matter of fact, the moons are barely visible," floundered Matheny.

Peri pouted, dimpling her cheeks. "Must you spoil my dreams?" she said. "When I think of Mars, the frontier, where men are still men, why, my breast swells with emotion."

"Uh, yes." Matheny gulped. "Swell. Yes."

She leaned closer to his chair. "Now that I've got you, don't think you'll get away," she smiled. "A live Martian, trapped!"

Doran looked at his watch. "Well," he said, "I have got to get up tomorrow, so I had better run along now."

"Ta-ta," said Peri. Matheny rose. She pulled him down beside her. "Oh, no, you don't, Mars lad. I'm not through with you yet!"

"But, but, but," said Matheny.

Doran chuckled. "I'll meet you on the Terrace at fourteen hundred hours tomorrow," he said. "Have fun, Pete."

The door closed on him.

Peri slithered toward her guest. He felt a nudge and looked down. She had not actually touched him with her hands. "Gus is a good squiff," she said, "but I wondered if he'd ever go."

"Why, why . . . what do you mean?" croaked Matheny.

"Haven't you guessed?" she whispered.

She kissed him. It was rather like being caught in a nuclear turbine, with soft blades.

Matheny, said Matheny, *you represent your planet.*

Matheny, said Matheny, *shut up.*

Time passed.

"Have another drink," said Peri, "while I slip into something more comfortable."

Her idea of comfort was modest in one sense of the word: a nightdress or something, like a breath of smoke, and a seat on Matheny's lap.

"If you kiss me like that just once more," she breathed, "I'll forget I'm a nice girl."

Matheny kissed her like that.

The door crashed open. A large man stood there, breathing heavily. *"What are you doing with my wife?"* he bawled.

"Sam!" screamed Peri. "I thought you were in Australia!"

"—and he said he might settle out of court," finished Matheny. He stared in a numb fashion at his beer. "He'll come to my hotel room this afternoon. What am I going to do?"

"It is a great shame," said Doran. "I never thought . . . you know, he told everybody he would be gone on business for weeks yet—Pete, I am more sorry than I can express."

"If he thinks I'll pay his miserable blackmail," bristled Matheny, "he can take his head and stick—"

Doran shook his own. "I am sorry, Pete, but I would pay if I was you. He does have a case. It is too bad he just happened to be carrying that loaded camera, but he is a photographer and now, well, our laws on Earth are pretty strict about unlicensed corespondents. You could be very heavily fined as well as deported, plus all the civil damage claims and the publicity. It would ruin your mission and even make trouble for the next man Mars sent."

"But," stuttered Matheny, "b-but it's a badger game!"

"Look," said Doran. He leaned over the tablet and gripped the Martian's shoulder. "I am your friend, see? I feel real bad this happened. In a way it is my fault and I want to help you. So let me go talk to Sam Wendt. I will cool him down if I can. I will talk down his figure. It will still cost you, Pete, but fout, you can pad your expense account, can't you? So we will both come see you today. That way there will be two people on your side, you and me, and Sam will not throw his weight around so much. You pay up in cash and it will be the end of the affair. I will see to that, pal!"

Matheny stared at the small dapper man. His aloneness came to him like a blow in the stomach. *Et tu, Brute,* he thought.

He bit his lip. "Thanks, Gus," he said. "You are a real friend."

Sam blocked the doorway with his shoulders as he entered the room. Doran followed like a diminutive tug pushing a very large liner. They closed the door. Matheny stood up, avoiding Sam's glare.

"Okay, louse," harshed Sam. "You got a better pal here than you deserve, but he ain't managed to talk me into settling for nothing."

"Let me get this . . . I mean . . . well," said Matheny. "Look,

sir, you claim that I, I mean that your wife and I were, uh, well, we weren't. Not really. I was only visiting her and—"

"Stow it, stow it." Sam towered over the Martian. "Shoot it to the moon. You had your fun. It'll cost you. One million dollars."

"*One mil*—But—but—Gus," wailed Matheny, "this is out of all reason! I thought you said—"

Doran shrugged. "I am sorry, Pete. I could not get him any farther down. He started asking fifty. You better pay him."

"No!" Matheny scuttled behind a chair. "No, look here! I, Peter Matheny of the Martian Republic, declare you are blackmailing me!"

"I'm asking compensation for damages," growled Sam. "Hand it over or I'll go talk to a lawyer. That ain't blackmail. You got your choice, don't you?"

Matheny wilted. "Yes," he shuddered.

"A megabuck isn't so bad, Pete," soothed Doran. "I, personally, will see that you earn it back in—"

"Oh, never mind." Tears stood in Matheny's eyes. "You win." He took out his checkbook.

"None of that," rapped Sam. "Cash. Now."

"But you claimed this was a legitimate—"

"You heard me."

"Well . . . could I have a receipt?" begged Matheny.

Sam grinned.

"I just thought I'd ask," said Matheny.

He opened a drawer and counted out one hundred ten-kilobuck bills. "There! And, and, and I hope you choke on it!"

Sam stuffed the money in a pocket and lumbered out.

Doran lingered. "Look here, Pete," he said, "I will make this up to you. Honest. All you have got to do is trust me."

"Sure." Matheny slumped on the bed. "Not your fault. Let me alone for a while, will you?"

"Look, I will come back in a few hours and buy you the best dinner in all the Protectorates and—"

"Sure," said Matheny. "Sure."

Doran left, closing the door with great gentleness.

He returned at 1730, entered, and stopped dead. The floor space was half taken up by a screen and a film projector. "What happened, Pete?" he asked uncertainly.

Matheny smiled. "I took some tourist movies," he said. "Self-developing soundtrack film. Sit down and I'll show you."

"Well, thanks, but I am not so much for home movies."

"It won't take long. Please."

Doran shrugged, found a chair, and took out a cigarette.

"You seem pretty well cheered up now," he remarked. "That is a spirit I like to see. You have got to have faith."

"I'm thinking of a sideline business in live photography," said the Martian. "Get back my losses of today, you know."

"Well, now, Pete, I like your spirit, like I say. But if you are really interested in making some of that old baroom, and I think you are, then listen—"

"I'll sell prints to people for home viewing," went on Matheny. "I'd like your opinion of this first effort." He dimmed the transparency and started the projector. The screen sprang into colored motion. Sam Wendt blocked the doorway with his shoulders.

"Who knows, I might even sell you one of the several prints I made today," said Matheny.

. . . "Okay, louse," said Sam. . . .

"Life is hard on Mars," commented Matheny in an idle tone, "and we're an individualistic culture. The result is pretty fierce competition, though on a person-to-person rather than organizational basis. All friendly enough, but—Oh, by the way, how do you like our Martian camera technology? I wore this one inside my buttonhole."

Doran in the screen shrugged and said: "I am sorry, Pete." Doran in the chair stubbed out his cigarette, very carefully, and asked, "How much do you want for that film?"

"Would a megabuck be a fair price?" inquired Matheny.

"Uh . . . huh."

"Of course, I am hoping Sam will want a copy too."

Doran swallowed. "Yeah. Yes, I think I can talk him into it."

"Good." Matheny stopped the projector. He sat down on the edge of the table, swinging one leg, and lit his pipe. Its bowl glowed in the dimness like the eye of a small demon. "By the way," he said irrelevantly, "if you check newscast tapes you'll find I was runner-up in last year's all-Martian pistol contest. We shoot from the hip."

"I see." Doran wet his lips. "Uh, no hard feelings. No, none at all. But say, in case you are, well, you know, looking for a slipstring, what I came here for was to tell you I have located the very guy you want. Only he is in jail right now, see, and it will cost—"

"Oh, no!" groaned Matheny. "Not the Syrtis Prospector! Kids are taught that one in kindergarten."

Doran bowed his head. "We call it the Spanish Prisoner here," he said. He got up. "I will send the price of those films around in the morning."

"You'll call your bank and have the cash pneumoed here tonight," said Matheny. "Also Sam's share. I daresay he can pay you back."

"No harm in trying, was there?" asked Doran humbly.

"None at all," said Matheny. He chuckled. "In fact, I'm grateful to you. You helped me solve my major problem."

"What?"

"I'll have to investigate further, but I'm sure my hunch will be confirmed. You see, we Martians have stood in awe of Earthmen. And since for a long time there's been very little contact between the two planets except the purely official, impersonal sort, there's been nothing to disabuse us. It's certainly true that our organizations can't compete with yours, because your whole society is based on organizations.—But now, by the same token, I wonder if your individuals can match ours. Ever hear of the Third Moon? No? the whipsaw play? The aqueduct squeeze? Good Lord, can't you even load a derrel set?" Matheny licked his chops. "So there's our Martian export to Earth. Martian con men. I tell you this under security, of course—not that anyone would believe you, till our boys walk home with the shirt off the Terrestrial back."

He waved an imperious pipestem. "Hurry up and pay me, please. I've a date tonight with Peri. I just called her up and explained the situation, and she really does seem to like Martians."

THIRD OFFENSE

By Frederik Pohl

One minute Roykin was in the Web and it was beginning to vibrate and get hot. And then red lightnings flashed and crashed, and then he was naked, on dusty ground, under a pale winter sun. The wind was knifely cold.

Roykin stood up and looked angrily around.

A hoarse voice shouted at him, a voice like Grillard's voice, in a language he didn't understand. Grillard had all of stuffy male wrath in his voice when he talked to Roykin, and so had this voice.

But it was not Grillard. It was sobering. Roykin's anger chilled as quickly as his body, for this was no place for anger. He looked around him and what he saw made him momentarily afraid.

Bare dirt was underfoot.

A frozen sky was overhead.

Low wooden barracks surrounded him.

Nearby was a clot of naked men with doomed and opaque faces. They were looking at him. An irregular crescent of men in brown uniforms, splashed jagged black-and-white at the shoulders, surrounded them all. The uniformed men were looking at him too.

Roykin thought anxiously: Curse Grillard, what sort of place is this?

It was a cold place that stank with a thick, pungent stink of sweat and sickness. It was a lot worse than the galleys, Roykin admitted, and at the time he had thought that there would never be anyhing worse. But that had been his first offense. Naturally this would be worse; Roykin could trust Grillard to see to that . . .

A man in a brown uniform stepped forward and struck him on the head with an eighteen-inch club.

The blow floored Roykin.

He climbed to his feet with the merely tiresome sensation of physical pain filling his skull like a breath swelling a balloon.

The man was standing over him still. There was no passion in his face, Roykin noticed. He looked at Roykin as a carpenter might look at a nailhead. Perhaps the nailhead would need another blow and perhaps not, but he wasn't angry at the nail.

Hurriedly, Roykin scrambled over to the knot of naked

men. They marched off in the shivering cold. The man with the club looked emptily after.

The line of bareskinned men passed a sign, with lettering on it that was hooked curlicues and straggling lines. Roykin couldn't read it very well, partly because it wasn't in his own language and partly because, although the letters were Roykin's familiar ABC's, they were more ornate than he was used to.

But underneath the more complicated words was one simple one. He read it:

BELSEN

Roykin slept that night on a board floor, with cold air coming up between the cracks.

The smell was appalling. It was a fetid slaughterhouse stench, like the hot steamy gusts from a rendering plant, but it wasn't hot—it was cold as old ice. It was very difficult for Roykin to get to sleep, particularly because a baby was crying annoyingly near his ear. The baby wept and wept.

Curse Grillard, Roykin thought in fatigue. His head still hurt badly and that was an inconvenience.

Still . . . it wasn't so bad. Roykin had always been able to adjust himself to whatever came along; it was the thing he prided himself on. At least he wasn't pushing an eighteen-foot oar, as in the galleys; *that* was bad, but he had adjusted to that well enough, though it was work. Roykin didn't like work. And they didn't seem to care if the prisoners worked or not in this place, whatever this place was, and that in itself was an improvement. Roykin curled up and set his mind to trying to go to sleep; but the crying baby bothered him.

Roykin propped himself up and looked around.

There was no baby. It was a man, ancient as Methuselah's father, with arms like pipestreams and a face hacked out of dirty bone—no flesh, no softness, stretched rock-tight. And his eyes were closed and he was crying, crying.

Roykin could think of nothing that he could do or wanted to do about it, and accordingly returned to the effort to go to sleep. But he remembered things drowsily: things from another place and time. Grillard, furiously angry, hissing into the microphone: "You don't *deserve* another chance, Roykin. You've had chance after chance, and what do you make of them?"

"I don't like your chances," said Roykin.

"The world doesn't like you, Roykin! You're antisocial. You've stolen. You've hurt people. What are we to do? Corrective school?"

"I don't like your school."

"All right. That leaves only one thing." *Bang* came the

gavel, and the microphone enlarged the sound flatly. "Second offense, thirty days. Take him away."

And the greasy-feelered police, sparkling blue from the ends of their sensors, wrapped themselves around Roykin and rolled him away to the Web.

Roykin, remembering, fell asleep to dream of Grillard and —with fond contempt—of Zenomia, who had watched at the Web as he went and would be waiting at the Web as he returned. Joke on her. Joke on Grillard—great joke!

For this to Grillard was punishment, designed to correct, this Web-borne transference to a place of punishment and pain. But Roykin had never been afraid of pain; and to Roykin pain had never been punishment.

There was no more parading around naked, though the filth that was in the clothing Roykin received was worse than bare skin. Roykin needed someone to talk to, and in time found someone—no, not one of his own people, but what was called a Spaniard. The language he spoke was not the inflected loan-worded Spanish Roykin was used to, but an earlier version; still, Roykin could make himself understood and could understand, though some of the words of the jailers were more familiar than the Spanish. And he had found out where he was.

Belsen? A concentration camp, explained his informant. For criminals, Jews, homosexuals, aliens and the politically suspect. For *what?* Haltingly, the Spaniard tried to explain each of the terms, but Roykin lacked patience for instruction in the mores of this time. Where? he asked. Germany.

Where was Germany?

His informant began to look worried, particularly as one of the men in brown uniforms was wandering near. Silently the man crept away.

But Roykin at last remembered; yes, Germany—he had heard of it. Things fell into place. He discovered that the gauntlet he had run, naked, was called "medical inspection" and, for a while, Roykin thought wonderingly of the spectrum-readers of his own time, that diagnosed physical state by electronic measurement.

But Roykin understood these matters: this was a place where things were not called by proper names; it was a place where things were concealed in part for purposes of security and in part so that those who were here should lack even the assurance of knowing what was in store for them . . . and should therefore suspect and fear everything. Roykin determined to remember that principle; it would be helpful when the thirty days were up.

The men in brown uniforms put Roykin to work.

He was taken to an open ditch where blank-faced men in

filthy rags like his own were up-ending wheelbarrows of ash into the trough and others were striking the ash with great hammers.

Roykin looked closer and saw what the hammers were for. Mixed in the ash were pieces of calcined bone; it was the task of the hammers to shatter them out of shape, perhaps so that the ash itself could be added anonymously to some farmer's soil, perhaps out of an instinct for neatness.

Roykin rebelled. No, not at the cremated remains, for that was to be expected in a punishment time, but: "Work!" he cried, in the halting German he had begun to pick up. "I shall not work! I am not here for work!"

"Halt's mahl," said one of the men in brown uniforms standing by, and moved passionately to hit him in the face.

Roykin felt his teeth crumble. He reeled to where he was ordered to go and stood for a moment, tasting the pain. It was an inconvenience again, he thought, appraising it; but not too bad, not too bad at all.

Pain had never been punishment for Roykin, as has been said. Pain is only a tingle in the nerve endings, not different from touch or taste or chill; it is only the connotations of pain that make it feared. The pain of a knife rending through the flesh is only in part the message that the cut nerves send. In part it is also fear, and that the greater part—fear of death; fear of long slow healing aches; fear that it will never heal, that an arm or a leg may be lost or an eye go blind. Pain itself is not always feared—even by others than Roykin; the grueling pain of childbirth is more sought than evaded.

From such fears as make pain insupportable, Roykin, for good reason, was immune. To that degree, he was immune from pain; and this was what Grillard had not been able to learn.

All the same, Roykin picked up his hammer and began to punish the calcined bone.

Roykin understood that there was danger here.

Thirty days is not long, but it was up to him to survive the thirty days; it would be no court's fault if he were killed first. And perhaps, he mused, it had even been Grillard's wish that he should die here in this place, and thus the problem of Roykin should once and for all be solved. The thought amusing him, he laughed. He determined, then, to avoid the worst of the punishments these men offered.

Of such punishments there were many. Around him was more than pain, pain multiplied to a pitch that raised it to another magnitude entirely. Roykin discovered that every person in this place was here because it was desired that he die. Some were killed outright by blow or knife or gun. Some were starved. Some were placed in enormous gas chambers, stripped

and extinguished, and their corpses ransacked for dental fillings and for rings.

Roykin thought, by the twentieth day, almost wistfully of the galleys.

This was not the galleys. This was something different. Here the imprisoned were not commanded to work until they died. Here they were commanded to die.

Roykin had to admit that it made a pattern and even that it had a certain elegance. This was Early Machine Age. There was no real need for human slaves, which inevitably made a difference in attitude toward the preservation of human life; the impulse to preserve life rested only on ethical considerations, not on the solid basis of conservation of usable property. There were, however, no ethical considerations in Belsen.

It was a long stride from his tenth-century galleys, where his first offense had brought him, but it was not a stride upward.

Still, he survived, though he grew quite thin. Twenty days. Thirty.

And he felt the invisible Web wrapped, tight and burning, around him. The dying prisoner whom he had been robbing of a moldy piece of bread looked apathetically up at him, then wonderingly, then disappeared.

Roykin dropped a few inches onto a padded couch.

Bright lights blazed around him. He was home.

Zenomia was waiting to greet him—of course.

"Pfiu," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Darling Roykin, I am here but—pfiu."

Roykin felt strong as a tiger. He fought his way free of the Web and kicked against the protecting bars. "I stink!" he exulted. "Ah, we all did, Zenomia, but I lived and the others didn't. You, there! Let me out of here."

Behind his glass panel, the Web operator silently disapproved, but he moved a hand and the bars that kept visitors from tangling with the Web dropped away. Roykin bounded out and clutched the girl.

"We'll get married again," he planned. "I need a woman tonight. Now! You'll do."

"Roykin," she said, straining away, "please bathe. I'll wait."

Roykin laughed and, walking lightly, stripped off his clothes and threw them at the Web operator. They struck the glass and left a mark. Roykin laughed again.

He went surely to the dressing rooms on the side of the door, for he remembered the way. Naked and laughing to himself, he passed unremembered faces, men and women who perhaps worked there, perhaps had business elsewhere in the building, perhaps had come to see what it was like—everyone knew about the Web, though only a few like Roy-

kin would ever experience it themselves. Or perhaps they had come to see Roykin! Some of the faces seemed to know him, for they whispered to each other.

He laughed louder. Roykin! Roykin knew Roykin, too—it was a name that everyone should know!

He was still laughing as the bath sprayed him, soaped him, rinsed him and dried him.

"Love?" whispered the bath recording, its perfume sprays and powder jets cocked. "Sport? Sleep? What is your pleasure?"

Roykin frowned. The mood for Zenomia had passed him.

"Nothing," he decided. "Just get me out of here."

Warm gusts of air wrapped themselves obediently around him and the curtain slipped away.

He stepped out and clothed himself, while Zenomia waited lovingly. But he said grandly, "Not now. I will see you later, perhaps. Now I intend to visit with Grillard."

Grillard's house stood alone on stilts in six feet of water.

"Hoy!" cried Roykin, waving at the house. "Come get me!"

Obediently, the house unrolled a floating streamer from the door to the grassy bank where Roykin stood. He stepped on it and stood regally as it retracted to deposit him on the doorstep.

A silvery voice recognized him and chimed, "Roykin, Roykin," though he had never been there before.

Trust Grillard, he thought—he hasn't neglected to tell the house that I might appear. Roykin waited, tapping his foot.

Grillard himself appeared.

The handsome face, white-haloed, was dignified but uneasy. "What do you want, Roykin."

"I'm back, Grillard."

"I know you're back. I signed the order for the Web."

Roykin pushed by him. "You signed the order that sent me there, too."

"I had no choice. What do you want?"

Roykin walked on in and sat down, fingering little knick-knacks on a table before him. "Chinese, Grillard?" he guessed, picking up a little figurine. It was quite heavy and dangerous. "It looks Chinese."

"Get out of here, Roykin."

Roykin considered. "No," he decided, "I don't want to do that. I thought I wanted Zenomia, but I didn't want her either. I'm not sure what I do want. Is that amusing Grillard?"

Grillard peered fretfully out from the white whiskers that framed his face. He said uneasily: "I'm warning you, Roykin. The next time will be your third offense, and that isn't a matter of thirty days."

"What is?" asked Roykin dreamily. "No, it wasn't Zenomia

I wanted, though she has taut breasts. It wasn't a woman at all. I wanted to frighten someone."

"Get out of here!"

"I may steal your Chinese figurine," said Roykin, "or I may hit you with it. Perhaps I will pull out your whiskers. Have you a wife, Grillard? I don't know, maybe I could violate her. I have learned these things, in thirty days with your help as well as elsewhere. I am grateful, I think."

"Roykin," Grillard cried shrilly, "the third offense is—"

"Shut up, old man, and come here," said Roykin, moving toward him, and he couldn't afterward remember what had come next.

But he remembered what happened the next morning, oh, yes.

Grillard, with a bit of surgeon's plaster across his forehead, stood over him on the dais, scowling, and said into the microphone: "The diagnosis is total dissociation, schizoid. Third offense. One week." And then it was the Web again.

Roykin leaped to his feet where the Web dropped him, very angry, for not even Zenomia had been there to see him go. (He thought, though he couldn't remember for sure, that he had been to see her after striking Grillard. Also there had been something about a fire. Perhaps he had made her dislike him.)

But he looked about him, and he was not so angry. This time they had let him keep his clothes, and besides it was not cold. Oh, it was *hot*. Fools, he cried silently, very pleased. Only *one* week?

But it might be an unpleasant week.

Foul stenches smote his nose. He was standing calf-deep in thick black mud, and two sorry horses were straining to draw a wheeled wagon past him. The heat was appalling; the smell was awful; there were cloud of isects. (But only one week! he sang to himself.)

"Hi!" he cried. "Hoy!"

The man on the wagon shouted at him and whipped his horses. This angered Roykin and he leaped to the wagon—leaped and missed and came down half sprawling in the ugly mud. But he caught himself up again, laughing (only one week!), and climbed aboard.

"Where am I, man?" he demanded. "When is this?"

The man snarled at him.

"Man, tell me!" cried Roykin, and finally made himself understood.

"Philadelphia?" repeated Roykin, trying to remember where *that* was. "And the year is seventeen hundred and ninety-three?"

It made no sense, no sense at all. He swung off the wagon

and let the carter flog his feeble beasts away. There were many like him; the road was packed. Overhead, a cloud-fogged sun steamed the earth gently, evoking every smell that the smeared soil was capable of. Seventeen-ninety-three, thought Roykin, frowning. But what was 1793, that it should be a punishment? And for only one week?

"Ware!" cried a voice strongly. "Ware for the dead wagon!"

And another wagon sloshed and slithered by; and it held a cargo of stickfigures in rags. There had been bodies like that in Belsen when Roykin took the task of cleaning out the gas rooms after a busy day's extermination; but he had never thought to see them here.

"Ware!" cried the dead-cart driver's voice, passing away. "Ware for the victims of the yellow fever!"

And Roykin stopped and looked around.

It was a city in flight and he was in the middle of it. Half of Philadelphia was on these roads, striving for the safety that lay outside the city—striving in vain for wherever they went they could not escape themselves, and it was in themselves that the plague lay.

Yellow fever!

Angrily Roykin ran, slipping and falling, to a house and thundered at the door. A curtain quivered at an upper window, but the door remained barred.

"Prophylaxis!" shouted Roykin. "An ampoule of antibiotic, quickly!" The window curtain quivered again to mock him, and then not even that.

"I beg you!" shouted Roykin, but no answer. And how could there be? he sobbed to himself. Seventeen hundred and ninety-three! Antibiotics were nearly two centuries away, as far from reach as the Moon!

He looked around him again, and the smell no longer mattered. It was filth that bred the fever, but the fever was grown now; the filth no longer mattered.

Yellow fever.

With horror, Roykin brushed the stinging insects from his skin.

But they returned again, bringing their itch of death.

There were wagons, there were roads, there were many ways of getting out of the city.

But not in time. Roykin stood with the whining mosquitoes swarming around his head, staring up at the uncaring sky.

Third offense.

One week.

THE RECURRENT SUITOR

By Ron Goulart

I watched the rain bounce off the fully clothed cast iron Venus in the overgrown yard outside. It wasn't a compelling vista and I wandered away from the half shuttered window and over toward the deep fireplace. The fire still seemed to be doing okay. The big dark clock in the corner of the study showed 9:25 on its face. I sat uneasily down in one of the twin bentwood rockers and studied the tableau of carved Civil War generals under the nearest bellglass. About thirty seconds of that was enough and I got up and went for the study door.

The door opened before I reached it and Edwin Plumrose entered. "Well?" I asked.

Plumrose was a large plump man. Pink faced with handsome white whiskers. The pockets of his art nouveau dressing gown were cluttered with clippings, folded sheets of heavy paper, ribbon-wound scrolls. "The mouse only got as far as 1922," he said.

"Great," I said, going back and sitting down.

"Also the poor little fellow lost his tail out there somewhere," said Plumrose. "Perhaps there are realms best left untinkered with."

"I don't have a tail to lose. And you should have sworn off tinkering before you got me here."

"A very well read young lady owes her life to that little experiment," said Plumrose. "I had the impression that you had come to be quite fond of her after we solved the Case of the Nob Hill Fiend."

I shrugged. "Sure, Emily's all right. Except I feel uneasy about it. I mean here in 1897 she's great. But if I were in my right time spot, in 1961, she'd be 84 years old."

"An older woman can teach you a few tricks," said Plumrose, taking the other rocker.

"You know," I said, "if you're such a hot occult investigator I don't see why you can't whip up a different way to get me back to 1961."

"Now," said Plumrose. "The time ray got you here, didn't it? Simply because a small missetting of the dial got us somebody from the wrong year is no reason to turn against the machine. Your only legitimate cause for complaint is the fact that the time ray got banged up in your tussle with the Nob Hill Fiend."

"Okay. So how long is it going to take to get it working again?"

"From what you've told me of 1961," said Plumrose, "I can't understand why you simply don't dismiss it from your mind. I've given you a job as my assistant and secretary and, I hope, my future biographer. Stay here in 1897 and relax."

"I've got friends in 1961 and a good job. When that damn time ray of yours put the snatch on me I was on my way to coffee. By now I've set the world's record for long coffee breaks."

From the wet street outside came the sound of a buggy hurrying up. "Company?" said Plumrose, rising.

"Little early in the day for guests. I bet it's some client."

Mrs. Hoggins, Plumrose's housekeeper, answered the door and in a moment showed in a tall thin young man with light hair and an uninspiring moustache. I suppose the moustache was actually okay. I still wasn't used to living in such a hairy era as 1897.

"Which of you is Mr. Edwin Plumrose?" the young man asked, holding out his card.

Plumrose took the card. "I am Plumrose," he said. "Mr. Bert Willsey is my assistant."

"I see," the guy said.

Plumrose read from the card. " 'Barry Todhunter, Bank Clerk.' "

"What do you think of the card as a card?" Todhunter asked. "It's my first situation, you see. I wanted cards with a designation before this. However, Barry Todhunter, Unemployed Art Student, doesn't have an impressive ring, do you think?"

"My Uncle Randolph," said Plumrose, "who did much pioneer work in the field of upper case type, always felt . . ."

"Did you have some kind of occult problem, Mr. Todhunter?" I cut in.

Todhunter glanced at the clock. "Yes, I'd better get to it. My employers at the bank don't know I've come here. They think I'm down in one of the vaults."

"My assistant," said Plumrose, sitting down in his striped love seat and motioning Todhunter into the empty rocker, "is sometimes too blunt. He comes from an area where good fellowship and leisurely talk are not valued. Since you are pressed, Mr. Todhunter, perhaps you had best explain your reason for consulting me."

"My fiancee," Todhunter began, "that is, my fiancee so I thought. Let me say simply that a Miss Elizabeth Walton, eldest daughter of Joseph Manley Walton, of this city, is in grave danger from supernatural sources." He hesitated. "There is, I must admit, the possibility that it is all a hoax on her family's part to unburden themselves of me. Mr. Walton is one of San Francisco's most respected brokers. It may be that I did

not impress him sufficiently. Still to be a bank clerk at twenty six is not an accomplishment to be scorned."

"Take my Cousin Rupert," said Plumrose.

"What sort of supernatural trouble is it?" I asked Todhunter.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I've neglected to mention it thus far. The problem, gentlemen, is this. Miss Elizabeth Walton may be in danger of becoming the latest victim of a family curse."

Plumrose sat up. "A family curse? Of what sort?"

Lowering his head Todhunter said, "It's an unpleasant sort of curse. Then I suppose most curses are. At any rate, for well over one hundred years the eldest daughter in the Walton family has come to some violence on the eve of her twenty first birthday. This is one of those curses that got started back when the family lived in England, in a bleak castle."

"When's your girl friend's birthday coming up?" I asked.

"It will be this Saturday," said Todhunter, "which means the eve of her birthday will be tomorrow night. I wish they'd told me all this before I made reservations for dinner and bought a present for Elizabeth."

"You said earlier," put in Plumrose, "that you and Miss Walton were no longer engaged. What does this have to do with the curse?"

"You see," said Todhunter, "Elizabeth and I were never formally engaged. Further she had never mentioned this horrible ancestral curse to me. It seems, however, that all the other Walton girls who came to a bad end had been engaged to be married. Apparently Elizabeth's family felt that if they kept her from being seriously involved with any young man until after she was twenty-one the curse would not harm her."

"How'd they find out you were engaged?" I asked him.

Todhunter drew a packet of letters from his coat. "Elizabeth's parents intercepted these and took to asking her questions. In the course of the questioning she admitted her situation in regard to me. The ridiculous thing is that I am not the author of these letters. That man, whoever he is, deserves a sound beating." He handed the bundle across to Plumrose.

Plumrose undid the twine. "The Waltons have asked you to stay away from Elizabeth until she passes the dangerous birthday?"

"After they read those they don't want me back ever."

Plumrose took a letter from its envelope and skimmed it. "Very European in approach."

"Does Elizabeth know who really wrote them?" I asked.

"No, I'm certain she does not. We have no secrets and never lie to each other. We both prided ourselves that ours was a wholesome romance. Little good that does us now."

Plumrose mumbled something and took the letter over to the window. In the watery morning light he held it first at arm's length and then very close to his round blue eyes. "Tomorrow afternoon when you finish work at your bank," he said to Todhunter, "return here. My fee, in your case, will be fifteen dollars. Bring the money and I will see to it that Miss Walton comes to no harm from the curse."

"That's splendid," said Todhunter, jumping up. "Do you think you'll clear it up by eight? Or shall I cancel the dinner reservations?"

"Occult work doesn't keep regular hours," Plumrose said. "Don't make any plans."

"You can save Elizabeth, though, Mr. Plumrose?"

"I can," he answered, turning away.

Todhunter shook hands with me and rushed out and jumped into his buggy. He was soon gone down the rainy street.

"Suppose I give you my name on a card along with fifteen dollars in cash," I said to Plumrose's back. "Will you get me back to San Francisco, 1961?"

"In the attic," he said. He was rubbing the letter thoughtfully across his beard.

"In the attic?"

"This writing," said Plumrose.

I moved up and looked at the letter. It didn't seem too bad to me, although flowery. "I would not be afraid of a guy who wrote like that."

"Not the content, but the style of handwriting," said Plumrose. He stuffed the letter and its mates in a cluttered pocket. "You can help me do some lifting. Come along, Willsey."

I was stuck in 1897. What else could I do? I went along to the attic.

When I'd jumped back to dodge the falling mummy case I knocked into the zither-playing automaton.

The automaton resembled a cigarstore Indian trying to pass as a Gypsy woman. A kick in the side turned it off.

I worked my way around a confused pile of fetters and manacles and lifted an unloaded crossbow off a dusty black trunk. "You know," I said, "I'm pretty sure they tear this place of yours down in 1960 and build a ten story apartment house. All brick and glass."

"Flesh is like grass," he answered.

I got the trunk open and studied the top layer of its contents. The trunk seemed to be full of music manuscripts, all for Vienese waltzes. "Nothing in here but waltz music," I said.

"Down in the bottom."

I dug down. Under a lot of waltzes was a small black portfolio. I worked it out. When I opened it fragments of yellowed paper fluttered away and spiralled to the floor. Written in bold

letters at the top of the first sheet was the word *Ouro*. "This might be what we're looking for," I said. "It's in Spanish or something."

"Portuguese," said Plumrose, grunting to his feet. He chuckled and squeezed over to me. "Yes. That's it. Fernand Amador's treatise on the transmutation of gold. At least the first few pages. Written in Lisbon in 1773, shortly before they ran him out."

While Plumrose got one of the love letters out of his robe pocket I said, "You could be right about this."

"Of course." He put the letter alongside the manuscript. "See there."

The handwriting was the same. "So does Fernand Amador have a time machine, too?"

Plumrose shook his head. He closed the portfolio and tucked it up under his arm. "Not so simple as that. We'll have our afternoon brandy after we clean up and I'll explain it to you."

I led the way out of the attic, stepping across the incomplete suit of sprawled armor and around the stack of gold braided band uniform hats.

As yet the pockets of Plumrose's clean dressing gown were empty. He put his hands in them and paced a small line in front of the study fireplace. "A certain number of legends," he said, "turn out to be absolutely true. Fernand Amador has always been rumored a close friend of the renowned Comte de St. Germain."

"Who?"

"St. Germain, the gentleman who claimed to be some 2000 years old. Perhaps old St. Germain was legitimate."

"You think St. Germain passed his secret on to Amador and that Fernand Amador is still alive? That he wrote those love letters to Miss Walton?"

"Either that or someone sent her a batch of old mail."

"Hey," I said, "where did Amador go when he skipped Portugal?"

Plumrose smiled. "To England. Nothing is known of him after he left London, supposedly for Scotland, in 1805."

"Suppose he'd met the ancestor of Elizabeth Walton back in the late 1700s somewhere. Maybe she turned him down for somebody else and he did her in. Then he decided to give it another try and he came back the next generation."

"Only to be rejected by that eldest daughter, too."

"So Amador gets hooked with the idea and comes back over and over. And here he is in 1897 to try for Elizabeth Walton."

"That seems to make sense," said Plumrose. "It would imply a tremendous dedication to making headway with a Walton girl."

"We haven't met Elizabeth Walton yet. She may be great."

"I personally wouldn't devote 100 years to a project like this. If you're immortal it probably gives you a different point of view."

"Do you," I asked, "know where Amador might be? He's not this guy Todhunter, is he?"

"No," said Plumrose. He remembered his brandy and picked his glass from the mantle. "There's no resemblance for one thing. I've seen an old engraving of Amador someplace or other." He walked up close to the clock and studied it. "Nearly five. Too late for the sort of detective work I want you to do. Tomorrow first thing."

"I thought occult detectives preferred night work."

"I'll give you a list of shops and stores in which to make inquiries," said Plumrose.

"And that'll lead us to Fernand Amador in time to save Elizabeth Walton."

"Depending on how close he was to the Comte de St. Germain."

San Francisco has always been a cosmopolitan city. But I was surprised to find that the shops Plumrose sent me to had ever existed. I still hadn't managed to work out the operation of a buggy so Plumrose hired a carriage for me. Plumrose stayed close to his study fireplace, doing research, while I clattered from Chinatown to South of the Slot to he Barbary Coast.

The morning had been thick with fog. A little before noon the fog cleared. When I got back to Plumrose's place, a good half hour too late to make lunch, the rain had started in again.

I ran up to the wrought iron gate and gave it a shove. It stuck, which was usual. So I climbed over and made my way up the narrow path that still showed between the tall grass and thick shubbery of Plumrose's front yard. The heads of iron deer and midget Cupids were scattered here and there, poking up out of bushes and grass. Rain on the roof is okay but for real listening pleasure there's nothing like rain on a cast iron elk. I got up the porch of the two story Victorian house and used the gargoyle knocker.

Plumrose himself let me in. He was in another of his bright patterned lounging robes. "Quiet, Willsey," he said.

I shook myself out next to the umbrella rack and took off my muddy shoes. "Why?"

"Mrs. Hoggins is in a trance."

"Anything serious?" I asked, following him down the hall into his study.

"No," he said, "this is her afternoon off and she can do what she likes." He settled down on the striped loveseat. Nodding at the crackling fire he said, "Dry off some."

"Thanks." From the inside pocket of my 1897 suit I took a sheet of paper.

"You got a lead?"

"The place out in the Mission District," I said, checking my notes, "is sold out of balm of azoth. They tried to sell me carbonated maydew but I said no."

"Did you learn who bought the balm from them?"

"Finally, yes. A man named F. Orlando. No address."

"That's bad."

"Wait now. Your friend in Chinatown says he's had a real rush on elixir of acharat the past couple of years. The customer is F. Orlando. It's the same with the rest of the shops. The only guy who's buying up any noticable quantities of the ingredients that go into the elixir of life is this F. Orlando."

"Did any of the dealers have the man's residence listed?"

"No," I said, "but on the way back here I saw his address written on a brick wall on Sutter Street."

"That's convenient," said Plumrose, stroking his beard. "How did that happen?"

F. Orlando runs a public bath house. Out by the ocean somewhere near The Cliff House from the looks of the address on the sign."

Plumrose nodded. "That would be a nice roomy place to carry out all the rituals necessary to maintain eternal life."

"I take it," I said, moving further from the fireplace as I dried off, "that you have to keep reapplying this eternal life treatment."

"Most authorities, including the Comte de St. Germain, seem to feel that way about it," said Plumrose.

"Look. If you know all these ingredients, why don't you whip up some of this elixir of life. Say you never get the time ray patched up. I can just take a drink of the elixir and wait around for 1961 to get here."

"You don't drink it," said Plumrose. "That is, you drink some of it. The chief problem is that while the ingredients are fairly well known the exact formulas and recipes that make them work are harder to come by. My uncle Courtenay got the formula wrong and instead of making him young the stuff turned his hair white overnight."

"Aged him, huh?"

"No. What he'd ended up with was a simple bleach." Plumrose sighed. "The main thing needed, besides the formulas, is a philosopher's stone."

"None of the shops had one," I said. "Although that Egyptian lady under the Barbary Coast offered to put my name on a waiting list."

"Only Fernand Amador could wait long enough." Plumrose got up. "I believe I'll go soak in a tub for a time. Then we'll have a brandy and prepare for this evening. I want to investi-

gate Amador, or F. Orlando as he calls himself. I want to investigate the premises of this bath house."

"Why not wait until then for your bath? It'd make a good dodge for getting in."

"We must gain access by stealth and cleverness. Occult detectives don't go in for disguises and ruses."

"Sorry," I said as he left. I sat in one of the rockers and leaned back. The rain slid down the shutters and far away thunder rolled.

I turned up the collar of my cloak and waited for the next lightning flash. Plumrose and I and Barry Todhunter were ducked down in the shrubbery that fenced the slanting empty lot next to F. Orlando's public bath house.

The lightning came and we all looked hard. The house was a rambling sprawling building, all paneled windows and mushroom cupolas. It had three separate weather vanes on its spires and each one seemed to be spinning at a different speed in the wet sea wind.

"Somebody hitching up a buggy out back," said Todhuntr.

"What's that behind the stable?" I asked. "Looked like chicken coops."

"So they did," said Plumrose. "It also seems as though Mr. Orlando is going out tonight."

"Do we follow him?"

"I want to take a look around here first," said Plumrose.

"I'm beginning to wonder," said Todhunter, "meaning your splendid display of occult ratiocination no undue slight, Mr. Plumrose, if this isn't all a waste of time. Granted this F. Orlando, or Amador as you prefer to call him, may be the fellow who sent Elizabeth the letters. I find it difficult to credit the idea that he is several hundred years old."

Plumrose was about to answer when the lightning went on again. We all squinted through the high hedge.

"Driver's bringing the buggy around front," I said.

"I hope he gets going. I'm anxious to get inside there."

"Besides," said Todhunter, "Elizabeth's going to remain at home this evening now that our dinner plans have been canceled. She'll be safe and surrounded by her parents and sisters. There won't even be any visitors, save Elizabeth's piano teacher who will drop in briefly for his usual Friday evening session of instruction."

"Willsey," said Plumrose, "if this young man speaks up again return his fifteen dollars and kick him in the slats."

A short dark figure, thickly caped, appeared on the gingerbread railed porch of the Orlando-Amador place. The figure was half way to the waiting carriage when there was another flash of lightning.

"There's a coincidence for you," said Todhunter as the dark

man stepped into the carriage. "This F. Orlando has the same piano teacher as Elizabeth."

The grey cloaked driver snapped the reins and the two white horses drew the carriage off into the rain filled darkness.

I got up and grabbed Todhunter to his feet. "You schlep. That was him."

"I don't quite understand your turn of phrase."

"He means," said Plumrose, "that it is quite possible that Fernand Amador is not only F. Orlando but your Miss Walton's piano instructor to boot."

"Kindly Lorenzo Fern? A centuries old love thief?"

"Take the buggy," said Plumrose. "I'll scout about here. You get over to Miss Walton's."

I pulled Todhunter downhill and around the corner to the place where we'd hitched our horses and rig. "Come on," I said, boosting him up into the driver's seat. "You've got to drive this thing."

"One moment," he said, "Are you certain we won't be making a bad impression if we call on the Waltons this evening?"

"It's considered good taste to save young girls from ancestral curses," I said, jumping up beside him. "Now get us going."

"Yes, sir," he said.

You really don't get to know a city until you've raced across it at night during a thunder storm sitting behind two damp grey horses.

The Walton home was neat and bright, sitting back behind a smooth lawn that was free of elks or Cupids. Amador's carriage was in front, his driver dozing.

We left our rig down the street and moved up to the house on foot.

"Where's she have the piano lessons?" I asked Todhunter.

"Why, in the music room, of course."

"Where's that?"

"On the side of the house there," said Todhunter, pointing at a lighted bow window. "After we are announced we can ask to be allowed in there."

"Come on," I said, clearing the low brick wall around the Walton grounds. "We don't want to announce ourselves to this guy."

"Are you certain this is the correct course of action?"

"It's in all the occult detective manuals."

"Very well." He joined me on the wet lawn.

We zigzagged up toward the house and finally got right under the music room windows. The piano music that I'd noticed when we first hit the lawn had stopped now. I caught a carved sill and pulled myself up.

Behind me Todhunter said, "I can't believe this is proper."

Inside a heavy set dark man who seemed to be in his middle thirties was on his knees next to the piano bench. Seated on the bench, looking surprised, was a slender auburn haired girl. I could understand why Amador had kept at it all these years and why Todhunter wanted to make a good impression. Elizabeth Walton was a fine looking girl.

She shook her head negatively at Amador. He stood up, wringing his hands. Then he slipped one hand inside his coat. A filigreed pistol appeared.

"A rock, quick," I yelled to Todhunter, holding out one hand.

He took one from a shrub border and tossed it to me. I strained and swung myself up and smashed the window with the stone.

Elizabeth screamed. Amador whirled and ran to the window.

"This is a private conversation," he said. "Go on about your business or I shall use this weapon on you."

"That would spoil your pattern wouldn't it, Amador?" I said, trying to look threatening while hanging from the window sill.

Elizabeth's family had heard the noise and were banging on the locked music room door.

"You seem to know too much," said Amador.

Todhunter meanwhile had got a rock for himself and busted another window. He was climbing into the music room and I was hoping he'd be able to grab Amador from behind before he used his pistol on me or Elizabeth.

"These are most unsatisfactory teaching conditions," he said, spotting Todhunter half into the room.

"Barry," said Elizabeth, "Professor Fern is the one who sent those awful letters."

"I know, dear."

Amador was hesitating, unsure whom to shoot first. Then he stepped back and stood up straight. "Oh, my," he said. "Close those windows, you young crackerjacks." His voice was taking on a quaver. "Let me warm my bones." His hair was going white and his face wrinkling. "Never mind the window; bring me my shawl." The aging accelerated and he started to cackle and rattle.

In under five minutes he was gone completely. A pile of well-tailored clothes on the flowered rug.

I let myself down into the room as Todhunter tried to revive the unconscious Elizabeth, who had fainted when Amador hit 100.

Somewhere during all this Amador's carriage driver had taken off. I crossed the room to try to let the rest of the Waltons in.

Mr. Walton was a big black bearded man in his late fifties. The women of the family had taken Elizabeth off somewhere to cheer her up and Todhunter, now completely acceptable to all the Waltons, and I were sitting in the living room trying to explain the real cause of the family curse to Elizabeth's father.

"You feel then that we will have no more trouble?"

"You can't," I said. "Fernand Amador, or Lorenzo Fern to you, is gone."

"May I ask how you worked that?" said Todhunter.

"I didn't," I admitted. "He just started aging suddenly."

"It happened at a fortunate time," said Todhunter. "Well, I certainly thank you and Mr. Plumrose for solving all our problems."

"Plumrose," I said, rising up. "We left him out by the ocean."

One of the Waltons' butlers entered. "A Mr. Plumrose to see you, Mr. Walton."

Walton blinked. "Could this be your Mr. Plumrose, Barry?"

"I imagine so."

"Show him in."

It was our Plumrose. "Willsey, Todhunter," he said, grinning. "Edwin Plumrose, Mr. Walton." He extended his hand to the broker.

"How'd you get here?" I asked him.

"Amador's driver came back to pack prior to making his getaway. I jumped him and commandeered the carriage."

"I understand," said Walton, offering Plumrose a chair, "that I am in debt to you, too, Mr. Plumrose, for lifting the curse of the Waltons."

"There never was a curse," said Plumrose, settling down. "It was all old Fernand Amador acting up."

"You're not asking about him," I said. "Do you know what happened?"

"Why do you think it happened," said Plumrose. "I located his philosopher's stone and smashed it. Even an apprentice occultist will tell you that that breaks the spell for good. I knew he'd age once the stone was no more. When you turn 200 all at once there is not going to be much left."

I agreed. "Where'd you find the stone?"

"Inside the place I noticed, while examining Amador's den, a few feathers. The standard philosopher's stone is, as you must know, rather egg-shaped. Amador had hidden it in one of his chicken's nests. I found it. I also gathered a dozen fresh eggs, which I left out in the carriage."

"May I offer you a glass of brandy?" asked Walton.

I walked over close to the seated Plumrose and said in a low voice, "Now that this is solved how about my time ray?"

"In the attic," said Plumrose. "In the attic somewhere is the very piece of equipment that will fix the machine for sure. We'll have you back home within a day."

At the time I actually believed him.

TRY AND CHANGE THE PAST

By Fritz Leiber

No, I wouldn't advise anyone to try to change the past, at least not his *personal* past, although changing the *general* past is my business, my fighting business. You see, I'm a Snake in the Change War. Don't back off—human beings, even Resurrected ones engaged in time-fighting, aren't built for outward wriggling and their poison is mostly psychological. "Snake" is slang for the soldiers on our side, like Hun or Reb or Ghibelline. In the Change War we're trying to alter the past—and it's tricky, brutal work, believe me—at points all over the cosmos, anywhere and anywhen, so that history will be warped to make our side defeat the Spiders. But that's a much bigger story, the biggest in fact, and I'll leave it occupying several planets of microfilm and two asteroids of coded molecules in the files of the High Command.

Change one event in the past and you get a brand new future? Erase the conquests of Alexander by nudging a Neolithic pebble? Extirpate America by pulling up a shoot of Sumerian grain? Brother, that isn't the way it works at all! The space-time continuum's built of stubborn stuff and change is anything but a chain-reaction. Change the past and you start a wave of changes moving futurewards, but it damps out mighty fast. Haven't you ever heard of temporal reluctance, or of the Law of the Conservation of Reality?

Here's a little story that will illustrate my point: This guy was fresh recruited, the Resurrection sweat still wet in his armpits, when he got the idea he'd use the time-traveling power to go back and make a couple of little changes in his past so that his life would take a happier course and maybe, he thought, he wouldn't have to die and get mixed up with Snakes and Spiders at all. It was as if a new-enlisted feuding hillbilly soldier should light out with the high-power rifle they issued him to go back to his mountains and pick off his pet enemies.

Normally it couldn't ever have happened. Normally, to avoid just this sort of thing, he'd have been shipped straight off to some place a few thousand or million years distant from his point of enlistment and maybe a few light-years, too. But there was a local crisis in the Change War and a lot of routine operations got held up and one new recruit was simply forgotten.

Normally, too, he'd never have been left alone a moment in the Dispatching Room, never even have glimpsed the place except to be rushed through it on arrival and reshipment. But,

as I say, there happened to be a crisis, the Snakes were shorthanded, and several soldiers were careless. Afterwards two N. C.'s were busted because of what happened and a First Looey not only lost his commission but was transferred outside the galaxy and the era. But during the crisis this recruit I'm telling you about had opportunity and more to fool around with forbidden things and try out his schemes.

He also had all the details on the last part of his life back in the real world, on his death and its consequences, to mull over and be tempted to change. This wasn't anybody's carelessness. The Snakes give every candidate that information as part of the recruiting pitch. They spot a death coming and the Resurrection Men go back and recruit the person from a point a few minutes or at most a few hours earlier. They explain in uncomfortable detail what's going to happen and wouldn't he rather take the oath and put on scales? I never heard of anybody turning down that offer. Then they lift him from his lifeline in the form of a Doubleganger and from then on, brother, he's a Snake.

So this guy had a clearer picture of his death than of the day he bought his first car, and a masterpiece of morbid irony it was. He was living in a classy penthouse that had belonged to a crazy uncle of his—it even had a midget astronomical observatory, unused for years—but he was stony broke, up to the top hair in debt, and due to be dispossessed next day. He'd never had a real job, always lived off his rich relatives and his wife's, but now he was getting a little too mature for his stern dedication to a life of sponging to be cute. His charming personality, which had been his only asset, was deader from overuse and abuse than he himself would be in a few hours. His crazy uncle would not have anything to do with him any more. His wife was responsible for a lot of the wear and tear on his social-butterfly wings; she had hated him for years, had screamed at him morning to night the way you can only get away with in a penthouse, and was going batty herself. He'd been playing around with another woman, who'd just given him the gate, though he knew his wife would never believe that and would only add a scornful note to her screaming if she did.

It was a lousy evening, smack in the middle of an August heat wave. The Giants were playing a night game with Brooklyn. Two long-run musicals had closed. Wheat had hit a new high. There was a brush fire in California and a war scare in Iran. And tonight a meteor shower was due, according to an astronomical bulletin that had arrived in the morning mail addressed to his uncle—he generally dumped such stuff in the

fireplace unopened, but today he had looked at it because he had nothing else to do, either more useful or more interesting.

The phone rang. It was a lawyer. His crazy uncle was dead and in the will there wasn't a word about an Asteroid Search Foundation. Every penny of the fortune went to the no-good nephew.

This same character finally hung up the phone, fighting off a tendency for his heart to spring giddily out of his chest and through the ceiling. Just then his wife came screeching out of the bedroom. She'd received a cute, commiserating, tell-all note from the other woman; she had a gun and announced that she was going to finish him off.

The sweltering atmosphere provided a good background for sardonic catastrophe. The French doors to the roof were open behind him but the air that drifted through was muggy as death. Unnoticed, a couple of meteors streaked faintly across the night sky.

Figuring it would sure dissuade her, he told her about the inheritance. She screamed that he'd just use the money to buy more other women—not an unreasonable prediction—and pulled the trigger.

The danger was minimal. She was at the other end of a big living room, her hand wasn't just shaking, she was waving the nickel-plate revolver as if it were a fan.

The bullet took him right between the eyes. He flopped down, deader than his hopes were before he got the phone call. He saw it happen because as a clincher the Resurrection Men brought him forward as a Doubleganger to witness it invisibly—also standard Snake procedure and not productive of time-complications, incidentally, since Doublegangers don't imprint on reality unless they want to.

They stuck around a bit. His wife looked at the body for a couple of seconds, went to her bedroom, blonded her graying hair by dousing it with two bottles of undiluted peroxide, put on a tarnished gold-lamé evening gown and a bucket of make-up, went back to the living room, sat down at the piano, played "Country Gardens" and then shot herself, too.

So that was the little skit, the little double blackout, he had to mull over outside the empty and unguarded Dispatching Room, quite forgotten by its twice-depleted skeleton crew while every available Snake in the sector was helping deal with the local crisis, which centered around the planet Alpha Centauri Four, two million years minus.

Naturally it didn't take him long to figure out that if he went back and gimmicked things so that the first blackout didn't occur, but the second still did, he would be sitting pretty back in the real world and able to devote his inheritance to fulfilling his wife's prediction and other pastimes. He didn't

know much about Doublegangers yet and had it figured out that if he didn't die in the real world he'd have no trouble resuming his existence there—maybe it'd even happen automatically.

So this Snake—name kind of fits him, doesn't it?—crossed his fingers and slipped into the Dispatching Room. Dispatching is so simple a child could learn it in five minutes from studying the board. He went back to a point a couple of hours before the tragedy, carefully avoiding the spot where the Resurrection Men had lifted him from his lifeline. He found the revolver in a dresser drawer, unloaded it, checked to make sure there weren't any more cartridges around, and then went ahead a couple of hours, arriving just in time to see himself get the slug between the eyes same as before.

As soon as he got over his disappointment, he realized he'd learned something about Doublegangers he should have known all along, if his mind had been clicking. The bullets he'd lifted were Doublegangers, too; they had disappeared from the real world only at the point in space-time where he'd lifted them, and they had continued to exist, as real as ever, in the earlier and later sections of their lifelines—with the result that the gun was loaded again by the time his wife had grabbed it up.

So this time he set the board so he'd arrive just a few minutes before the tragedy. He lifted the gun, bullets and all, and waited around to make sure it stayed lifted. He figured —rightly—that if he left this space-time sector the gun would reappear in the dresser drawer, and he didn't want his wife getting hold of any gun, even one with a broken lifeline. Afterwards—after his own death was averted, that is—he figured he'd put the gun back in his wife's hands.

Two things reassured him a lot, although he'd been expecting the one and hoping for the other: his wife didn't notice his presence as a Doubleganger and when she went to grab the gun she acted as if it weren't gone and held her right hand just as if there were a gun in it. If he'd studied philosophy, he'd have realized he was witnessing a proof of Leibniz's theory of Pre-established harmony: that neither atoms nor human beings really affect each other, they just look as if they did.

But anyway he had no time for theories. Still holding the gun, he drifted out into the living room to get a box seat right next to Himself for the big act. Himself didn't notice him any more than his wife had.

His wife came out and spoke her piece same as ever, Himself cringed as if she still had the gun and started to babble about the inheritance, his wife sneered and made as if she were shooting Himself.

Sure enough, there was no shot this time, *and* no mysteriously appearing bullet hole—which was something he'd been afraid of. Himself just stood there dully while his wife made as if she were looking down at a dead body and went back to her bedroom.

He was pretty pleased: this time he actually *had* changed the past. Then Himself slowly glanced around at him, still with that dull look, and slowly came toward him. He was more pleased that ever because he figured now they'd melt together into one man and one lifeline again, and he'd be able to hurry out somewhere and establish an alibi, just to be on the safe side, while his wife-suicided.

But it didn't happen quite that way. Himself's look changed from dull to desperate, he came up close . . . and suddenly grabbed the gun and quick as a wink put a thumb to the trigger and shot himself between the eyes. And flopped, same as ever.

Right there he was starting to learn a little—and it was an unpleasant shivery sort of learning—about the Law of the Conservation of Reality. The four-dimensional spacetime universe doesn't *like* to be changed, any more than it likes to lose or gain energy or matter. If it *has* to be changed, it'll adjust itself just enough to accept that change and no more. The Conservation of Reality is a sort of Law of Least Action, too. It doesn't matter how improbable the events involved in the adjustment are, just so long as they're possible at all and can be used to patch the established pattern. His death, at this point, was part of the established pattern. If he lived on instead of dying, billions of other compensatory changes would have to be made, covering many years, perhaps centuries, before the old pattern could be re-established, the snarled lifelines woven back into it—and the universe finally go on the same as if his wife had shot him on schedule.

This way the pattern was hardly affected at all. There were powder burns on his forehead that weren't there before, but there weren't any witnesses to the shooting in the first place, so the presence or absence of powder burns didn't matter. The gun was lying on the floor instead of being in his wife's hands, but he had the feeling that when the time came for her to die, she'd wake enough from the Pre-established Harmony trance to find it, just as Himself did.

So he'd learned a little about the Conservation of Reality. He also had learned a little about his own character, especially from Himself's last look and act. He'd got a hint that he had been trying to destroy himself for years by the way he'd lived, so that inherited fortune or accidental success couldn't save him, and if his wife hadn't shot him he'd have done it

himself in any case. He'd got a hint that Himself hadn't merely been acting as an agent for a self-correcting universe when he grabbed the gun, he'd been acting on his own account, too—the universe, you know, operates by getting people to co-operate.

But, although these ideas occurred to him, he didn't dwell on them, for he figured he'd had a partial success the second time, and the third time if he kept the gun away from Himself, if he dominated Himself, as it were, the melting-together would take place and everything else go forward as planned.

He had the dim realization that the universe, like a huge sleepy animal, knew what he was trying to do and was trying to thwart him. This feeling of opposition made him determined to outmaneuver the universe—not the first guy to yield to such a temptation, of course.

And up to a point his tactics worked. The third time he gimmicked the past, everything started to happen just as it did the second time. Himself dragged miserably over to him, looking for the gun, but he had it tucked away and was prepared to hold onto it. Encouragingly, Himself didn't grapple, the look of desperation changed to one of utter hopelessness, and Himself turned away from him and very slowly walked to the French doors and stood looking out into the sweating night. He figured Himself was just getting used to the idea of not dying. There wasn't a breath of air. A couple of meteors streaked across the sky. Then, mixed with the upseeping night sounds of the city, there was a low whirring whistle.

Himself shook a bit, as if he'd had a sudden chill. Then Himself turned around and slumped to the floor in one movement. Between his eyes was a black hole.

Then and there this Snake I'm telling you about decided never again to try and change the past, at least not his personal past. He'd had it, and he'd also acquired a healthy respect for a High Command able to change the past, albeit with difficulty. He scooted back to the Dispatching Room, where a sleepy and surprised Snake gave him a terrific chewing-out and confined him to quarters. The chewing-out didn't bother him too much—he'd acquired a certain fatalism about things. A person's got to learn to accept reality as it is, you know—just as you'd best not be surprised at the way I disappear in a moment or two—I'm a Snake too, remember.

If a statistician is looking for an example of a highly improbable event, he can hardly pick a more vivid one than the chance of a man being hit by a meteorite. And, if he adds the condition that the meteorite hit him between the eyes so as to counterfeit the wound made by a 32-caliber bullet, the

improbability becomes astronomical cubed. So how's a person going to outmaneuver a universe that finds it easier to drill a man through the head that way rather than postpone the date of his death?

ROPE'S END

By Miriam Allen deFord

It all happened so fast that it was over before Grainger became actually aware of it. One second he was driving his ground-car slowly and carefully down the main street of the City, and in the next the young Agretian had darted in front of it, stumbled, fallen under it, and lay grotesquely dead on the metal roadway.

Shaking, Grainger stopped and walked back to where the victim lay. A *heldehar,* one of the infrequent Agretian guards or policemen or soldiers—they were all three—pushed through the excited crowd and stood over the mangled body. Grainger went up to him and touched his big arm.

"I never saw him!" he gulped, fighting to contain his nausea. "He ran right into my path, and before I could make a move he—he—" He had difficulty finding enough words in his poor Agretian to make sense of what he was trying to say.

The *heldehar* looked at him.

"You are Warren Grainger, the Terran," he said—not asked; in the City everyone knew everyone else at least by sight. "This young man was alive and now he is dead. Your *brondun* killed him."

"But it wasn't my fault—I couldn't help it. Ask any of these people—they saw."

"They saw, and they will speak. Be at the Hall of Judgment tomorrow two hours after sunrise, and you will receive your sentence."

Grainger felt a surge of relief at the words. If they weren't going to arrest him, if they were simply calling him to a hearing, the worst he could receive, he was sure, would be a reasonable fine. He knew nothing of Agretian law; in the two years that he had lived here there had been no crimes that he had heard of, no notice of trials in the daily news flashed on the screen in the Central Square. The spectators parted before him as he climbed back into his car and drove at snail's pace to his office. There all the Agretian clerks seemed already aware of the accident, but nobody spoke of it, though he caught surreptitious glances of curiosity and sympathy.

Nevertheless, as the day wore on, he became increasingly uneasy. When he left the office, instead of going home he drove to the converted residence where Chung Li lived above his business establishment.

Chung Li and he were the only Terrans with permanent residence permits, the only Terrans living in the section of the

City given over to aliens. They were scarcely friends; they were not even rivals, for the elderly Chinese had owned and run his export and import business for 15 years before young Grainger had sold the Agretians on permitting him to settle in the City as a competitor in the same line. Even though Chung Li obviously had more business than he could handle, he had resented the arrival of another claimant for the valuable Terran trade, and had shown his resentment openly. But surely, Grainger thought, he would not refuse to enlighten and help a fellow-Terran in serious difficulties. There was no one else to appeal to nearer than the Solar consul, two star systems away.

He found Chung Li in his private rooms, furnished at enormous expense in the style of the rich Chinese of 500 years ago, before the revolution. A huge Agretian servant announced him, and it was in Agretian that the two men spoke, having no other language in common.

Ordinarily, Grainger knew, no conversation with Chung Li started without formalities. But by now he was too upset to stand on ceremony. "Chung Li," he blurted, "I'm in trouble."

"I know," said the Chinese gravely. "I have heard."

"Then you know it was an accident, pure and simple. What are they going to do to me?"

Chung Li paused before he answered, to light a pipe filled with that immensely valuable import, tobacco. When he spoke, his rejoinder seemed irrevelant.

"Have you seen sometimes in the streets of the City, fellow-Terran, people who wear around their necks a loop of steel rope?"

"Why, yes, I think so—a few. I took it for some badge of office."

"They are people whose deeds caused the death of another. Two of them I know—the captain of a fishing boat which by his bad seamanship was swamped, drowning his crew of three, and a nursemaid who let her charge slip from her arms to fracture its skull. They must wear the rope for the length of their sentence."

"And that's all? I suppose it means social ostracism—but surely not professional ostracism too, or they couldn't earn a living."

"It does not mean ostracism at all. Nobody will reproach you, or wish you ill—not even the relatives of the young person you killed.They will pity you."

Grainger laughed.

"As I have no social relations with any native, that certainly won't bother me! But if that's the way they punish people who kill others accidentally, what do they do to real murderers—execute them on the spot?"

"There are none. No Agretian within recorded history has

ever murdered or deliberately injured another. As for what would happen if, say, you or I should do the other in, or any other resident alien should murder another alien—" Chung Li smiled briefly—"I can't imagine; they have no provision for such a crime. Revoke his papers and send him home, I suppose."

Warren Grainger breathed a relieved sigh as the last of his burden slipped from him.

"Thanks a lot, Chung Li," he said fervently. "You've put my mind at rest. I'll be able to sleep tonight—if I can get the memory of that poor devil I ran over out of my mind."

Chung Li gazed at him meditatively.

"I shall be at the hearing tomorrow," he said. "Afterwards we will go and drink a cup of *chash* together and discuss this further, when we know how long your sentence runs. . . . I forgot to mention one thing—every year of your sentence you must report to the Hall of Judgment and let them adjust your neck-rope."

"You mean, to prove I haven't taken it off?"

"You can't take it off. It is riveted on."

The hearing was so short and so cut-and-dried as to seem perfunctory. Grainger heard his sentence pronounced and stood submissively while the thin steel rope was fastened about his neck. Chung Li had been mistaken; it was not riveted on. It extended almost to his waist, and he resolved to take it off whenever he was alone, though it would be politic to wear it in the office and on the street, at least until the affair had been forgotten.

The Chinese was waiting for him at the back of the courtroom. An Agretian couple stood by him, their size dwarfing that of the Terrans.

"Grainger," said Chung Li, "these are Vark and Aidunn. They are the parents of young Makar, who died yesterday."

He felt himself turning pale, then reddening with emotion.

"I can't tell you how much—" he stammered in his bad Agretian. "I—I don't know how to say how terribly I regret — If—I know all the money in Agretia couldn't make up to you—but if you'll let me help with the—the expenses—"

His business caution brought him up short. He had meant, of course, to search out the relatives of the victim and make what recompense he could, but now he was laying himself open to some exorbitant claim that would be worse than any fine.

The two shook their heads. Vark spoke for them both.

"It was no fault of yours," he said. "Fate so willed it. He was our only child."

The mother laid a big six-fingered hand over his.

"We came—we asked to see you—only to say how very sorry we are for you."

Grainger stared at her, speechless. They both bowed, turned, and left silently, arm in arm. Dazed, he followed his fellow-Terran out of the building.

In the nearest inn, over the mildly inebriating *chash,* Chung Li broke their silence.

"Twenty years," he said. "That is very good."

"Good? You mean, compared to forty?"

"I mean compared to one or two."

"What are you talking about?"

"Would you prefer to die young?"

"What in high space do you mean?"

"As I told you, and as you heard the judge tell you this morning, every year you must go back to the Hall of Judgment and have the rope adjusted. What do you think the adjustment consists of?"

"What?"

"Every year the rope will be shortened by one-twentieth."

A cold chill swept over Grainger's body.

"But—but then at the end of twenty years—" he faltered.

"Yes," said Chung Li calmly. "At the end of twenty years it will strangle you."

Impulsively Grainger reached to draw the rope over his head and throw it from him. It clung immovably to the back of his neck. White with shock, his eyes questioned the other man.

"When I said 'riveted,' " explained Chung Li softly, "I did not mean a metal rivet. There is no way in which the rope can be removed from you, my friend. I do not know how it is done."

Grainger jumped to his feet and glanced around him wildly.

"I won't stand it!" he shouted. "They can't keep me here—I'll get away somehow—I'll appeal to the Solar consul."

"Read your permit papers, Grainger. One of the things you agreed to was to obey the laws of Agretia, just as if you were a native of the planet."

"Then I'll escape."

"How? Where to?" Chung Li's voice was gentle. "This is the only town of any size on Agretia. There is only one spaceport. Nobody enters or leaves without inspection by the *heldehars.* No Terran captain would dare let you secretly onboard, no matter how you bribed him; he would lose his license. If you managed to stow away he would turn you in; if you got away on Terra or any other planet you could live on, the authorities would have to send you back, by the terms of the Federation agreement.

"Believe me, if it were possible for me to help you escape, I would. I should then have a monopoly again."

"Then I'll die—I'll kill myself!"

"You are free to do so. But it seems rather foolish. At your age, and in your good health, you are now reasonably sure of 20 years of peace and comfort: why cut them short? Of course you will not be allowed to drive a *brondun* again, but that is a minor inconvenience. Otherwise, you will live just as you have been living—only you will know the maximum span of your life—an advantage few of us possess. I am sure I shall be dead long before you, but it does not worry me. You may even marry and leave children, if you can persuade some young lady on Terra to come here to you, under the circumstances.

"For of course, my friend, you must be an exile forever. You will never see our home planet again."

Habit accustoms us to anything in time. After the first few months, Grainger grew used to the rope. After a year or two, he ceased having nightmares from which he woke sweating and screaming. At first he worked hard in order to forget; after a while he began working hard because business had always been his whole existence, and because he liked making money and living in comfort, even if there was no one to leave the money to and the comfort was only the alleviation of a certain doom.

He did not even consider Chung Li's last advice—to join some Terran matrimonial club (since there was no woman in his past whom he could think of as his wife, or who would be likely to desire him as her husband) and establish a family while his children could still be nearly grown before their father died. Terrans and Agretians could not interbreed, but the *calubari*, the Agretian hetairae, were satisfactory enough for what needs he did not drug with toil.

Four years went by, and he was almost adjusted to the necessities of his fate; sometimes he did not think of it for days on end. Chung Li died suddenly, and Grainger inherited his business; doubtless a new competitor would get a residence permit some day, but so far he was able to handle the older Terran's trade and his own as well.

And then something occurred that he had never anticipated. He fell in love.

Tourists were rare on Agretia—it was not an interesting planet, either scenically or historically. But every ship brought in some visitors—commercial representatives, journalists, scientists, scholars and research workers of one sort or another.

Luvina Nilsson was a physical anthropologist. She had a Foundation grant for a year's analytical study of the Agretians. She came in on the *Starfarer* four years from the day when Warren Grainger had accidentally killed Makar. She was tall and slender and blonde, with delicate features but a warm, generous mouth and steady grey eyes. Grainger met her the

day she landed—the small alien colony was like a neighborhood club. Something happened to him that had never happened before—something he had never believed could happen. Suddenly this slim girl became as necessary to him as air and water. And even in his newfound self-depreciation he could not ignore her instant response.

He had never been a coward, and he had always been honest. He was not simply in love with Luvina; he loved her. Before she could become too deeply committed, he told her his story. It was the hardest task of his 33 years.

For answer, she threw her arms around his neck. She did not seem to notice the thin metal rope that already encircled it.

But later, when they sat in the close embrace that followed the avowals and the kisses, she burst passionately into speech.

"We'll find a way out, dearest!" she cried fiercely. "You'll get free somehow! I won't give you up after only sixteen years!"

"I would rather have sixteen days with you—" he began brokenly. His mouth sought hers again. "Marry me soon, my darling—we have so little time."

"I'll marry you tomorrow, or as soon as the silly laws of this place allow. But I won't give up—there has to be a way out, and I won't rest till we find it."

"There *is* no way, sweetheart. I've tried and tried. Chung Li was right. If you'll have me, then you must reconcile yourself to being a widow in sixteen years at the most."

But in his heart a little fire was lighted that he had never thought to feel again. Its name was hope.

They were married by Agretian law and ceremony, since no other was available, and Luvina moved in to his bachelor apartment. On their wedding night they took a pledge to let their first year go by without concern for the future. Luvina would go ahead with her project, under her grant, measuring, weighing, and classifying the Agretians, analyzing their resemblances to and differences from Terrans. Warren would conduct his growing import and export business and do his best to make it grow more. Neither of them would talk, or, if they could help it, think about the rope around his neck or the doom awaiting him.

"But don't think I'm forgetting," Luvina said firmly, "I'm willing to spend the rest of my life on Agretia; I'm willing to carry on my work here as best I can; but I want your children, and I want them to have a father. I'm not going to give you up. And I'm not going to start a family till I know I'm going to keep you."

So the months passed. It was not hard for Grainger to keep his part of the compact; he had long ago exhausted himself seeking vainly for some way out of the trap. Luvina never

spoke of it, but he knew her mind was busy with the problem, and that she like him could find no solution.

And then came the fifth annual reminder, and another twentieth of the rope was cut and the shortened halter fastened again, by that secret method he could not fathom, immovably to the back of his neck. The time of their pledge of silence was over, but both of them avoided the subject instinctively, since neither would acknowledge despair.

Sometimes he saw on the streets of the City others who wore his mark; he grew familiar with their faces, noticed the shortening of their ropes. Some of them had disappeared. He asked no questions; he knew what had happened to them.

Luvina's study was finished. The Agretians had been most co-operative, and had submitted patiently to her calipers and scales and questionnaires. Grainger helped her assemble the charts and tables, the tapings of her conclusions, ready to send the material to the Foundation by the next Terra-bound ship.

"You haven't discussed your findings with me at all," he complained. "Don't you think I'm interested?"

"There was nothing to discuss till now, darling. A lot of it is drearily technical, and it wouldn't mean any more to you than your shipping manifests would mean to me. But the summary might interest you—this section here."

"Then let's play it back, so I can ask questions. After all, I have to deal with the Agretians all the time; the more I can learn about them the better."

"All right, I'll put it on for you. It will be a help to have someone else listen and comment, anyway—it might give me new insights that would let me make last-minute improvements even now."

We're both talking at random, Grainger thought bitterly. The time has come when we must face something so much more important to us, and we're both putting it off, because there simply isn't any solution—there can't be—and we'll have to make ourselves accept it. Perhaps—a stab of fear pierced him—perhaps it will be too much for her, perhaps she will leave me, go back to Terra.

This wouldn't do. He forced himself to attention.

"At the outset, some generalizations can be made. The natives of Agretia are not merely humanoid; they are, in all essential respects, human—another species of human being from *Homo sapiens*, but distinctly the product of the same evolutionary forces.

"They have six-fingered hands and six-toed feet. Their circulatory and eliminative systems vary in some respects from ours. Their period of gestation is 11 months, and there are minor variations in the reproductive apparatus. There are significant differences in the cerebral cortex. These matters will all be discussed in detail.

"The most obvious difference at first sight is that on the average the Agretian, both male and female, is distinctly taller and heavier than the average Terran of even the tallest races. (See Chart CCVII.) The average full-grown Agretian male is seven and a half feet tall and weighs between three hundred and fifty and four hundred pounds. The musculature is consonant with this height and weight; they have large chests, heavy hips, wide shoulders, big arms, legs, and necks. Their heads—"

"Turn it off!" Grainger yelled. *"Turn it off!"*

Bewildered, Luvina closed the circuit.

"What is it?" she cried. "Is something wrong? Are you sick?"

He stood there trembling, hardly able to speak.

"Their necks," he croaked. "Their necks—"

She frowned in puzzlement. Then suddenly she saw it too.

"Oh, Warren! Their necks are twice as thick as ours," she gasped. "It figures—they're used to their own size—How long was the rope when they first put it on you? Quick, let me measure it now."

She dashed for the measure, wrote down the figure with clumsy fingers.

"It's been five years. It's a quarter shorter than it was, which makes it originally— And a twentieth of that, taken off each year—let me see—"

He was there before her; they looked at each other with shining eyes.

"And 15 times more besides this still will leave—"

Another hasty calculation. Then she was sobbing in his arms, and his own tears were dropping on her blonde head.

"There'll still be a good twenty-five inches left at the end of the twenty years," he whispered. "They've estimated for—what is their average neck-size?"

"About twenty-eight inches."

"And mine is sixteen. They figured it for their own size."

"Won't they come to realize it later, and cut off more each time?" she asked fearfully.

"They can't. Maybe they realize it already, but Agretians are absolutely law-abiding, and they never change their rules. There's nothing they can do, fifteen years from now, but remove the rope forever. My sentence will be served. They'll have to set me free."

And they did—fifteen years later to the day on which they had shackled him. It was quite a ceremony. Grainger went to it accompanied by Luvina and their three children. By this time he spoke Agretian as fluently as his Agretia-born youngsters. And he had planned his speech, full of resentment for the ordeal he had undergone before Luvina's penetration had opened his eyes.

For an instant his neck felt bare and awkward, bereft of the rope it had worn so many years. The officiating judge who had

removed it held out his arm, palm up, in the Agretian gesture of congratulation.

"You have borne your burden of shame bravely and modestly, Terran Grainger," he said. "It must have been hard to endure so long the pity of your fellow-beings."

Grainger stared at him, his planned speech frustrated.

"But—but haven't you noticed," he stammered at last, "that they made the rope too long—that it didn't work the way they intended?"

The official looked puzzled.

"It was measured for your neck, not for our larger ones," he explained.

"Do you mean," asked Grainger, amazed, "that if I had been an Agretian it would have been still longer?"

"Of course—we have no desire to cause anyone physical discomfort."

"But then—at the end of the sentence it could never have strangled me!"

It was the judge's turn to be astonished—and offended.

"Strangled? What made you think that we would purposely kill a human being?"

Confusedly Grainger repeated what Chung Li had told him so long ago.

The judge was young; he did not remember Chung Li.

"But this Terran—you say he was your rival in trade? He resented your presence here?"

"Yes, but when I had my—my trouble, he helped me all he could with his advice."

The Agretian sighed.

"I shall never understand the Terran mind," he said. "You seem to delight in deceiving and causing pain to others, and then ascribing it to something you call a sense of humor."

"You mean," cried Grainger, "that Chung Li was just pulling my leg?"

The judge shook his head in puzzlement.

"Your leg? No, he was, in your inscrutable Terran manner which conceals vindictiveness under amusement, merely pulling the rope more tightly around your neck!"

OR THE GRASSES GROW

By Avram Davidson

About halfway along the narrow and ill-paved country road between Crosby and Spanish Flats (all dips and hollows shimmering falsely like water in the heat till you get right up close to them), the road to Tickisall Agency branches off. No pretense of concrete or macadam—or even grading—deceives the chance or rare purposeful traveller. Federal, State, and County governments have better things to do with their money: Tickisall pays no taxes, and its handful of residents have only recently (and most grudgingly) been accorded the vote.

The sunbaked earth is cracked and riven. A few dirty sheep and a handful of scrub cows share its scanty herbage with an occasional swaybacked horse or stunted burro. Here and there a gaunt automobile rests in the thin shadow of a board shack, and a child, startled doubtless by the smooth sound of a strange motor, runs like a lizard through the dusty wastes to hide, and then to peer. Melon vines dried past all hope of fruit lie in patches next to whispery, tindery cornstalks.

And in the midst of all this, next to the only spring which never goes dry, are the only painted buildings, the only decent buildings in the area. In the middle of the green lawn is a pole with the flag, and right behind the pole, over the front door, the sign:

U. S. BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS
TICKISALL AGENCY
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

There were already a few Indians gathering around that afternoon, the women in cotton-print dresses, the men in overalls. There would soon be more. This was scheduled as the last day for the Tickisall Agency and Reservation. Congress had passed the bill, the President had signed it, the Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs had issued the order. It was supposed to be a great day for the Tickisall Nation—only the Tickisalls, what was left of them, didn't seem to think so. Not a man or woman of them spoke. Not a child whimpered. Not a dog barked.

Before Uncle Fox-head sat a basket with four different kinds of clay, and next to the basket was a medicine gourd full of water. The old man rolled the clay between his moistened palms, singing in a low voice. Then he washed his hands and

sprinkled them with pollen. Then he took up the prayer-sticks, made of juniper—(once there had been juniper trees on the reservation, once there had been many trees)—and painted with the signs of Thunder, Sun,, Moon, Rain, Lightning. There were weathers tied to the sticks—once there had been birds, too . . .

Oh, People-of-The-Hidden Places,
Oh, take our message to The Hidden Places,
Swiftly, swiftly, now . . .

the old man chanted, shaking the medicine-sticks.

Oh, you, Swift Ones, People-with-no-legs,
Take our message to The-People-with-no-bodies,
Swiftly, swiftly, now . . .

The old man's skin was like a cracked, worn moccasin. With his turkey-claw hand he took up the gourd rattle, shook it: West, South, Up, Down, East, North.

Oh, People-of-the-hollow Earth,
Take our message to the hollow Earth,
Take our song to our Fathers and Mothers,
Take our cry to the Spirit People,
Take and go, take and go,
Swiftly, swiftly, now . . .

The snakes rippled across the ground and were gone, one by one. The old man's sister's son helped him back to his sheepskin, spread in the shade, where he half-sat, half-lay, panting.

His great-nephews, Billy Cottonwood and Sam Quarterhorse, were talking together in English. "There was a fellow in my outfit," Cottonwood said, "a fellow from West Virginia, name of Corrothers. Said his grandmother claimed she could charm away warts. So I said my great-uncle claimed he could make snakes. And they all laughed fit to kill, and said, 'Chief, when you try a snow-job, it turns into a blizzard!' . . . Old Corrothers," he reflected. "We were pretty good buddies. Maybe I'll go to West Virginia and look him up. I could hitch, maybe."

Quarterhorse said, "Yeah, you can go to West Virginia, and I can go to L.A.—but what about the others? Where *they* going to go if Washington refuses to act?"

The fond smile of recollection left his cousin's lean, brown face. "I don't know," he said. "I be damned and go to Hell,

if I know." And then the old pick-up came rattling and coughing up to the house, and Sam said, "Here's Newton."

Newton Quarterhorse, his brother Sam, and Billy Cottonwood, were the only three Tickisall's who had passed the physical and gone into the Army. There weren't a lot of others who were of conscripting age (or any other age, for that matter), and those whom TB didn't keep out, other ailments active or passive did. Once there had been trees on the Reservation, and birds, and deer, and healthy men.

The wash-faded Army suntans had been clean and fresh as always when Newt set out for Crosby, but they were dusty and sweaty now. He took a piece of wet burlap out and removed a few bottles from it. "Open these, Sam, will you, while I wash," he said. "Cokes for us, strawberry pop for the old people . . . How's Uncle Fox-Head?"

Billy grunted. "Playing at making medicine snakes again. Do you suppose if we believed he could, he could?"

Newt shrugged. "So. Well, maybe if the telegrams don't do any good, the snakes will. And I'm damned sure they won't do no worse. That son of a bitch at the Western Union office," he said, looking out over the drought-bitten land. " 'Sending a smoke-signal to the Great White Father again, Sitting Bull?' he says, smirking and sneering. I told him; 'You just take the money and send the wire.' They looked at me like coyotes looking at a sick calf." Abruptly, he turned away and went to dip his handkerchief in the bucket. Water was hard come by.

The lip of the bottle clicked against one of Uncle Fox-head's few teeth. He drank noisily, then licked his lips. "Today we drink the white man's sweet water," he said. "What will we drink tomorrow?" No one said anything. "I will tell you, then," he continued. "Unless the white man relent, we will drink the bitter waters of The Hollow Places. They are bitter, but they are strong and good." He waved his withered hand in a semi-circle. "All this will go," he said, "and the Fathers and mothers of The People will return and lead us to our old home inside the Earth." His sister's son, who had never learned English nor gone to school, moaned. "Unless the white men relent," said the old man.

"They never have," said Cottonwood, in Tickisall. In English, he said, "What will he do when he sees that nothing happens tomorrow except that we get kicked the Hell out of here?"

Newt said, "Die, I suppose . . . which might not be a bad idea. For all of us."

His brother turned and looked at him. "If you're planning Quarterhorse's Last Stand, forget about it. There aren't twenty rounds of ammunition on the whole reservation."

Billy Cottonwood raised his head. "We could maybe move in with the Apahoya," he suggested. "They're just as dirt-poor

as we are, but there's more of them, and I guess they'll hold on to their land a while yet." His cousins shook their heads. "Well, not for us. But the others . . . Look, I spoke to Joe Feather Cloud that last time I was at the Apahoya Agency. If we give him the truck and the sheep, he'll take care of Uncle Fox-head."

Sam Quarterhorse said he supposed that was the best thing. "For the old man, I mean. I made up *my* mind. I'm going to L.A. and pass for Colored." He stopped.

They waited till the new shiny automobile had gone by towards the Agency in a cloud of dust. Newt said, "The buzzards are gathering." Then he asked, "How come, Sam?"

"Because I'm tired of being an Indian. It has no present and no future. I can't be a white, they won't have me—the best I could hope for would be that they laugh: 'How, Big Chief'—'Hi, Blanket-bottom.' Yeah, I *could* pass for a Mexican as far as my looks go, only the Mexes won't have me, either. But the Colored will. And there's millions and millions of them—whatever price they pay for it, they never have to feel lonely. And they've got a fine, bitter contempt for the whites that I can use a lot of. 'Pecks,' they call them. I don't know where they got the name from, but, Damn! it sure fits them. They've been pecking away at us for over a hundred years."

They talked on some more, and all the while the dust never settled in the road. They watched the whole tribe, what there was of it, go by towards the agency—in old trucks, in buckboards, on horses, on foot. And after some time, they loaded up the pick-up and followed.

The Indians sat all over the grass in front of the Agency, and for once no one bothered to chase them off. They just sat, silent, waiting. A group of men from Crosby and Spanish Flats were talking to the Superintendent; there were maps in their hands. The cousins went up to them; the white men looked out of the corners of their eyes, confidence still tempered—but only a bit—by wariness.

"Mr. Jenkins," Newt said to one, "most of this is your doing and you know how I feel about it—"

"You better not make any trouble, Quarterhorse," said another townsman.

Jenkins said, "Let the boy have his say."

"—but I know you'll give me a straight answer. What's going to be done here?"

Jenkins was a leathery little man, burnt almost as dark as an Indian. He looked at him, not unkindly, through the spectacles which magnified his blue eyes. "Why, you know, son, there's nothing personal in all this. The land belongs to them that can hold it and use it. It was made to be used.

You people've had your chance, Lord knows— Well, no speeches. You see, here on the map, where this here dotted line is? The county is putting through a new road to connect with a new highway the state's going to construct. There'll be a lot of traffic through here, and this Agency ought to make a fine motel.

"And right along *here*—" his blunt finger traced, "—there's going to be the main irrigation canal. There'll be branches all through the Reservation. I reckon we can raise some mighty fine alfalfa. Fatten some mighty fine cattle . . . I always thought, son, you'd be good with stock, if you had some good stock to work with. Not these worthless scrubs. If you want a job—"

One of the men cleared his sinus cavities with an ugly sound, and spat. "Are you out of your mind, Jenk? Here we been workin for years ta git these Indyins outa here, and you tryin ta make um stay . . ."

The Superintendent was a tall, fat, soft man with a loose smile. He said ingratiatingly, "Mr. Jenkins realizes, as I'm sure you do too, Mr. Waldo, that the policy of the United States government is, and always has been—except for the unfortunate period when John Collier was in charge of the Bureau of Indian Affairs—man may have *meant* well, but Lord! hopeless sentimentalist—well, our policy has always been: Prepare the Indian to join the general community. Get him off the reservation. Turn the tribal lands over to the *individual.* And it's been done with other tribes, and now, finally, it's being done with this one." He beamed.

Newt gritted his teeth. Then he said, "And the result was always the same—as soon as the tribal lands were given to the individual red man they damn quick passed into the hand of the individual white man. That's what happened with other tribes, and now, finally, it's being done with this one. Don't you *know,* Mr. Scott, that we can't adapt ourselves to the system of individual land-ownership? That we just aren't strong enough by ourselves to hold onto real estate? That—"

"Root, hog, er die," said Mr. Waldo.

"Are men *hogs?*" Newt cried.

Waldo said, at large, *"Told* ya he w's a trouble-maker." Then, bringing his long, rough, red face next to Newt's, he said, "Listen, Indyin, you and all y'r stinkin relatives are through. If Jenkins is damnfool enough ta hire ya, that's his look-out. But if he don't, you better stay far, far away, because nobody likes ya, nobody wants ya, and now that the Guvermint in Worshennon is finely come ta their sentces, nobody is goin ta protec ya—you and y'r mangy cows and y'r smutty-nosed sheep and y'r blankets—"

Newt's face showed his feelings, but before he could

voice them, Billy Cottonwood broke in. "Mr. Scott," he said, "we sent a telegram to Washington, asking to halt the break-up of the Reservation."

Scott smiled his sucaryl smile. "Well, that's your privilege as a citizen."

Cottonwood spoke on. He mentioned the provisions of the bill passed by Congress, authorizing the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to liquidate, at his discretion, all reservations including less than one hundred residents, and to divide the land among them.

"Mr. Scott, when the Treaty of Juniper Butte was made between the United States and the Tickisalls," Cottonwood said, "there were thousands of us. That treaty was to be kept 'as long as the sun shall rise or the grasses grow.' The Government pledged itself to send us doctors—it didn't, and we died like flies. It pledged to send us seed and cattle; it sent us no seed and we had to eat the few hundred head of stock-yard cast-offs they did send us, to keep from starving. The Government was to keep our land safe for us forever, in a sacred trust—and in every generation they've taken away more and more. Mr. Scott—Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Waldo, and all you other gentlemen—you knew, didn't you, when you were kind enough to loan us money—or rather, to give us credit at the stores, when this drought started—you knew that this bill was up before Congress, didn't you?"

No one answered him. "You knew that it would pass, and that turning our lands over to us wouldn't mean a darned thing, didn't you? That we already owed so much money that our creditors would take all our land? Mr. Scott, how can the Government let this happen to us? It made a treaty with us to keep our lands safe for us 'as long as the sun rises or the grasses grow.' Has the sun stopped rising? Has the grass stopped growing? We believed in you—we kept our part of the treaty. Mr. Scott, won't you wire Washington—won't you other gentlemen do the same? To stop this thing that's being done to us? It's almost a hundred years now since we made the treaty, and we've always hoped. Now we've only got till midnight to hope. Unless—?"

But the Superintendent said, No, he couldn't do that. And Jenkins shook his head, and said, sorry; it was really all for the best. Waldo shrugged, produced a packet of legal papers. "I've been deppatized to serve all these," he said. "Soons the land's all passed over ta individj'l ownership—which is 12 P.M. tanight. But if you give me y'r word (whatever that's worth) not ta make no trouble, why, guess it c'n wait till morning. Yo go back ta y'r shacks and I'll be round, come morning. We'll sleep over with Scott f'r tanight."

Sam Quarterhorse said, "We won't make any trouble,

no. Not much use in that. But we'll wait right here. It's still possible we'll hear from Washington before midnight."

The Superintendent's house was quite comfortable. Logs (cut by Indian labor from the last of the Reservation's trees) blazed in the big fireplaces (built by Indian labor). A wealth of rugs (woven by Indians in the Agency school) decorated walls and floors. The card-game had been on for some time when they heard the first woman start to wail. Waldo looked up nervously. Jenkins glanced at the clock. "Twelve midnight," he said. "Well, that's it. All over but the details. Took almost a hundred years, but it'll be worth it."

Another woman took up the keening. It swelled to a chorus of heartbreak, then died away. Waldo picked up his cards, then put them down again. An old man's voice had begun a chant. Someone took it up—then another. Drums joined it, and rattles. Scott said, "That was old Fox-head who started that just now. They're singing the death-song. They'll go on till morning."

Waldo swore. Then he laughed. "Let'm," he said. "It's their last morning."

Jenkins woke up first. Waldo stirred to wakefulness as he heard the other dressing. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Don't know," Jenkins said. "But it feels to me like gettin-up time. . . . You hear them go just a while back? No? Don't know how you could miss it. Singing got real loud—seemed like a whole lot of new voices joined in. Then they all got up and moved off. Wonder where they went . . . I'm going to have a look around outside." He switched on his flashlight and left the house. In another minute Waldo joined him, knocking on Scott's door as he passed.

The ashes of the fire still smoldered, making a dull red glow. It was very cold. Jenkins said, "Look here, Waldo—look." Waldo followed the flash-light's beam, said he didn't see anything. "It's the grass . . . it was green last night. It's all dead and brown now. Look at it . . ."

Waldo shivered. "Makes no difference. We'll get it green again. The land's ours now."

Scott joined them, his overcoat hugging his ears. "Why is it so cold?" he asked. "What's happened to the clock? Who was tinkering with the clock? It's past eight by the clock—it ought to be light by now. Where did all the Tickisalls go to? What's happening? There's something in the air—I don't like the feel of it. I'm sorry I ever agreed to work with you, no matter what you paid me—"

Waldo said, roughly, nervously, "Shut up. Some damned Indyin sneaked in and must of fiddled with the clock. Hell

with um. Govermint's on *our* side now. Soons it's daylight we'll clear um all out of here f'r good."

Shivering in the bitter cold, uneasy for reasons they only dimly perceived, the three white men huddled together alone in the dark by the dying fire, and waited for the sun to rise.

And waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. . . .

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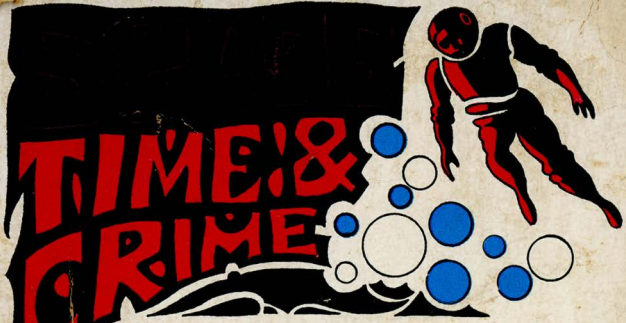

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