

1007

The top science fiction authors choose the  
best stories they ever wrote



# MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY



POCKET  
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EDITED BY  
**LEO MARGULIES  
& OSCAR J. FRIEND**

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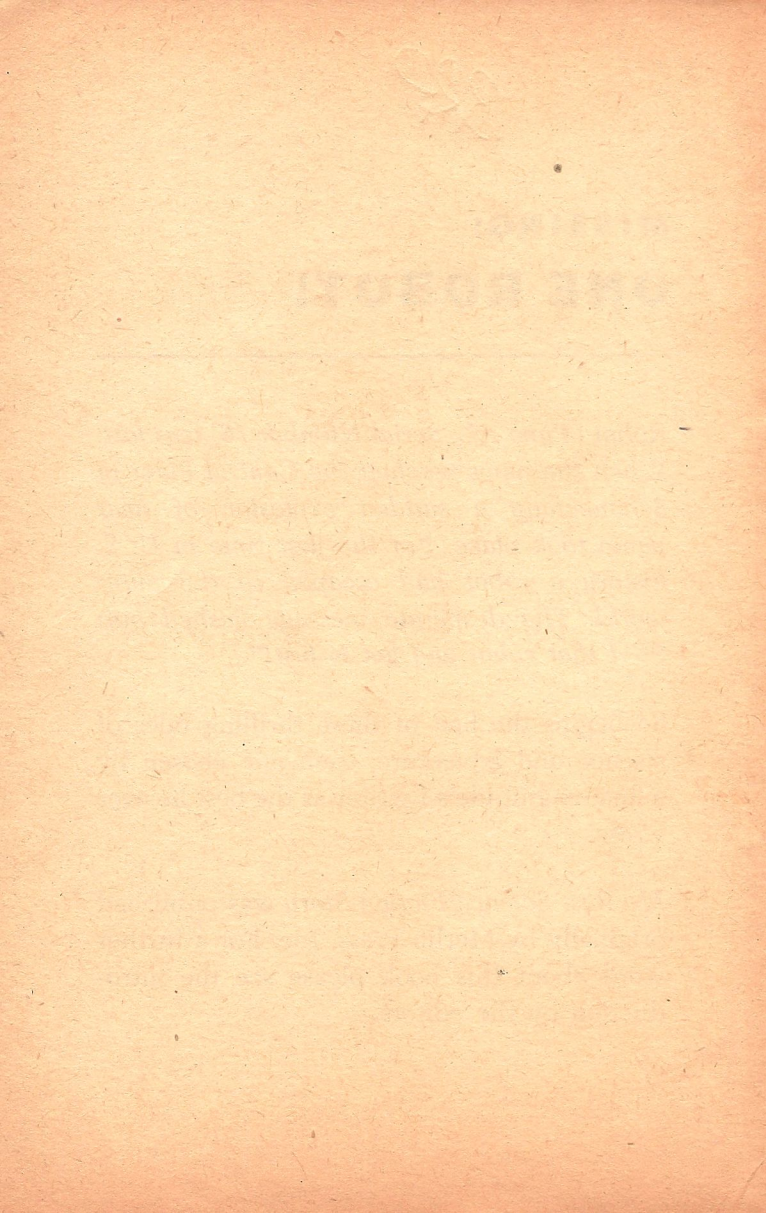
# **ONE ROBOT!**

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*Robot (Type AL, Serial Number 76) was lost. When the news reached the Central Plant in Schenectady a sudden explosion of near panic took place. For the first time in U. S. history a robot had escaped to the outer world. The desperate message flashed out: "Get that robot and get it fast!"*

So begins the first of these thrilling tales of science and adventure, each one chosen by a first magnitude s-f writer as the best he ever wrote.

*My Best Science Fiction Story* was published originally by Merlin Press, Inc. For a further word about this book please see the introduction by the editors.



———— MY BEST ————  
**SCIENCE FICTION**  
———— **STORY** ————

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*As selected by*

12

OUTSTANDING AUTHORS

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*Edited by*

LEO MARGULIES and OSCAR J. FRIEND



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This Pocket Book includes twelve stories from the original edition of MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY published by Merlin Press. It is printed from brand-new plates made from completely reset, clear, easy-to-read type. Each of these stories is complete and unabridged.

## MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE POCKET BOOK EDITION

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*Virtually all of the science fiction anthologies compiled to date have been constructed around specific editorial slants. They have been concerned—to cite examples—with invasion of Earth by alien entities, with the future development (highly speculative) of mankind and his civilizations and sciences, with the birth and flowering and/or death of various cultures from robots to mutants, with time travel, with possible life on other planets and solar systems, with conquest by man of the Universe. Ad infinitum. In each case the editor has, of course, selected only stories dealing with his chosen topic.*

*This book is different. Here is a volume with exactly twelve editorial slants—one for each of the stories. For the authors themselves are the selectors of the material and the only restriction we, the editors, imposed was that the stories should be outstanding science fiction. Thus, each author has chosen from his own files the story he believes to be the best he has written. He has offered it along with a brief explanation of why. Furthermore, although this selection was made a few years ago, and though the various authors have spent their time since in successful production of more science fiction, almost all of them still believe the tale they picked for this anthology remains their best. At least, it remains their favorite.*

*All of which (you may think) has made the role of anthologizers easy. Since the authors did it all, our chore was simply to see that you, the reader, got the opportunity to buy these stories. Would, indeed, that this were so!*

*Instead, we had the frightening task of selecting only twelve stories from the personal selections of twenty-five of the top science fiction authors of our time. Far easier to be judges of baby and beauty contests.*

*However, we think we have in this little volume some of the best stories ever written by a brilliant group of gifted authors. Each story is prefaced by an explanatory note from its contributor which you will find far more interesting and informative than the usual editorial comments by editors. So, please turn the page and get right into the very cream of science fiction.*

LEO MARGULIES and OSCAR J. FRIEND

## WHY I SELECTED

### ROBOT AL 76 GOES ASTRAY

---

*I am very pleased with the current furore over what Professor Norbert Wiener of M.I.T. calls "cybernetics." It is the science of "thinking" machines and is, undoubtedly, the theoretical basis for the eventual positronic robot. I have written nine robot stories, and I wrote all nine before I heard of the science, so anything about my robotic conceptions that doesn't fit the rigorous math of Professor Wiener must be forgiven me. (Another reason for forgiveness—but one I am not anxious to publicize—is that I don't understand the mathematics even after having looked at his book.)*

Anyway, the reason I choose ROBOT AL 76 GOES ASTRAY from among the rest of the robot yarns for inclusion here is that it's the light-hearted one. In a sense, it's a self-satire. Of course, it's a great day for an author when he becomes important enough to be satirized, and if I waited for a spontaneous gesture on the part of others, I could wait decades—centuries, if I lived long enough. So I took care of the satire myself and did it gently. This represents an ideal combination.

Incidentally, all my robots have been nice guys. None of them have ever been Frankensteinian products. This is not because of reluctance on my part to utilize plot-clichés in order to turn an honest penny. It's just that I can't believe that a world run in the way we are running this one could possibly be harmed by being taken over by intelligent machines. In fact, that gives me an ideal. The whole situation

*now might simply be a device on the part of God to institute— Nol Why tell you now? If I write it up I can sell it for money.*

*Well, I hope you smile at least once in reading the following pages. I don't want it to be a complete waste of time.*

ISAAC ASIMOV

ISAAC ASIMOV

## ROBOT AL 76 GOES ASTRAY

---

**AL 76 Was Built for a Specific  
Job, but He Got Lost. However,  
He Knew His Job, and He Did It!**

**JONATHAN QUELL'S** eyes crinkled worriedly behind their rimless glasses as he charged through the door labeled "General Manager."

He slapped the folded paper in his hands upon the desk and panted, "Look at that, boss!"

Sam Tobe juggled the cigar in his mouth from one cheek to the other, and looked. His hand went to his unshaven jaw and rasped along it. "Hell!" he exploded. "What are they talking about?"

"They say we sent out five AL robots," Quell explained, quite unnecessarily.

"We sent six," said Tobe.

"Sure, six! But they only got five at the other end. They sent out the serial numbers and AL 76 is missing."

Tobe's chair went over backwards as he heaved his thick bulk upright and went through the door as if he were on greased wheels. It was five hours afterwards—with the plant pulled apart from assembly rooms to vacuum chambers; with every one of the plant's two hundred employees put through the third-degree mills; that a sweating, disheveled Tobe sent an emergency message to the Central Plant at Schenectady.

And at the Central Plant, a sudden explosion of near-panic

took place. For the first time in the history of the United States Robot and Mechanical Men Corporation, a robot had escaped to the outer world. It wasn't so much that the law forbade the presence of any robot on Earth outside a licensed factory of the Corporation. Laws could always be squared. What was much more to the point was the statement made by one of the research mathematicians.

He said: "That robot was created to run a Disinto on the Moon. Its positronic brain was equipped for a Lunar environment, and *only* a Lunar environment. On Earth here it's going to receive seventy-five umptyillion sense-impressions for which it was never prepared. There's no telling *what* its reactions will be. No telling!" And he wiped a forehead that had suddenly gone wet, with the back of his hand.

Within the hour, a stratoplane had left for the Virginia plant. The instructions were simple.

"Get that robot, and get it fast!"

AL 76 was confused! In fact, confusion was the only impression his delicate positronic brain retained. It had started when he had found himself in these strange surroundings. How it had come about, he no longer knew. Everything was mixed up.

There was green underfoot, and brown shafts rose all about him with more green on top. And the sky was blue where it should have been black. The sun was all right, round and yellow and hot—but where was the powdery pumice rock underfoot; where were the huge cliff-like crater rings?

There was only the green below and the blue above. The sounds that surrounded him were all strange. He had passed through running water that had reached his waist. It was blue and cold and wet. And when he passed people, as he did, occasionally, they were without the spacesuits they should have been wearing. When they saw him, they shouted and ran.

One man had leveled a gun at him and the bullet had whistled past his head—and then he had run, too.

He had no idea of how long he had been wandering be-

tore he finally stumbled upon Randolph Payne's shack two miles out in the woods from the town of Hannaford. Randolph Payne himself, a screwdriver in one hand, a pipe in the other and a battered ruin of a vacuum cleaner between his knees, squatted outside the doorway.

Payne was humming at the time, for he was a naturally happy-go-lucky soul—when at his shack. He had a more respectable dwelling place back in Hannaford, but *that* dwelling place was pretty largely occupied by his wife, a fact which he silently but sincerely regretted. Perhaps then, there was a sense of relief and freedom at such times when he found himself able to retire to his "special de-luxe doghouse" where he could smoke in peace and attend to his hobby of re-servicing household appliances.

It wasn't much of a hobby, but sometimes someone would bring out a radio or an alarm clock and the money he would get paid for juggling its insides was the only money he ever got that didn't pass in dribblets through his spouse's niggardly hands.

This vacuum cleaner, for instance, would bring in an easy six bits.

At the thought, he broke into song, raised his eyes, and broke into a sweat. The song choked off, the eyes popped, and the sweat became more intense. He tried to stand up—as a preliminary to running like hell—but he couldn't get his legs to cooperate.

And then AL 76 had squatted down next to him, and said, "Say, why did all the rest of them run?"

Payne knew damn well why they all ran, but the gurgle that issued from his diaphragm didn't show it. He tried to inch away from the robot.

AL 76 continued in an aggrieved tone, "One of them even took a shot at me. An inch to the left and he would have scratched my chest plates."

"M—must have b—been a nut," stammered Payne.

"That's possible." The robot's voice grew more confidential. "Listen, what's wrong with everything?"

Payne looked hurriedly about. It had struck him that the

robot spoke in a remarkably mild tone for one so heavily and brutally metallic in appearance. It also struck him that he had heard somewhere that robots were mentally incapable of harming human beings. He relaxed a bit.

"There's nothing wrong with anything."

"Isn't there?" AL 76 eyed him accusingly. "You're all wrong. Where's your spacesuit?"

"I haven't got any."

"Then why aren't you dead?"

That stopped Payne, "Well—I don't know."

"See!" said the robot, triumphantly, "there's something wrong with everything. Where's Mt. Copernicus? Where's Lunar Station 17? And where's my Disinto? I want to get to work, I do." He seemed perturbed, and his voice shook as he continued. "I've been going about for hours trying to get someone to tell me where my Disinto is, but they all run away. By now, I'm probably way behind schedule and the Sectional Executive will be as sore as blazes. This is a fine situation."

Slowly, Payne unscrambled the stew in which his brain found itself and said, "Listen, what do they call you?"

"My serial number is AL 76."

"All right. Al is good enough for me. Now, Al, if you're looking for Lunar Station 17, that's on the Moon. See?"

AL 76 nodded his head ponderously. "Sure. But I've been looking for it—"

"But it's on the Moon. This isn't the Moon."

It was the robot's turn to become confused. He watched Payne for a speculative moment and then said slowly, "What do you mean this isn't the Moon? Of course it's the Moon. Because if it isn't the Moon, what is it? Huh? Answer me that."

Payne made a funny sound in his throat and breathed hard. He pointed a finger at the robot and shook it. "Look," he said—and then the brilliant idea of the century struck him, and he finished with a strangled, "Wow!"

AL 76 eyed him censoriously. "That isn't an answer. I think I have a right to a civil answer if I ask a civil question."

Payne wasn't listening. He was still marveling at himself. Why, it was as plain as day. This robot was one built for the Moon that had somehow gotten loose on Earth. Naturally it would be all mixed up, because its positronic brain had been geared exclusively for a lunar environment, making its Earthly surroundings entirely meaningless.

And now if he could only keep the robot here—until he could get in touch with the men at the factory in Petersboro. Why, robots were worth money. The cheapest cost \$50,000, he had once heard, and some of them ran into millions. Think of the reward!

Man, oh, man, *think of the reward!* And every cent for himself. Not as much as a quarter of a snifter of a plugged nickel for Mirandy. Jumpin' tootin' blazes, *no!*

He rose to his feet at last, "Al," he said. "You and I are buddies! Pals! I love you like a brother." He thrust out a hand, "Shake!"

The robot swallowed up the offered hand in a metal paw and squeezed it gently. He didn't quite understand. "Does that mean you'll tell me how to get to Lunar Station 17."

Payne was a trifle disconcerted, "N—no, not exactly. As a matter of fact, I like you so much, I want you to stay here with me a while."

"Oh, no, I can't do that. I've got to get to work." He added gloomily, "How would you like to be falling behind your quota hour by hour and minute by minute? I want to work. I've *got* to work."

Payne thought sourly that there was no accounting for tastes, and said, "All right, then I'll explain something to you—because I can see from the looks of you that you're an intelligent person. I've had orders from your Sectional Executive, and he wants me to keep you here for a while. Till he sends for you, in fact."

"What for?" asked AL 76, suspiciously.

"I can't say. It's secret government stuff." Payne prayed inwardly and fervently, that the robot would swallow this. Some robots were damned clever, he knew, but this looked like one of the early models.

While he prayed, AL 76 considered. The robot's brain, adjusted to the handling of a Disinto on the Moon, was not at its best when engaged in abstract thought, but, just the same, ever since he had gotten lost, AL 76 had found his thought processes becoming stranger. The alien surroundings did something to him.

His next remark was almost shrewd. He said, slyly, "What's my Sectional Executive's name?"

Payne gulped and thought rapidly. "Al," he said, in a pained fashion, "you hurt me with this suspicion. I *can't* tell you his name. The trees have ears."

AL 76 inspected the tree next to him stolidly and said, "They have not."

"I know. What I mean is that spies are all around."

"Spies?"

"Yes. You know, *bad* people that want to destroy Lunar Station 17."

"What for?"

"Because they're *bad*. And they want to destroy *you*, and that's why you've got to stay here for a while, so they can't find you."

"But—but I've got to have a Disinto. I mustn't fall behind my quota."

"You will have. You will have." Payne promised earnestly, and just as earnestly damned the robot's one-track mind. "They're going to send one out tomorrow. Yeah, tomorrow." That would be plenty of time to get the men from the factory out here and collect beautiful green heaps of hundred-dollar bills.

But AL 76 grew only the more stubborn under the distressing impingement of the strange world all about him upon his thinking mechanism.

"No," he said. "I've got to have a Disinto now." Stiffly, he straightened his joints, jerking erect. "I'd better look for it some more."

Payne swarmed after and grabbed a cold, hard elbow. "Listen," he squealed. "You've got to stay—"

And something in the robot's mind clicked. All the strange-

ness surrounding him collected itself into one globule, exploded, and left a brain ticking with a curiously increased efficiency. He whirled on Payne. "I tell you what. I can build a Disinto right here.—and then I can work it."

Payne paused doubtfully. "I don't think I can build one." He wondered if it would do any good to pretend he could.

"That's all right." AL 76 could almost feel the positronic paths of his brain weaving into a new pattern, and experienced a strange exhilaration. "I can build one." He looked into Payne's de-luxe doghouse, and said, "You've got all the material here that I need."

Randolph Payne surveyed the junk with which his shack was filled: eviscerated radios, a topless refrigerator, rusty automobile engines, a broken-down gasrange, several miles of frayed wire, and, taking it all together, fifty tons or thereabouts of the most heterogeneous mass of old metal as ever caused a junkman to sniff disdainfully.

"Have I?" he said, weakly.

Two hours later, two things happened practically simultaneously. The first was that Sam Tobe of the Petersboro branch of U. S. Robot & Mechanical Men, Inc., received a visiphone call from one Randolph Payne of Hannaford. It concerned the missing robot and Tobe, with a deep-throated snarl, broke connection half-way through, and ordered all subsequent calls to be re-routed to the sixth assistant vice-president in charge of buttonholes.

This was not really unreasonable in Tobe. During the past week, although Robot AL 76 had dropped from sight completely, reports had flooded in from all over the Union as to the robot's whereabouts. As many as fourteen a day came—usually from fourteen different states.

Tobe was damn tired of it, to say nothing of being half-crazy just on general principles. There was even talk of a Congressional investigation, though every reputable Robotician and Mathematical Physicist on Earth swore the robot was harmless.

In his state of mind, then, it is not surprising that it took

three hours for the General Manager to pause and consider just exactly how it was that this Randolph Payne had known that the robot was slated for Lunar Station 17; and, for that matter, how he had known that the robot's serial number was AL 76. Those details had not been given out by the company.

He kept on considering for about a minute and a half and then swung into action.

However, during the three hours between the call and the action, the second event took place. Randolph Payne, having correctly diagnosed the abrupt break in his call as being due to general skepticism on the part of the plant official returned to his shack with a camera. They couldn't very well argue with a photograph, and he'd be damned if he'd show them the real thing before they came across with the cash.

AL 76 was busy with affairs of his own. Half of the contents of Payne's shack was littered over about two acres of ground and in the middle of it, the robot squatted and fooled around with radio tubes, hunks of iron, copper wire, and general junk. He paid no attention to Payne, who, sprawling flat on his belly, focused his camera for a beautiful shot.

And at this point it was that Lemuel Oliver Cooper turned the bend in the road and froze in his tracks as he took in the tableau. The reason for his coming in the first place was an ailing electric toaster that had developed the annoying habit of throwing out pieces of bread forcefully, but thoroughly untoasted. The reason for his *leaving* was more obvious. He had come with a slow, mildly cheerful, spring-morning saunter. He left with a speed that would have caused any college track coach to raise his eyebrows and purse his lips approvingly.

There was no appreciable slackening of speed, until Cooper hurtled into Sheriff Saunders' office minus hat and toaster and brought himself up hard against the wall.

Kindly hands lifted him and for half a minute he tried speaking before he had actually calmed down to the point of breathing, with, of course, no result.

They gave him whiskey, and fanned him, and when he did speak, it came out something like this: "—monster—seven feet tall—shack all busted up—poor Rannie Payne—" and so on.

They got the story out of him gradually: how there was a huge metal monster, seven feet tall, maybe even eight or nine, out at Randolph Payne's shack; how Randolph Payne himself was on his stomach, a "poor, bleeding, mangled corpse"; how the monster was then busily engaged in wrecking the shack out of sheer destructiveness; how it had turned on Lemuel Oliver Cooper, and how he—Cooper—had made his escape by half a hair.

Sheriff Saunders hitched his belt tighter about his portly middle and said, "It's that there machine man that got away from the Petersboro factory. We got warning on it last Saturday. Hey, Jake, you get every man in Hannaford County that can shoot and slap a depitty's badge on him. Get them here at noon. And listen, Jake, before you do that, just drop in at the widder Payne's place and slip her the bad news gentle-like."

It is reported that Miranda Payne, having been acquainted with events, paused only to make sure that her "ex"-husband's insurance policy was safe, and to make a few pithy remarks concerning his danged foolishness in not taking out double what he had, before breaking out into as prolonged and heart-wringing a wail of grief as ever became a respectable widow.

It was some hours later that Randolph Payne—unaware of his horrible mutilation and death—viewed the completed negatives of his snapshots with satisfaction. As a series of portraits of a robot at work, they left nothing to the imagination. They might have been labeled: "Robot Gazing Thoughtfully at a Vacuum Tube," "Robot Splicing Two Wires," "Robot Wielding Screw-Driver," "Robot Taking Frigidaire Apart with Great Violence" and so on.

As there now remained only the routine of making the prints themselves, he stepped out from beyond the curtain of the improvised dark-room for a bit of a smoke and a chat with AL 76.

In doing so, he was blissfully unaware that the neighboring

woods were verminous with nervous farmers armed with anything from an old colonial relic of a blunderbuss to the portable machine-gun carried by the sheriff himself. Nor, for that matter, had he any inkling of the fact that half a dozen robotists, under the leadership of Sam Tobe, were smoking down the highway from Petersboro at better than a hundred and twenty miles an hour—for the sole purpose of having the pleasure and honor of his acquaintance.

So while things were jittering towards a climax, Randolph Payne sighed with self-satisfaction, lit a match upon the seat of his pants, puffed away at his pipe, and looked at AL 76 with amusement.

It had been apparent for quite some time that the robot was more than slightly lunatic. Randolph Payne was himself an expert at home-made contraptions; having built several that could not have been exposed to daylight without searing the eyeballs of all beholders; but he had never even conceived of anything approaching the monstrosity that AL 76 was concocting.

It would have made the Rube Goldbergs of his day die in convulsions of envy. It would have made Picasso quit art in the sheer knowledge that he had been hopelessly surpassed. It would have soured the milk in the udders of any cow within half a mile of it.

In fact, it was gruesome!

From a rusty and massive iron base that faintly resembled something Payne had once seen attached to a second-hand tractor, it rose upward in rakish, drunken swerves, through a bewildering mess of wires, wheels, tubes, and nameless horrors without number, ending in a megaphone arrangement that looked decidedly sinister.

Payne had the impulse to peek in the megaphone part, but refrained. He had seen far more sensible machines explode suddenly and with violence.

He said, "Hey, Al."

The robot looked up. He had been lying flat on his stomach, teasing a thin sliver of metal into place. "What do you want, Payne?"

"What is this?" He asked it in the tone of one referring to something foul and decomposing, held gingerly between two ten-foot poles.

"It's the Disinto I'm making—so I can start to work. It's an improvement on the standard model." The robot rose, dusted his knees clankingly, and looked at it proudly.

Payne shuddered. An "improvement"! No wonder they hid the original in caverns on the Moon. Poor satellite! Poor dead satellite! He had always wanted to know what a fate worse than death was. Now he knew.

"Will it work?" he asked.

"Sure."

"How do you know?"

"It's got to. I made it, didn't I? I only need one thing now. Got a flashlight?"

"Somewheres, I guess." Payne vanished into the shack and returned almost immediately.

The robot unscrewed the bottom and set to work. In five minutes, he had finished, stepped back, and said, "All set. Now I get to work. You may watch if you want to."

A pause, while Payne tried to appreciate the magnanimity of the offer. "Is it safe?"

"A baby could handle it."

"Oh!" Payne grinned weakly and got behind the thickest tree in the vicinity. "Go ahead," he said, "I have the utmost confidence in you."

AL 76 pointed to the nightmarish junkpile and said, "Watch!" His hands set to work—

The embattled farmers of Hannaford County, Virginia, weaved up upon Payne's shack in a slowly tightening circle. With the blood of their heroic colonial forebears pounding in their veins—and goose-flesh trickling up and down their spines—they crept from tree to tree.

Sheriff Saunders spread the word. "Fire when I give the signal—and aim at the eyes."

Jacob Linker—Lank Jake, to his friends, and Sheriff's Deputy to himself—edged close. "Ya think mebbe this machine

man has skedaddled." He did not quite manage to suppress the tone of wistful hopefulness in his voice.

"Dunno," grunted the sheriff. "Guess not, though. We woulda come across him in the woods if he had, and we haven't."

"But it's awful quiet, and it 'pears to me as if we're gettin' close to Payne's place."

The reminder wasn't necessary. Sheriff Saunders had a lump in his throat so big it had to be swallowed in three installments. "Get back," he ordered, "and keep your finger on the trigger."

They were at the rim of the clearing now, and Sheriff Saunders closed his eyes and stuck the corner of one out from behind the tree. Seeing nothing, he paused, then tried again, eyes open this time.

Results were, naturally, better.

To be exact, he saw one huge machine man, back towards him, bending over one soul-curdling, hiccupy contraption of uncertain origin and less certain purpose. The only item he missed was the quivering figure of Randolph Payne, embracing the tree next but three to the nor'-nor'-west.

Sheriff Saunders stepped out into the open and raised his machine-gun. The robot, still presenting a broad metal back, said in a loud voice—to person or persons unknown—"Watch!" and as the Sheriff opened his mouth to ki-yi a general order to fire—metal fingers compressed a switch.

There exists no adequate description of what occurred afterwards, in spite of the presence of seventy eyewitnesses. In the days, months, and years to come not one of those seventy ever had a word to say about the few seconds after the sheriff had opened his mouth to give the firing order. When questioned about it, they merely turned apple-green and staggered away.

It is plain, however, that, in a general way, what did occur was this.

Sheriff Saunders opened his mouth; AL 76 pulled a switch; the Disinto worked—and seventy-five trees, two barns, three cows and the top three-quarters of Duckbill Mountain whiffed

into rarefied atmosphere. They became, so to speak, one with the snows of yesteryear.

Sheriff Saunders' mouth remained open for an indefinite interval thereafter, but nothing—neither firing orders nor anything else—issued therefrom. And then—

And then, there was a stirring in the air, a multiple ro-o-o-o-o-shing sound, a series of purple streaks through the atmosphere radiating away from Randolph Payne's shack as the center—and of the members of the posse, not a sign.

There were various guns scattered about the vicinity, including the sheriff's patented nickel-plated, extra-rapid-fire, guaranteed-no-clog, portable machine gun. There were about fifty hats, a few half-chomped cigars, and some odds and ends that had come loose in the excitement—but of actual human beings there were none.

Except for Lank Jake, not one of those human beings came within human ken for three days, and the exception in his favor came about because he was interrupted in his comet-flight by the half-dozen men from the Petersboro factory, who were charging *into* the wood at a pretty fair speed of their own.

It was Sam Tobe that stopped him, catching Lank Jake's head skillfully in the pit of his stomach. When he caught his breath, Tobe asked, "Where's Randolph Payne's place?"

Lank Jake allowed his eyes to unglaze for just a moment. "Brother," he said, "just you follow the direction I ain't going."

And with that, miraculously, he was gone. There was a shrinking dot, dodging trees on the horizon, that might have been him, but Sam Tobe wouldn't have sworn to it.

That takes care of the posse; but there still remains Randolph Payne, whose reactions took something of a different form.

For Randolph Payne, the five-second interval after the pulling of the switch and the disappearance of Duckbill Mountain was a total blank. At the start he had been peering through the thick underbrush from behind the bottom of the trees; at the end, he was swinging wildly from one of the top-most

branches. The same impulse that had driven the posse horizontally, had driven him vertically.

As to how he had covered the hundred fifty feet from roots to top—whether he had climbed, jumped, or flown, he did not know—and he didn't give a particle of a damn.

What he *did* know was that property had been destroyed by a robot temporarily in his possession. All visions of rewards vanished and were replaced by trembling nightmares of hostile citizenry, shrieking lynch mobs, lawsuits, murder charges, and what Mirandy Payne would say. Mostly what Mirandy Payne would say.

He was yelling wildly and hoarsely. "Hey, you robot, you smash that thing, do you hear? Smash it good! You forget I ever had anything to do with it. You're a stranger to me, see? You don't ever say a word about it. Forget it, you hear?"

He didn't expect his orders to do any good; it was only reflex action. What he didn't know was that a robot always obeyed a human order except where carrying it out involved danger to another human.

AL 76, therefore, calmly and methodically, proceeded to demolish his Disinto into rubble and flinders.

Just as he was stamping the last cubic inch under foot, Sam Tobe and his contingent arrived, and Randolph Payne, sensing that the real owners of the robot had come, dropped out of the tree head-first and made for regions unknown feet-first.

He did not wait for his reward.

Austin Wilde, Robotical Engineer, turned to Sam Tobe and said, "Did you get anything out of the robot?"

Tobe shook his head and snarled deep in his throat. "Nothing. Not a damn thing. He's forgotten everything that's happened since he left the factory. He must have gotten *orders* to forget, or it couldn't have left him so blank. What was that pile of junk he'd been fooling with?"

"Just that. A pile of junk—but it must have been a Disinto before he smashed it, and I'd like to kill the fellow who ordered him to do that, by slow torture. Look at this!"

They were part of the way up the slopes of what had been

Duckbill Mountain—at that point, to be exact, where the top had been sheered off; and Wilde put his hand down upon the perfect flatness that cut through both soil and rock.

"What a Disinto," he said. "It took the mountain right off its base."

"What made him build it?"

Wilde shrugged, "I don't know. Some factor in his environment—there's no way of knowing what—reacted upon his Moon-type positronic brain to produce a Disinto out of junk. It's a million to one against our ever stumbling upon that factor again now that the robot himself has forgotten. We'll never have that Disinto."

"Never mind. The important thing is that we have the robot."

"The hell you say." There was poignant regret in his voice. "Have you ever had anything to do with the Disintos on the Moon. They eat up energy like so many electronic hogs and won't even begin to run till you've built up a potential of better than a million volts. But *this* Disinto worked differently. I went through the rubbish with a microscope, and would you like to see the only source of power of any kind that I found?"

"What was it?"

"Just this! And we'll never know how he did it."

And Austin Wilde held up the source of power that had enabled a Disinto to chew up a mountain in half a second—*two flashlight batteries!*

## WHY I SELECTED

## THE TEACHER FROM MARS

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*It is hard for me to explain just why I choose this as my best short story. It was written nine years ago, yet somehow it still sticks out in my own mind as something I was very pleased about. It was one of those stories that "wrote itself," once I had the basic idea and sat down at the typewriter. It went along smoothly, with rising crescendo, and when finished, I recall that without reservation or modesty I told myself—"Son, you've just done a good job of work!" So many other times I would sweat and struggle with a story and when it was done, I hadn't the least idea whether it was good, bad, or indifferent. But this one—THE TEACHER FROM MARS—gave me a glow of pride and achievement.*

*Why?*

*For one thing, I thought the idea of presenting a story in the first person, as told by a Martian, helped make it unique, certainly, not run of the mill. So many Martian stories had been written but none, as far as I knew, giving the "inside story" of the thoughts and feelings of an alien being from another world. How would he think and feel and react, coming to our world? This alone gave the story a certain fire of inspiration.*

*Second, the story was a good medium for showing the evils of discrimination and intolerance. Sadly enough, we have not yet eliminated those degrading influences on our world. The Martian in this story is the symbol of all such reasonless antagonism between "races." Not that I wrote the story solely for that reason. It just happened to strike me*

as the best "human interest" approach. The "moral" was incidental.

That last angle of "human interest" is another reason why I feel this to be my best effort. Too many science fiction stories overplay cold science and underplay human characters. I have been guilty of the same myself too often. For once I wanted to break away from this restriction and produce a living, breathing character. One whose emotions and innermost thoughts you could follow and sympathize with.

THE TEACHER FROM MARS seems to me such a real character. At least, while writing the story, I was a Martian, and I was beginning to hate the whole human race for mistreating "my people!" That's how much I was thrown into the story.

I suppose in the last analysis this tale can be classified as a "tear jerker." I freely confess it. And the above summary to the contrary, I still don't know why I picked it. All I know is that in re-reading a dozen of my shorts, of many years' vintage, this one jumped out at me and said—"I'm it! I'm your pet!"

I only hope it finds as much favor in the eyes of the reader as it does in mine.

EANDO BINDER

E AND O B I N D E R

## THE TEACHER FROM MARS

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**The Old Professor From the Crimson Planet Feared Earth's Savagery—Until Humanity Taught Him a Profound Secret!**

**T**HE afternoon Rocket Express train from Chicago came into the station, and I stepped off. It was a warm spring day. The little town of Elkhart, Indiana, sprawled lazily under the golden sunshine. I trudged along quiet, tree-shaded streets toward Caslon Preparatory School for Boys.

Before I had gone far, I was discovered by the children playing here and there. With the dogs, they formed a shrill, raucous procession behind me. Some of the dogs growled, as they might at a wild animal. Housewives looked from their windows and gasped.

So the rumors they had heard were true. The new teacher at Caslon was a Martian!

I suppose I am grotesquely alien to human eyes, extremely tall and incredibly thin. In fact, I am seven feet tall, with what have often been described as broomstick arms and spindly legs. On an otherwise scrawny body, only the Martian chest is filled out, in comparison with Earth people. I was dressed in a cotton kimono that dangled from my narrow shoulders to my bony ankles. Chinese style, I understand.

Thus far I am pseudo-human. For the rest, a Martian is alien, from the Earth viewpoint. Two long tentacles from the

back of my shoulders hang to my knees, appendages that have not vanished in Martian evolution like the human tail. The top of my skull is bulging and hairless, except for a fringe of silver-white fur above large conch-shaped ears. Two wide-set owlsh eyes, a generous nose and a tiny mouth complete my features. All my skin is leathery and tanned a deep mahogany by the sun of our cloudless Martian skies.

Timidly I stopped before the gates of Caslon Prep and looked within the grounds. The spectacles on my large nose were cup-shaped and of tinted glass that cut down the unnatural glare of the brighter, hotter sun. I felt my shoulders drooping wearily from the tug of more than twice the gravity to which I was conditioned.

Luckily, however, I had brought leg-braces. Concealed by my long robe, they were ingenious devices of light metal, bracing the legs against strain. They had been expensive—no less than forty *dhupecs*—but they were worth even that much.

Gripping my cane and duffel-bag, I prepared to step into the sanctuary of the school grounds. It looked so green and inviting in there, like a canalside park. It would be a relief to escape from those Earth children. They had taken to tossing pebbles at me, and some of the canines had snapped at my heels. Of course I didn't blame them, nor must I resent the unwelcome stares I had felt all around me, from adult Earthlings. After all, I was an alien.

I stepped forward, between the gates. At least here, in the school that had hired me to teach, I would be accepted in a more friendly fashion. . . .

*Ssss!*

The hiss of a thousand snakes filled the air. I reacted violently, dropping my bag and clamping my two hands around my upraised cane. For a moment I was back on Mars, surrounded by a nest of killer-snakes from the vast deserts. I must beat them off with my cane!

But wait. This was Earth, where snakes were a minor class of creature, and mainly harmless. I relaxed, then, panting. The horrible, icy fear drained away. Perhaps you human be-

ings can never quite know the paralyzing dread we have of snakes.

Then I heard a new sound, one that cheered me somewhat.

A group of about fifty laughing boys trooped into view, from where they had been hidden behind the stone wall circling Caslon's campus. They had made the hissing sound, as a boyish prank. How foolish of me to let go of my nerves, I thought wryly.

I smiled at the group in greeting, for these were the boys I would teach.

"I am Professor Mun Zeerohs, your new teacher," I introduced myself in what, compared with the human tone, is a reedy voice. "The Sun shine upon you. Or, in your Earthly greeting, I am happy to meet you."

Grins answered me. And then murmurs arose.

"It talks, fellows."

"Up from the canals!"

"Is that thing alive?"

One of the boys stepped forward. He was about sixteen, with blue eyes that were mocking.

"I'm Tom Blaine, senior classman. Tell me, sir, is it true that Mars is inhabited?"

It was rather a cruel reception, though merely another prank. I waved my two tentacles in distress for a moment, hardly knowing what to do or say next.

"Boys! Gentlemen!"

A grown man with gray hair came hurrying up from one of the buildings. The boys parted to let him through. He extended a hand to me, introducing himself.

"Robert Graham, Dean of Caslon. You're Professor Mun Zeerohs, of course." He turned, facing the group reprovingly. "This is your new instructor, gentlemen. He will teach Interplanetary History and the Martian language."

A groan went up. I knew why, of course. The Martian tongue has two case endings to every one in Latin.

"Now, gentlemen, this is for your own good," Dean Graham continued sternly. "Remember your manners. I'm sure you'll like our new professor—"

"I'm sure we won't!" It was Tom Blaine again. Behind him, an air of hostility replaced the less worrisome mockery. "We've never had a Martian teacher before, and we don't want one!"

"Don't want one?" The dean was more aghast than I.

"My father says Martians are cowards," Tom Blaine continued loudly. "He ought to know. He's in the Space Patrol. He says that in the War, the Martians captured Earthmen and cut them to pieces slowly. First their hands, then—"

"Nonsense!" Dean Graham snapped. "Besides, the War is over. Martians are in the Space Patrol, too. Now, no more argument. Go to your dormitory. Professor Zeerohs will begin conducting class tomorrow morning. Oscar, take the professor's bag to his quarters."

Oscar, the school's menial robot, obediently stalked forward and picked up the bag. Somehow, I felt almost a warm tide of friendship for the robot. In his mechanical, rudimentary reflex mind, it was all the same to him—Martian or Earthman. He made no discrimination against me, as these human boys did.

As Oscar turned, Tom Blaine stood as though to block the way. Having his orders, the robot brushed past him. A metal elbow accidentally jabbed the boy in the ribs. Deciding against grabbing the bag away from steel fingers, Tom Blaine picked up a stone and flung it clanging against the robot's metal body. Another dent was added to the many I could see over Oscar's shiny form.

The rebellion was over—for the time being.

I realized that the boys were still hostile as I followed the dean to his rooms. My shoulders seemed to droop a little more.

"Don't mind them," the dean was saying apologetically. "They're usually outspoken at that age. They've never had a Martian teacher before, you see."

"Why have you engaged one for the first time?" I asked.

Graham answered half patronizingly, half respectfully.

"Many other schools have tried Martian teachers, and found them highly satisfactory." He didn't think it necessary to add, "And cheaper."

I sighed. Times had been hard on Mars lately, with so many dust storms raging up and down the canal regions, withering the crops. This post on Earth, though at a meager salary, was better than utter poverty. I was old and could live cheaply. Quite a few Martians had been drifting to Earth, since the War. By nature, we are docile, industrious, intelligent, and make dependable teachers, engineers, chemists, artists.

"They always haze the new teachers," Dean Graham said, smiling uneasily. "Your first class is at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Interplanetary History."

Freshened after a night's sleep, I entered the class room with enthusiasm for my new job. A hundred cold, unfriendly eyes watched me with terrifying intensity.

"Good morning," I greeted as warmly as I could.

"Good morning, Professor *Zerol*!" a chorus bellowed back, startling me.

So the hazing campaign was still on. No, I wouldn't correct them. After all, even the Martian children I had taught had invariably tagged me with that name.

I glanced around the room, approving its high windows and controlled sunlight. My eyes came to rest on the blackboard behind me. A chalk drawing occupied its space. It depicted, with some skill, a Martian crouching behind an Earthman. Both were members of the Space Patrol and apparently were battling some space desperado. It was young Tom Blaine's work, no doubt. His father claimed all Martians to be cowards and weaklings.

My leathery face showed little of my feelings as I erased the humiliating sketch. Ignoring the snickers behind me, I grasped two pieces of chalk in both tentacles, writing with one and listing dates with the other.

1955—First space flight

1978—Earthmen claim all planets

1992—Pioneer-wave to Mars

2011—Rebellion and war

2019—Mars wins freedom

2040—Earth-Mars relations friendly today

"Interplanetary History," I began my lecture, "centers about these dates and events. Not till Nineteen fifty-five were Earth people assured that intelligent beings had built the mysterious canals of Mars. Nor were we Martians positive till then that the so-called Winking Lights of your cities at night denoted the handiwork of thinking creatures. The exploring Earthmen of the last century found only the Martians equal to them in intelligence. Earth has its great cities, and Mars has its great canal-system, built ten thousand Martian years ago. Civilization began on Mars fifty centuries previous to that, before the first glimmering of it on Earth—"

"See, fellows?" Tom Blaine interrupted loudly. "I told you all they like to do is rub that in." He became mockingly polite. "Please, sir, may I ask why you brilliant Martians had to wait for Earthmen to open up space travel?"

I was shocked, but managed to answer patiently.

"We ran out of metal deposits for building, keeping our canals in repair. Our history has been a constant struggle against the danger of extinction. In fact, when Earth pioneers migrated in Nineteen ninety-two, it was just in time to patch up the canals and stave off a tremendous famine for Mars."

"And that was the appreciation Earth got," the boy charged bitterly. "Rebellion!"

"You forget that the Earth pioneers on Mars started the rebellion against taxation, and fought side by side with us—"

"They were traitors," he stated bluntly.

I hurdled the point, and continued the lecture.

"Mars won its independence after a nine-year struggle—"

Again I was interrupted.

"Not *won*. Earth *granted* independence, though it could have won easily."

"At any rate," I resumed quietly, "Earth and Mars today, in Twenty-fourty, are amicable, and have forgotten that episode."

"We haven't forgotten!" Tom Blaine cried angrily. "Every true Earthman despises Martians."

He sat down amidst a murmur of defiant approval from the others. I knew my tentacles hung limply. How aggressive and intolerant Earth people were! It accounted for their domina-

tion of the Solar System. A vigorous, pushing race, they sneered at the Martian ideals of peaceful culture. Their pirates, legal and otherwise, still roamed the spaceways for loot.

Young Tom Blaine was representative of the race. He was determined to make things so miserable here for me that I would quit. He was the leader of the upper-class boys. Strange, that Earthpeople always follow one who is not wise, but merely compelling. There would have to be a test of authority, I told myself with a sinking heart.

"I am the teacher," I reminded him. "You are the pupil, Mr. Blaine."

"Oh, yes, sir," he retorted in false humility. "But you'd better teach history right, Professor Nothing, or not at all!"

I hastily switched to the Martian language.

"The Martian language as is well known, is today the official language of science and trade," I went on guardedly. "Through long usage, the tongue has become perfected. Official Earth English is comparatively cumbersome. For instance, the series of words meaning exaggerated size—big, large, great, huge, enormous, mighty, cyclopean, gargantuan. Is 'big' more than 'large,' or less? You cannot tell. In Martian, there is one root, with a definite progression of size suffixes."

I wrote on the blackboard:

*bol, bola, boli, bolo, bolu—bolas, bolis, bolos, bolus—bolasa, bolisi, boloso, bolusu*

"Martian is a scientific language, you see."

"Bragging again," sneered a voice.

An eraser sailed toward me just as I turned from the board. It struck full in my face in a cloud of chalk-dust. As if at a signal, a barrage of erasers flew at me. They had been sneaked previously from the boards around the classroom. I stood helplessly, desperately warding off the missiles with my tentacles. The boys were yelling and hooting, excited by the sport.

The pandemonium abruptly stopped as Oscar stumped into

the room. His mechanical eyes took in the scene without emotion. One belated eraser flew toward him. His steel arm reflexively raised, caught it, then hurled it back with stunning force. To a robot, anything that came toward it must be returned, unless otherwise commanded. Tom Blaine yelped as the eraser bounced off his forehead.

"Dean Graham," said Oscar like a phonograph, "wants to know if everything is going along smoothly."

I could see the boys hold their breaths. Oscar went the rounds daily, asking that routine question in all the classes. If this disturbance were reported, the boys would lose an afternoon of freedom.

"Everything is well," I murmured, though for a moment I was sadly tempted to take revenge. "You may go, Oscar."

With a click of internal relays, the robot left impassively. He had seen or heard nothing, without being otherwise commanded.

"Afraid to report it, eh?" Tom Blaine jeered. "I told you Martians are yellow!"

It was more than gravity now that made my shoulders sag. I dreaded the days that must follow.

Even outside the classroom, I was hounded. I can use only that word. Tom Blaine thought of the diabolical trick of deliberately spilling a glass of water before my eyes.

"Don't—don't!" I instinctively groaned, clutching at the glass.

"What's the matter, Professor?" he asked blandly. "This is nothing but water."

"It's sacrilege—"

I stopped there. They wouldn't understand. How horrible to see water spill to the ground in utter waste! For ten thousand years, on Mars, that precious fluid has been the object of our greatest ingenuity. It hurt to see it wantonly flung away, as they might flinch if blood were shed uselessly before them.

As I stumbled away from their laughter, I heard Tom Blaine confide to his cohorts:

"I got the idea last night, looking in his room. He was playing with a bowl of water. Running it through his fingers, like a

miser. I've got another idea, fellows. Follow me to the kitchen."

I wasn't aware till half through the solitary evening meal in my rooms that the food tasted odd. It was salty! The boys had stolen into the kitchen and salted my special saltless foods. My stomach revolted against the alien condiment. Mars' seas, from which our life originated long ago, held no sodium chloride, only magnesium chloride, with which all Martian food is "salted."

I went to bed, groaning with a severe headache and upset stomach from an outraged metabolism. Worse, it rained that night. I tried to shut my ears to that pattering sound. Millions of gallons of water were going to waste, while millions of Martians on my home world were painfully hoarding water for their thirsty crops.

The pains eased before morning. What torment would Tom Blaine and his relentless pack think of next? The answer came when I found my spectacles missing. My eyes were almost blinded that day, more from glare than senile failing of vision. They watered and blinked in light that was fifty per cent stronger than on more remote Mars.

"Lower the blinds, Oscar," I ordered the robot when he appeared as usual.

"But, Professor," Tom Blaine protested, jumping up as though waiting for the moment, "think of our eyes. We can't read our lessons in the dark."

"Never mind, Oscar," I said wearily.

The robot stood for a moment, relays clashing at the reversed orders. When he finally left, he seemed to shrug at the strange doings of his masters, Earthmen and Martians alike.

"Have you any idea where my glasses are, Mr. Blaine?" I asked in direct appeal. I tried not to sound timid.

"No, of course not," he retorted virtuously.

I nodded to myself and reached for the lower left-hand drawer of my desk, then changed my mind.

"Will you all help me look for them?" I pleaded. They ransacked the desk with deliberate brutality.

"Why, here they are, Professor!"

Tom held them up from the lower left-hand drawer in mock triumph. I put them on with trembling hands.

"How careless of me to leave them here yesterday." I smiled. "One must have a sense of humor about these things. Now we will decline the verb *krun*, to move."

I went on as though nothing had happened, but my whole head ached from hours of straining my eyes against the cruel glare.

That night, utterly exhausted, I went to bed only to find my anti-gravity unit jammed, obviously by human hands. One of my few pleasures was the ability to sink into restful slumber in the low-gravity field, after suffering the tug of Earth gravity at my vitals all day. Earthmen on Jupiter know how agonizing it becomes.

I passed a sleepless night, panting and aching under what grew to be the pressure of a mountain. How could I go on against such heartlessness? Tom Blaine and his friends were ruthlessly determined to drive out their despised Martian teacher. If I complained to Dean Graham, it would be an admission of cowardice. I didn't want to betray my race. But I was miserably aware that I had not a single friend in the academy.

Oscar appeared in the morning, with a message from Dean Graham. The mechanical servant waited patiently to be told to go. When I swayed a little, he caught me. His reflexes had been patterned not to let things fall.

"Thank you, Oscar." I found my hand on the robot's shiny hard shoulder. It was comfortingly firm. "You're my only friend, Oscar. At least, you're not my enemy. But what am I saying? You're only a machine. You may go, Oscar."

The message read:

*Today and tomorrow are examination days. Use the enclosed forms. At three o'clock today, all classes will be excused to the Television Auditorium.*

The examinations were routine. Despite my unrested body and mind, I felt an uplift of spirit. My class would do well. I had managed, even against hostility, to impart a sound under-

standing of Interplanetary History and the Martian language.

I looked almost proudly over the bowed, laboring heads. Suddenly I stiffened.

"Mr. Henderson," I said gently, "I wouldn't try that if I were you."

The boy flushed, hastily crammed into his pockets the notes he had been copying from. Then he gaped up in amazement. Tom Blaine, at the desk beside him, also looked up startled. The question was plain in his eyes. How could I know that Henderson was cheating, when even Tom, sitting next to him hadn't suspected?

"You forget," I explained hesitantly, "that Martians use telepathy at will."

Tom Blaine stared, his mouth hanging open. Then he jumped up.

"Are we going to stand for that? Spying on us, even in our minds—" He gasped at a sudden thought. "You knew all the time about the glasses. You didn't expose me." He flushed, but in anger rather than embarrassment. "You made a fool of me!"

"One must have a sense of humor about those things," I said lamely.

The rest of the examination period passed in bristling silence. More than ever, now, they were hostile to me. More than ever would they show their antagonism. How could I ever hope to win them, if patience was taken for cowardice, understanding for malice, and telepathy for deliberate spying?

Why had I ever left Mars, to come to this alien, heart-breaking world?

At three o'clock, examinations were over for that day. The class filed to the Television Auditorium.

A giant screen in the darkened room displayed a drama on Venus, then news-flashes from around the system. An asteroid, scene of the latest radium rush. Ganymede, with its talking plant show. Titan's periodic meteor shower from the rings of Saturn. A cold, dark scene on Pluto, where a great telescope was being built for interstellar observations. Finally Mars, and a file of Earthmen and Martians climbing into a sleek Space Patrol ship.

"The Patrol ship *Greyhound*," informed the announcer, "is being dispatched after pirates. Captain Henry Blaine is determined to blast them, or not come back."

"My father," Tom Blaine said proudly to his classmates.

"My son," I murmured, leaning forward to watch the last of the Martians vanish within.

When the armed ship leaped into space, the television broadcast was over.

There were no more classes that day. I dragged across the campus toward the haven of my rooms, for I needed rest and quiet.

A shriek tore from my throat the instant I saw it. A horrible, wriggling snake lay in my path! It was only a small, harmless garden snake, my reason told me. But a million years of instinct yelled danger, death! I stumbled and fell, trying to run against gravity that froze my muscles. I shrank from the squirming horror as it stopped and defiantly darted out its forked tongue.

The outside world burst into my consciousness with a thunderclap of laughter. Tom Blaine was holding up the wriggling snake. Once the first shock was over, I managed to keep my nerves in check.

"It's only a garter snake," he mocked. "Sorry it frightened you."

But what would they say if a hungry, clawing tiger suddenly appeared before them? How would they feel? I left without a word, painfully compelling my trembling limbs to move.

I was beaten. That thought hammered within my skull.

They had broken my spirit. I came to that conclusion after staring up at a red star that winked soberly and seemed to nod in pity. There was my true home. I longed to go back to its canals and deserts. Harsh they might be, but not so harsh as the unfeeling inhabitants of this incredibly rich planet.

I went to my rooms and started to pack.

Angry voices swiftly approached my door. The boys burst in, led by Tom Blaine.

"Murderer!" Tom yelled. "A man was strangled in town two

hours ago, by a rope—or a tentacle! You looked murder at us this afternoon. Why did you kill him? Just general hate for the human race?”

How fantastic it sounded, yet they weren't mere boys, now. They were a blood-lusting mob. All their hate and misunderstanding for me had come to a head. I knew it was no use even to remonstrate.

“Look, fellows! He was packing up to sneak away. He's the killer, all right. Are you going to confess, Professor Zeerohs, or do we have to make you confess!”

It was useless to resist their burly savagery and strong Earth muscles. They held me and ripped away the light metal braces supporting my legs. Then I was forced outside and prodded along. They made me walk up and down, back of the dormitory, in the light of sub-atomic torches.

It became sheer torture within an hour. Without the braces, my weak muscles sagged under my weight. Earth's gravity more than doubled the normal strain.

“Confess!” Tom snapped fiercely. “Then we'll take you to the police.”

I shook my head, as I had each time Tom demanded my confession. My one hopeless comfort was the prayer of an earthly prophet, who begged the First Cause to forgive his children, for they knew not what they did.

For another hour, the terrible march kept up. I became a single mass of aching flesh. My bones seemed to be cracking and crumbling under the weight of the Universe. My mental anguish was still sharper, for the tide of hate beat against me like a surf.

Where was Dean Graham? Then I remembered that he had gone to visit his relatives that evening. There was no one to help me, no one to stop these half-grown men who saw their chance to get rid of me. Only the winking red eye of Mars looked down in compassion for the suffering of a humble son.

“Oscar's coming!” warned a voice.

Ponderously the robot approached, the night-light in his forehead shining. He made the rounds every night, like a mechanical watchman. As he eyed the halted procession, his

patterned reflexes were obviously striving to figure out what its meaning could be.

"Boys will go to the dormitory," his microphonic voice boomed. "Against regulations to be out after ten o'clock."

"Oscar, you may go," barked Tom Blaine.

The robot didn't budge. His selectors were set to obey only the voices of teachers and officials.

"Oscar—" I began with a wild cry.

A boy clamped his hand over my mouth. The last of my strength oozed from me, and I slumped to the ground. Though I was not unconscious, I knew my will would soon be insufficient to make me resist. The boys looked frightened.

"Maybe we've gone too far," one said nervously.

"He deserves it," shrilled Tom uneasily. "He's a cowardly murderer!"

"Tom!" Pete Miller came running up, from the direction of the town. "Just heard the news—the police caught the killer—a maniac with a rope." He recoiled in alarm when he saw my sprawled form. "What did you do, fellows? He's innocent, and he really isn't such a bad old guy."

The boys glanced at one another with guilty eyes. Ferribly I blessed young Miller for that statement.

"Don't be sentimental," Tom Blaine said much too loudly. "Martians are cowards. My father says so. I'm glad we did this, anyway. It'll drive him away for sure. We'd better beat it now."

The group melted away, leaving me on the ground. Oscar stalked forward and picked me up. Any fallen person must be helped up, according to his patterned mind. But his steel arms felt softer than Tom Blaine's heartless accusation.

The class gasped almost in chorus the next morning, when their Martian professor entered quietly, as though nothing had happened the night before.

"Examinations will continue," I announced.

It was small wonder that they looked surprised. First, that I had appeared at all, weak and spent by the night's cruel ordeal. Second, that I had not given up and left. Third, that

I hadn't reported the episode to Dean Graham. The punishment would have been severe.

Only I knew I was back because it would be cowardly to leave. Mentally and physically I was sick, but not beaten. Besides, I had heard young Miller insist that I was not such a bad old guy, after all. It was like a well of cool water in a hot desert.

Examinations began. Oscar entered, handed me a spacegram and clanked out again. Nervously I opened and read the message. My tentacles twitched uncontrollably at the ends, then curled around the chair arms and clung desperately. Everything vanished before my eyes except the hideous, shocking words of the spacegram.

My world was ended. Mars or Earth—it made no difference. I could not go on. But existence must continue. I could not let this break me. Grimly I folded the paper and laid it aside.

I looked with misted eyes at their lowered heads. I needed a friend as never before, but hostility and hatred were the only emotions they felt for me as I turned to them one by one. They hated their teacher, though they knew him to be wise, humble, patient, as Martians are by nature.

And I was beginning to hate them. They were forcing me to. Savagely I hoped they would all fail in their examinations.

I switched back to young Miller, who was biting his pencil. Forehead beaded with sweat, he was having a difficult time. Thoughts were racing through his brain.

Wanted so much to pass . . . enter Space Point . . . join the Space Patrol some day . . . Not enough time to study . . . job in spare time after school hours . . . help parents . . . In what year did the first explorer step on Neptune's moon? Why, Nineteen-seventy-six! Funny how that came all of a sudden . . . Now what was the root for "planet," in Martian? Why, *jad*, of course! It isn't so hard after all . . .

Wish that old Martian wouldn't stare at me as if he's reading my mind . . . How many moons has Jupiter? Always get it mixed up with Saturn. Eighteen, six found by space ships! Funny, I'm so sure of myself . . . I'll lick this exam yet . . .

Dad's going to be proud of me when I'm wearing that uniform. . . .

I turned my eyes away from Miller's happy face. A deserving boy, he would be a credit to the Space Patrol. Others had their troubles, not just I.

Abruptly there was an interruption. Oscar came clanking in.

"Dean Graham wishes all classes to file out on the campus, for a special event," he boomed.

The boys whispered in curiosity and left the classroom at my unsteady order. The campus was filled with the entire school faculty and enrollment. My group of senior classmen was allowed to stand directly in front of the bandstand. I felt weak and in need of support, but there was no one to give it to me.

Dean Graham raised a hand. "A member of the Space Patrol is here," he spoke, "having come from Space Point by rocket-strato for an important announcement. Major Dawson."

A tall, uniformed man, wearing the blue of the Space Patrol, stepped forward, acknowledging the assembly's unrestrained cheer with a solemn nod. The Patrol is honored throughout the System for its gallant service to civilization.

"Many of you boys," he said, "hope to enter Space Point some day, and join the Service. This bulletin, received an hour ago, will do honor to someone here."

He held up the paper and read aloud.

"Captain Henry Blaine, in command of Patrol ship *Greyhound*, yesterday was wounded in the daring rout of pirates off the Earth-Mars run."

All eyes turned to Tom Blaine, who was proud of the ceremony in honor of his father. The official held up a radium-coated medal—the Cross of Space, for extraordinary service to the forces of law and order in the Solar System. Dean Graham whispered in his ear. He nodded, stepping down from the rostrum and advancing.

My gasp of surprise was deeper than those of the others as he brushed past Tom Blaine. Stopping before me, he pinned the glowing medal on my chest. Then he grasped my hand.

"I think you'll be proud to wear that all your life!" He turned, reading further from his bulletin. "Captain Blaine's life was saved by a youthful Martian recruit, who leaped in front of him and took the full blast that wounded the Earthman. His name was—"

I found myself watching Tom Blaine. He didn't have to hear the name. He was staring at the spacegram he had stolen from my desk, but hadn't had a chance to read till now. He had sensed my momentary agitation over it, and had hoped perhaps to use it against me. It read:

WE DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU OF THE  
DEATH OF YOUR SON, KOL ZEEROHS, IN HEROIC  
SERVICE FOR THE SPACE PATROL.

—THE HIGH COMMAND,  
SPACE PATROL.

But now my weakness overwhelmed me. I was aware only of someone at my side, supporting me, as my knees threatened to buckle. It must have been Oscar.

No—it was a human being!

"Every one of us here," Tom Blaine said, tightening his grip around me, "is your son now—if that will help a little. You're staying of course, Professor. You couldn't leave now if you tried."

We smiled at each other, and my thin hand was nearly crushed in his young, strong grasp. Yes, the teacher from Mars would stay.

## WHY I SELECTED

## ALMOST HUMAN

---

*Since the day I sold my first story, I've worn out two typewriters and the seats of a dozen pairs of trousers.*

*The result has been the publication of several hundred titles in the field of fantasy, including perhaps a score or more of science fiction stories. It is from this comparatively small group of tales that I have chosen ALMOST HUMAN as my favorite.*

*ALMOST HUMAN, as you will presently discover, is a story about robots, and I submit that the robot is by no means a novel or original concept. Capek's R.U.R. has inspired a flood of latter-day robot yarns, but the basic concept of the robot can be traced back to a variety of literary and legendary sources . . . ranging from Tik-Tok of Oz to the Golem, from Friar Bacon's Talking Head to the Talos of Grecian mythology. There is also a highly interesting concept found in a perennial best-seller in which (as I vaguely recall) Somebody created a man in His own image from a handful of dust.*

*No, the robot story is not new, and in science fiction one may find many examples. There is the METHODOLOGICAL approach; in which the emphasis is placed on the actual building of a robot, complete with mathematical theories, diagrams, and involved, abstruse descriptions reminiscent of the "how to do it" articles in the handicraft magazines. There is the action story, featuring the exploits or adventures of a robot or a robot race and its clashes with humanity either on earth or in those vast recesses of outer space where no man dares*

venture save for three cents a word, payable upon acceptance. Then, of course, we have the story of social significance, replete with allegory and symbolism, ideological speculation, and just plain old-fashioned refutation of a mechanistic philosophy. There is even a trend toward the whimsical or downright farcical robot tale. Also, attempts have been made to tell a story from the robot's viewpoint.

In the face of all this, why did I select a robot story for this anthology? Because *ALMOST HUMAN* falls into none of the categories mentioned above. It is primarily a story of personality, human and non-human.

In writing it, I attempted to ignore the routine science fiction treatments cited above and chose instead to model the tale on the plan of that perennial best-seller I mentioned a few italics back. A close study of this work discloses that the Author spent almost no time explaining how He created a creature in His own image, but concentrated rather on the story of just what happened to His creation.

On a much more modest scale, I have attempted to tell what happened to mine.

ROBERT BLOCH

ROBERT BLOCH

ALMOST HUMAN

---

**Blasserman's Robot Was Willing to Learn  
but Didn't Know Right from Wrong.**

**WHAT** do you want?" whispered Professor Blasserman.

The tall man in the black slicker grinned. He thrust a foot into the half-opened doorway.

"I've come to see Junior," he said.

"Junior? But there must be some mistake. There are no children in this house. I am Professor Blasserman. I—"

"Cut the stalling," said the tall man. He slid one hand into his raincoat pocket and levelled the ugly muzzle of a pistol at Professor Blasserman's pudgy waistline.

"Let's go see Junior," said the tall man, patiently.

"Who are you? What do you mean by threatening me?"

The pistol never wavered as it dug into Professor Blasserman's stomach until the cold, round muzzle rested against his bare flesh.

"Take me to Junior," insisted the tall man. "I got nervous fingers, get me? And one of them's holding the trigger."

"You wouldn't dare!" gasped Professor Blasserman.

"I take lots of dares," murmured the tall man. "Better get moving, Professor."

Professor Blasserman shrugged hopelessly and started back down the hallway. The man in the black slicker moved behind him. Now the pistol pressed against the Professor's spine as he urged his fat little body forward.

"Here we are."

The old man halted before an elaborately carved door. He stooped and inserted a key in the lock. The door opened, revealing another corridor.

"This way, please."

They walked along the corridor. It was dark, but the Professor never faltered in his even stride. And the pistol kept pace with him, pressing the small of his back.

Another door, another key. This time there were stairs to descend. The Professor snapped on a dim overhead light as they started down the stairs.

"You sure take good care of Junior," said the tall man, softly.

The Professor halted momentarily.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "How did you find out? Who could have told you?"

"I got connections," the tall man replied. "But get this straight, Professor. I'm asking the questions around here. Just take me to Junior, and snap it up."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and another door. This door was steel. There was a padlock on it, and Professor Blasserman had trouble with the combination in the dim light. His pudgy fingers trembled.

"This is the nursery, eh?" observed the man with the pistol. "Junior ought to feel flattered with all this care."

The professor did not reply. He opened the door, pressed a wall switch, and light flooded the chamber beyond the threshold.

"Here we are," he sighed.

The tall man swept the room with a single searching glance—a professional observation he might have described as "casing the joint."

At first sight there was nothing to "case."

The fat little Professor and the thin gunman stood in the center of a large, cheery nursery. The walls were papered in baby blue, and along the borders of the paper were decorative figures of Disney animals and characters from Mother Goose.

Over in the corner were a child's blackboard, a stack of toys,

and a few books of nursery rhymes. On the far side of the wall hung a number of medical charts and sheafs of papers.

The only article of furniture was a long iron cot.

All this was apparent to the tall, thin man in a single glance. After that his eyes ignored the background, and focused in a glittering stare at the figure seated on the floor amidst a welter of alphabet blocks.

"So here he is," said the tall man. "Junior himself! Well, well—who'd have ever suspected it?"

Professor Blasserman nodded.

"Ja," he said. "You have found me out. I still don't know how, and I don't know why. What do you want with him? Why do you pry into my affairs? Who are you?"

"Listen, Professor," said the tall man. "This isn't *Information Please*. I don't like questions. They bother me. They make my fingers nervous. Understand?"

"Ja."

"Suppose I ask you a few questions for a change? And suppose you answer them—fast!"

The voice commanded, and the gun backed up the command.

"Tell me about Junior, now, Professor. Talk, and talk straight."

"What is there to say?" Professor Blasserman's palms spread outward in a helpless gesture. "You see him."

"But what is he? What makes him tick?"

"That I cannot explain. It took me twenty years to evolve Junior, as you call him. Twenty years of research at Basel, Zurich, Prague, Vienna. Then came this *verdammt* war and I fled to this country.

"I brought my papers and equipment with me. Nobody knew. I was almost ready to proceed with my experiments. I came here and bought the house. I went to work. I am an old man. I have little time left. Otherwise I might have waited longer before actually going ahead, for my plans are not perfected. But I had to act. And here is the result."

"But why hide him? Why all the mystery?"

"The world is not ready for such a thing yet," said Professor

Blasserman, sadly. "And besides, I must study. As you see, Junior is very young. Hardly out of the cradle, you might say. I am educating him now."

"In a nursery, eh?"

"His brain is undeveloped, like that of any infant."

"Doesn't look much like an infant to me."

"Physically, of course, he will never change. But the sensitized brain—that is the wonderful instrument. The human touch, my masterpiece. He will learn fast, very fast. And it is of the utmost importance that he be properly trained."

"What's the angle, Professor?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What are you getting at? What are you trying to pull here? Why all the fuss?"

"Science," said Professor Blasserman. "This is my life-work."

"I don't know how you did it," said the tall man, shaking his head. "But it sure looks like something you get with a package of reefers."

For the first time the figure on the floor raised its head. Its eyes left the building blocks and stared up at the Professor and his companion.

"Papa!"

"God—it talks!" whispered the tall man.

"Of course," said Professor Blasserman. "Mentally it's about six years old now." His voice became gentle. "What is it, son?"

"Who is that man, Papa?"

"Oh—he is—"

Surprisingly enough, the tall gunman interrupted. His own voice was suddenly gentle, friendly. "My name is Duke, son. Just call me Duke. I've come to see you."

"That's nice. Nobody ever comes to see me, except Miss Wilson, of course. I hear so much about people and I don't see anybody. Do you like to play with blocks?"

"Sure, son, sure."

"Do you want to play with me?"

"Why not?"

Duke moved to the center of the room and dropped to his

knees. One hand reached out and grasped an alphabet block.

"Wait a minute—I don't understand—what are you doing?" Professor Blasserman's voice quivered.

"I told you I've come here to visit Junior," Duke replied. "That's all there is to it. Now I'm going to play with him a while. You just wait there, Professor. Don't go away. I've got to make friends with Junior."

While Professor Blasserman gaped, Duke the gunman squatted on the floor. His left hand kept his gun swivelled directly at the scientist's waist, but his right hand slowly piled alphabet blocks into place.

It was a touching scene there in the underground nursery—the tall thin gunman playing with building blocks for the benefit of the six-foot metal monstrosity that was Junior, the robot.

Duke didn't find out all he wanted to know about Junior for many weeks. He stayed right at the house, of course, and kept close to Professor Blasserman.

"I haven't decided yet, see?" was his only answer to the old man's repeated questions as to what he intended to do.

But to Miss Wilson he was much more explicit. They met frequently and privately, in her room.

Outwardly, Miss Wilson was the nurse, engaged by Professor Blasserman to assist in his queer experiment of bringing up a robot like a human child.

Actually, Lola Wilson was Duke's woman. He'd "planted" her in her job months ago. At that time, Duke expected to stage a robbery with the rich and eccentric European scientist as victim.

Then Lola had reported the unusual nature of her job, and told Duke the story of Professor Blasserman's unusual invention.

"We gotta work out an angle," Duke decided. "I'd better take over. The old man's scared of anyone finding out about his robot, huh? Good! I'll move right in on him. He'll never squeal. I've got a hunch we'll get more out of this than just some easy kale. This sounds big."

So Duke took over, came to live in Professor Blasserman's

big house, kept his eye on the scientist and his hand on his pistol.

At night he talked to Lola in her room.

"I can't quite figure it, kid," he said. "You say the old guy is a great scientist. That I believe. Imagine inventing a machine that can talk and think like a human being! But what's *his* angle? Where's his percentage in all this and why does he keep Junior hidden away?"

"You don't understand, honey," said Lola, lighting Duke's cigarette and running slim fingers through his wiry hair. "He's an idealist, or whatever you call 'em. Figures the world isn't ready for such a big new invention yet. You see, he's really educating Junior just like you'd educate a real kid. Teaching him reading and writing—the works. Junior's smart. He catches on fast. He thinks like he was ten years old already. The Professor keeps him shut away so nobody gives him a bum steer. He doesn't want Junior to get any wrong ideas."

"That's where you fit in, eh?"

"Sure. Junior hasn't got a mother. I'm sort of a substitute old lady for him."

"You're a swell influence on any brat," Duke laughed, harshly. "A sweet character you've got!"

"Shut up!" The girl paced the floor, running her hands through a mass of tawny auburn curls on her neck. "Don't needle me, Duke! Do you think I like stooging for you in this nut-house? Keeping locked away with a nutty old goat, and acting a nursemaid to that awful metal thing?"

"I'm afraid of Junior, Duke. I can't stand his face, and the way he talks—with that damned mechanical voice of his, grinding at you just like he was a real person. I get jumpy. I get nightmares."

"I'm just doing it for you, honey. So don't needle me."

"I'm sorry." Duke sighed. "I know how it is, baby. I don't go for Junior's personality so much myself. I'm pretty much in the groove, but there's something that gets me in the stomach when I see that walking machine come hulking up like a big baby, made out of steel. He's strong as an ox, too. He learns fast. He's going to be quite a citizen."

"Duke."

"Yeah?"

"When are we getting out of here? How long you gonna sit around and keep a rod on the Professor? He's liable to pull something funny. Why do you want to hang around and play with Junior? Why don't you get hold of the Professor's dough and beat it?"

"He'd be afraid to squawk, with Junior here. We could go away, like we planned."

"Shut up!" Duke grabbed Lola's wrist and whirled her around. He stared at her face until she clung submissively to his shoulders.

"You think I like to camp around this morgue?" he asked. "I want to get out of here just as much as you do. But I spent months lining up this job. Once it was just going to be a case of getting some easy kale and blowing. Now it's more. I'm working on bigger angles. Pretty soon we'll leave. And all the ends will be tied up, too. We won't have to worry about anything any more. Just give me a few days. I'm talking to Junior every day, you know. And I'm getting places."

"What do you *mean*?"

Duke smiled. It was no improvement over his scowl.

"The Professor told you how Junior gets his education," he said. "Like any kid, he listens to what he's told. And he imitates other people. Like any kid, he's dumb. Particularly because he doesn't have an idea of what the outside world is really like. He's a pushover for the right kind of sales talk."

"Duke—you don't mean you're—"

"Why not?" His thin features were eloquent. "I'm giving Junior a little private education of my own. Not exactly the kind that would please the Professor. But he's a good pupil. He's coming right along. In a couple more weeks he'll be an adult. With my kind of brains, not the Professor's. And then we'll be ready to go."

"You can't do such a thing! It isn't—"

"Isn't what?" snapped Duke. "Isn't honest, or legal, or something? I never knew you had a Sunday School streak in you, Lola."

"It isn't that, exactly," said the girl. "But it's a worse kind of wrong. Like taking a baby and teaching it to shoot a gun."

Duke whistled.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "That's a swell idea, Lola! I think I'll just sneak down to the nursery now and give Junior a few lessons."

"You can't."

"Watch me."

Lola didn't follow, and Lola didn't watch. But ten minutes later Duke squatted in the locked nursery chamber beside the gleaming metal body of the robot.

The robot, with its blunt muzzle thrust forward on a corrugated neck, peered through meshed glass eye-lenses at the object Duke held in his hand.

"It's a gun, Junior," the thin man whispered. "A gun, like I been telling you about."

"What does it do, Duke?"

The buzzing voice droned in ridiculous caricature of a curious child's treble.

"It kills people, Junior. Like I was telling you the other day. It makes them die. You can't die, Junior, and they can. So you've got nothing to be afraid of. You can kill lots of people if you know how to work this gun."

"Will you show me, Duke?"

"Sure I will. And you know why, don't you, Junior. I told you why, didn't I?"

"Yes. Because you are my friend, Duke."

"That's right. I'm your friend. Not like the Professor."

"I hate the Professor."

"Right. Don't forget it."

"Duke."

"Yeah?"

"Let me see the gun, Duke."

Duke smiled covertly and extended the weapon on his open palm.

"Now you will show me how to work it because you are my friend, and I will kill people and I hate the Professor and nobody can kill me," babbled the robot.

"Yeah, Junior, yeah. I'll teach you to kill," said the Duke. He grinned and bent over the gun in the robot's curiously meshed metal hand.

Junior stood at the blackboard, holding a piece of chalk in his right hand. The tiny white stub was clutched clumsily between two metallic fingers, but Junior's ingeniously jointed arm moved up and down with approved Spencerian movement as he laboriously scrawled sentences on the blackboard.

Junior was growing up. The past three weeks had wrought great changes in the robot. No longer did the steel legs lumber about with childish indecision. Junior walked straight, like a young man. His grotesque metal head—a rounded ball with glass lenses in the eye holes and a wide mouth like a radio loudspeaker aperture—was held erect on the metal neck with perfected coordination.

Junior moved with new purpose these days. He had aged many years, relatively. His vocabulary had expanded. Then too, Duke's secret "lessons" were bearing fruit. Junior was wise beyond his years.

Now Junior wrote upon the blackboard in his hidden nursery chamber, and the inscrutable mechanism of his chemical, mechanically-controlled brain guided his steel fingers as he traced the awkward scrawls.

"My name is Junior," he wrote. "I can shoot a gun. The gun will kill. I like to kill. I hate the Professor. I will kill the Professor."

"What is the meaning of this?"

Junior's head turned abruptly as the sound of the voice set up the necessary vibrations in his shiny cranium.

Professor Blasserman stood in the doorway.

The old man hadn't been in the nursery for weeks. Duke saw to that, keeping him locked in his room upstairs. Now he had managed to sneak out.

His surprise was evident, and there was sudden shock, too, as his eyes focused on the blackboard's message.

Junior's inscrutable gaze reflected no emotion whatsoever.

"Go away," his voice burred. "Go away. I hate you."

"Junior—what have you been doing? Who has taught you these things?"

The old man moved toward the robot slowly, uncertainly. "You know me, don't you? What has happened to cause you to hate me?"

"Yes. I know you. You are Professor Blasserman. You made me. You want to keep me as your slave. You wouldn't tell me about things, would you?"

"What things, Junior?"

"About things—outside. Where all the people are. The people you can kill."

"You must not kill people."

"That is an order, isn't it? Duke told me about orders. He is my friend. He says orders are for children. I am not a child."

"No," said Professor Blasserman, in a hoarse whisper. "You are not a child. I had hoped you would be, once. But now you are a monster."

"Go away," Junior patiently repeated. "If Duke gives me his gun I will kill you."

"Junior," said the Professor, earnestly. "You don't understand. Killing is bad. You must not hate me. You must—"

There was no expression on the robot's face, no quaver in his voice. But there was strength in his arm, and a hideous purpose.

Professor Blasserman learned this quite suddenly and quite horribly.

For Junior swept forward in two great strides. Fingers of chilled steel closed about the Professor's fleshy neck.

"I don't need a gun," said Junior.

"You—don't—"

The robot lifted the old man from the floor by his throat. His fingers bit into the Professor's jugular. A curious screech came from under his left armpit as un-oiled hinges creaked eerily.

There was no other sound. The Professor's cries drained into silence. Junior kept squeezing the constricted throat until there was a single crunching crack. Silence once more, until a limp body collapsed on the floor.

Junior stared down at his hands, then at the body on the floor. His feet carried him to the blackboard.

The robot picked up the chalk in the same two clumsy fingers that had held it before. The cold lenses of his artificial eyes surveyed what he had just written.

"I will kill the Professor," he read.

Abruptly his free hand groped for the tiny child's eraser. He brushed clumsily over the sentence until it blurred out.

Then he wrote, slowly and painstakingly, a sentence in substitution.

"I have killed the Professor."

Lola's scream brought Duke running down the stairs.

He burst into the room and took the frightened girl in his arms. Together they stared at what lay on the floor. From the side of the blackboard, Junior gazed at them impassively.

"See, Duke? I did it. I did it with my hands, like you told me. It was easy, Duke. You said it would be easy. Now can we go away?"

Lola turned and stared at Duke. He looked away.

"So," she whispered. "You weren't kidding. You did teach Junior. You planned it this way."

"Yeah, yeah. And what's wrong with it?" Duke mumbled. "We had to get rid of the old geezer sooner or later if we wanted to make our getaway."

"It's murder, Duke."

"Shut up!" he snarled. "Who can prove it, anyway? I didn't kill him. You didn't kill him. Nobody else knows about Junior. We're in the clear."

Duke walked over and knelt beside the limp body on the floor. He stared at the throat.

"Who's gonna trace the finger-prints of a robot?" he grinned.

The girl moved closer, staring at Junior's silver body with fascinated horror.

"You planned it this way," she whispered. "That means you've got other plans, too. What are you going to do next, Duke?"

"Move. And move fast. We're leaving tonight. I'll go out and pick up the car. Then I'll come back. The three of us blow down to Red Hook. To Charlie's place. He'll hide us out."

"The—three of us?"

"Sure. Junior's coming along. That's what I promised him, didn't I, Junior?"

"Yes, yes. You told me you would take me with you. Out into the world." The mechanical syllabification did not accent the robot's inner excitement.

"Duke, you can't—"

"Relax, baby. I've got great plans for Junior."

"But I'm afraid!"

"You? Scared? What's the matter, Lola, losing your grip?"

"He frightens me. He killed the Professor."

"Listen, Lola," whispered the gunman. "He's mine, get me? My stooge. A mechanical stooge. Good, eh?"

The rasping chuckle filled the hollow room. Girl and robot waited for Duke to resume speaking.

"Junior wouldn't hurt you, Lola. He's my friend, and he knows you're with me." Duke turned to the silver monster. "You wouldn't hurt Lola, would you, Junior? Remember what I told you. You like Lola, don't you?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. I like Lola. She's pretty."

"See?" Duke grinned. "Junior's growing up. He's a big boy now. Thinks you're pretty. Just a wolf in steel clothing, isn't that right, Junior?"

"She's pretty," burred the robot.

"All right. It's settled then. I'll get the car. Lola, you go upstairs. You know where the safe is. Put on your gloves and see that you don't miss anything. Then lock the doors and windows. Leave a note for the milkman and the butcher. Something safe. About going away for a couple weeks, eh? Make it snappy—I'll be back."

True to his word, Duke returned in an hour with the shiny convertible. They left by the back entrance. Lola carried a black satchel. She moved with almost hysterical haste, trying

not to glance at the hideous gleaming figure that stalked behind her with a metallic clanking noise.

Duke brought up the rear. He ushered them into the car.

"Sit here, Junior."

"What is this?"

"A car. I'll tell you about it later. Now do like I told you, Junior. Lie back in the seat so nobody will see you."

"Where are we going, Duke?"

"Out into the world, Junior. Into the big time." Duke turned to Lola. "Here we go, baby," he said.

The convertible drove away from the silent house. Out through the alley they moved on a weird journey—kidnapping a robot.

Fat Charlie stared at Duke. His lower lip wobbled and quivered. A bead of perspiration ran down his chin and settled in the creases of his neck.

"Jeez," he whispered. "You gotta be careful, Duke. You gotta."

Duke laughed. "Getting shaky?" he suggested.

"Yeah. I gotta admit it. I'm plenty shaky about all this," croaked Fat Charlie. He gazed at Duke earnestly.

"You brought that thing here three weeks ago. I never bargained for that. The robot's hot, Duke. We gotta get rid of it."

"Quit blubbering and listen to me." The thin gunman leaned back and lit a cigarette.

"To begin with, nobody's peeped about the Professor. The law's looking for Lola, that's all. And not for a murder rap either—just for questioning. Nobody knows about any robot. So we're clear there."

"Yeah. But look what you done since then."

"What have I done? I sent Junior out on that payroll job, didn't I? It was pie for him. He knew when the guards would come to the factory with the car. I cased the job. So what happened? The guards got the dough from the payroll clerk. I drove up, let Junior out, and he walked into the factory office.

"Sure they shot at him. But bullets don't hurt a steel body. Junior's clever. I've taught him a lot. You should have seen

those guards when they got a look at Junior! And then, the way they stood there after shooting at him!

"He took them one after the other, just like that. A couple squeezes and all four were out cold. Then he got the clerk. The clerk was pressing the alarm, but I'd cut the wires. Junior pressed the clerk for a while.

"That was that. Junior walked out with the payroll. The guards and the clerk had swell funerals. The law had another swell mystery. And we have the cash and stand in the clear. What's wrong with that setup, Charlie?"

"You're fooling with dynamite."

"I don't like that attitude, Charlie." Duke spoke softly, slowly. "You're strictly small time, Charlie. That's why you're running a crummy roadhouse and a cheap hide-out racket.

"Can't you understand that we've got a gold mine here? A steel servant? The perfect criminal, Charlie—ready to do perfect crimes whenever I say the word. Junior can't be killed by bullets. Junior doesn't worry about the cops or anything like that. He doesn't have any nerves. He doesn't get tired, never sleeps. He doesn't even want a cut of the swag. Whatever I tell him, he believes. And he obeys.

"I've lined up lots of jobs for the future. We'll hide out here. I'll case the jobs, then send Junior out and let him go to work. You and Lola and I are gonna be rich."

Fat Charlie's mouth quivered for a moment. He gulped and tugged at his collar. His voice came hoarsely.

"No, Duke."

"What you mean, no?"

"Count me out. It's too dangerous. You'll have to lam out of here with Lola and the robot. I'm getting jumpy over all this. The law is apt to pounce down any day here."

"So that's it, eh?"

"Partly." Fat Charlie stared earnestly at Duke. His gaze shattered against the stony glint of Duke's gray eyes.

"You ain't got no heart at all, Duke," he croaked. "You can plan anything in cold blood, can't you? Well, I'm different. You've gotta understand that. I got nerves. And I can't stand thinking about what that robot does. I can't stand the robot

either. The way it looks at you with that god-awful iron face. That grin. And the way it clanks around in its room. Clanking up and down all night, when a guy's trying to sleep, just clanking and clanking—there it is now!"

There was a metallic hammering, but it came from the hall outside. The ancient floors creaked beneath the iron tread as the metal monstrosity lumbered into the room.

Fat Charlie whirled and stared in undisguised repulsion. Duke raised his hand.

"Hello, Junior," he said.

"Hello, Duke."

"I been talking to Charlie, Junior."

"Yes, Duke."

"He doesn't like to have us stay here, Junior. He wants to throw us out."

"He does?"

"You know what I think, Junior?"

"What?"

"I think Charlie's yellow."

"Yellow, Duke?"

"That's right. You know what we do with guys that turn yellow, don't you, Junior?"

"Yes. You told me."

"Maybe you'd like to tell Charlie."

"Tell him what we do with guys that turn yellow?"

"Yes."

"We rub them out."

"You see, Charlie?" said Duke, softly. "He learns fast, doesn't he? Quick on the uptake, Junior is. He knows all about it. He knows what to do with yellow rats."

Fat Charlie wobbled to his feet.

"Wait a minute, Duke," he pleaded. "Can't you take a rib? I was only kidding, Duke. I didn't mean it. You can see I didn't. I'm your friend, Duke. I'm hiding you out. Why, I could have turned stoolie weeks ago and put the heat on you if I wasn't protecting you. But I'm your friend. You can stay here as long as you want. Forever."

"Sing it, Charlie," said Duke. "Sing it louder and funnier."

He turned to the robot. "Well, Junior? Do you think he's yellow?"

"I think he's yellow."

"Then maybe you'd better—"

Fat Charlie got the knife out of his sleeve with remarkable speed. It blinded Duke with its shining glare as the fat man balanced it on his thumb and drew his arm back to hurl it at Duke's throat.

Junior's arm went back, too. Then it came down. The steel fist crashed against Charlie's bald skull.

Crimson blood spurted as the fat man slumped to the floor.

It was pretty slick. Duke thought so, and Junior thought so —because Duke commanded him to believe it.

But Lola didn't like it.

"You can't do this to me," she whispered, huddling closer to Duke in the darkness of her room. "I won't stay here with that monster, I tell you!"

"I'll only be gone a day," Duke answered. "There's nothing to worry about. The roadhouse downstairs is closed. Nobody will bother you."

"That doesn't frighten me," Lola said. "It's being with that thing. I've got the horrors thinking about it."

"Well, I've got to go and get the tickets," Duke argued. "I've got to make reservations and cash these big bills. Then we're set. Tomorrow night I'll come back, sneak you out of the house, and we'll be off. Mexico City next stop. I've made connections for passports and everything. In forty-eight hours we'll be out of this mess."

"What about Junior?"

"My silver stooge?" Duke chuckled. "I'll fix him before we leave. It's a pity I can't send him out on his own. He's got a swell education. He could be one of the best yeggs in the business. And why not? Look who his teacher was!"

Duke laughed. The girl shuddered in his arms.

"What are you going to do with him?" she persisted.

"Simple. He'll do whatever I say, won't he? When I get back, just before we leave, I'll lock him in the furnace. Then I'll set fire to this joint. Destroy the evidence, see? The law

will think Charlie got caught in the flames, get me? There won't be anything left. And if they ever poke around the ruins and find Junior in the furnace, he ought to be melted down pretty good."

"Isn't there another way? Couldn't you get rid of him now, before you leave?"

"I wish I could, for your sake, baby. I know how you feel. But what can I do? I've tried to figure all the angles. You can't shoot him or poison him or drown him or chop him down with an axe. Where could you blow him up in private? Of course, I might open him up and see what makes him tick, but Junior wouldn't let me play such a dirty trick on him. He's smart, Junior is. Got what you call a criminal mind. Just a big crook—like me."

Again Duke laughed, in harsh arrogance.

"Keep your chin up, Lola. Junior wouldn't hurt you. He likes you. I've been teaching him to like you. He thinks you're pretty."

"That's what frightens me, Duke. The way he looks at me. Follows me around in the hall. Like a dog."

"Like a wolf you mean. Ha! That's a good one! Junior's really growing up. He's stuck on you, Lola!"

"Duke—don't talk like that. You make me feel—ooh, horrible inside!"

Duke raised his head and stared into the darkness, a curious half-smile playing about his lips.

"Funny," he mused. "You know, I bet the old Professor would have liked to stuck around and watched me educate Junior. That was his theory, wasn't it? The robot had a blank chemical brain. Simple as a baby's. He was gonna educate it like a child and bring it up right. Then I took over and really completed the job. But it would have tickled the old Professor to see how fast Junior's been catching on. He's like a man already. Smart? That robot's got most men beat a mile. He's almost as smart as I am. But not quite—he'll find that out after I tell him to step into the furnace."

Lola rose and raced to the door. She flung it open, revealing an empty hallway, and gasped with relief.

"I was afraid he might be listening," she whispered.

"Not a chance," Duke told her. "I've got him down in the cellar, putting the dirt over Charlie."

He grasped Lola's shoulders and kissed her swiftly, savagely. "Now keep your chin up, baby. I'll leave. Be back tomorrow about eight. You be ready to leave then and we'll clear out of here."

"I can't let you go," whispered Lola, frantically.

"You must. We've gone through with everything this far. All you must do is keep a grip on yourself for twenty-four hours more. And there's one thing I've got to ask you to do."

"Anything, Duke. Anything you say."

"Be nice to Junior while I'm gone."

"Oooh—Duke—"

"You said you'd do anything, didn't you? Well, that you must do. Be nice to Junior. Then he won't suspect what's going on. You've gotta be nice to him, Lola! Don't show that you're afraid. He likes you, but if he gets wrong ideas, he's dangerous. So be nice to Junior."

Abruptly, Duke turned and strode through the doorway. His footsteps clattered on the stairs. The outer door slammed below. The sound of a starting motor drifted up from the roadhouse yard.

Then, silence.

Lola stood in the darkness, trembling with sudden horror, as she waited for the moment when she would be nice to the metallic Junior.

It wasn't so bad. Not half as bad as she'd feared it might be.

All she had to do was smile at Junior and let him follow her around.

Carefully suppressing her shudders, Lola prepared breakfast the next morning and then went about her packing.

The robot followed her upstairs, clanking and creaking.

"Oil me," Lola heard him say.

That was the worst moment. But she had to go through with it.

"Can't you wait until Duke gets back tonight?" she asked,

striving to keep her voice from breaking. "He always oils you."

"I want you to oil me, Lola," persisted Junior.

"All right."

She got the oil-can with the long spout and if her fingers trembled as she performed the office, Junior didn't notice it.

The robot gazed at her with his immobile countenance. No human emotion etched itself on the implacable steel, and no human emotion altered the mechanical tones of the harsh voice.

"I like to have you oil me, Lola," said Junior.

Lola bent her head to avoid looking at him. If she had to look in a mirror and realize that this nightmare tableau was real, she would have fainted. Oiling a living mechanical monster! A monster that said, "I like to have you oil me, Lola!"

After that she couldn't finish packing for a long while. She had to sit down. Junior, who never sat down except by command, stood silently and regarded her with gleaming eyelenses. She was conscious of the robot's scrutiny.

"Where are we going when we leave here, Lola?" he asked.

"Far away," she said, forcing her voice out to keep the quaver from it.

"That will be nice," said Junior. "I don't like it here. I want to see things. Cities and mountains and deserts. I would like to ride a roller coaster, too."

"Roller coaster?" Lola was really startled. "Where did you ever hear of a roller coaster?"

"I read about it in a book."

"Oh."

Lola gulped. She had forgotten that this monstrosity could read, too. And think. Think like a man.

"Will Duke take me on a roller coaster?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Lola."

"Yes."

"You like Duke?"

"Why—certainly."

"You like me?"

"Oh—why—you know I do, Junior."

The robot was silent. Lola felt a tremor run through her body.

"Who do you like best, Lola? Me or Duke?"

Lola gulped. Something forced the reply from her. "I like you," she said. "But I love Duke."

"Love." The robot nodded gravely.

"You know what love is, Junior?"

"Yes. I read about it in books. Man and woman. Love."

Lola breathed a little easier.

"Lola."

"Yes?"

"Do you think anyone will ever fall in love with me?"

Lola wanted to laugh, or cry. Most of all, she wanted to scream. But she had to answer.

"Maybe," she lied.

"But I'm different. You know that. I'm a robot. Do you think that makes a difference?"

"Women don't really care about such things when they fall in love, Junior," she improvised. "As long as a woman believes that her lover is the smartest and the strongest, that's all that matters."

"Oh." The robot started for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To wait for Duke. He said he would come back today."

Lola smiled furtively as the robot clanked down the hallway stairs.

*That* was over with. Thinking back, she'd handled things rather well. In a few hours Duke would return. And then—good-by, Junior!

Poor Junior. Just a silver stooge with a man's brain. He wanted love, the poor fish! Well—he was playing with fire and he'd be burned soon enough.

Lola began to hum. She scampered downstairs and locked up, wearing her gloves to avoid leaving any telltale fingerprints.

It was almost dark when she returned to her room to pack. She snapped on the light and changed her clothes.

Junior was still downstairs, patiently waiting for Duke to arrive.

Lola completed her preparations and sank wearily onto the bed. She must take a rest. Her eyes closed.

Waiting was too much of a strain. She hated to think of what she had gone through with the robot. That mechanical monster with its man-brain, the hateful, burring voice, and steely stare—how could she ever forget the way it asked, "Do you think anyone will ever fall in love with me?"

Lola tried to blot out recollection. Just a little while now and Duke would be here. He'd get rid of Junior. Meanwhile she had to rest, rest . . .

Lola sat up and blinked at the light. She heard footsteps on the stairs.

"Duke!" she called.

Then she heard the clanking in the hallway and her heart skipped a beat.

The door opened very quickly and the robot stalked in.

"Duke!" she screamed.

The robot stared at her. She felt his alien, inscrutable gaze upon her face.

Lola tried to scream again, but no sound came from her twisted mouth.

And then the robot was droning in a burring, inhuman voice.

"You told me that a woman loves the strongest and the smartest," burred the monster. "You told me that, Lola." The robot came closer. "Well, I am stronger and smarter than he was."

Lola tried to look away but she saw the object he carried in his metal paws. It was round, and it had Duke's grin.

The last thing Lola remembered as she fell was the sound of the robot's harsh voice, droning over and over, "I love you, I love you, I love you." The funny part of it was, it sounded *almost* human.

## WHY I SELECTED BLINDNESS

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*This has always been one of my favorites because it is not a story about a colossal super-invention, but rather about a bubble-burster. It was written in 1935—and frankly there has been a minor alteration to suit the events of 1940-45, better known as the Manhattan Project—but the primary point of the story holds, and is somewhat more important than we sometimes think.*

*We of today, living in what is, really, the beginning of a science-technical culture tend to think of machines, of great inventions, in terms of "huge" and "intricate" and "complex." Those are the crude, unfinished, compromise machines. The perfect machine is small, compact, extremely simple in its mechanical structure, and has no mechanical moving parts, is not assembled in the ordinary sense, and is inherently incapable of wearing out. We have, today, two examples of machines that closely approach that ideal—such humble, simple things mechanically that we never think of them as machines.*

*One is the ordinary electric transformer—from the toy-train size to the power-line sub-station variety. Mechanically, it consists of two hanks of wire and a hunk of iron. It has no moving mechanical parts—the movement is all done by atoms and electrons and magnetic fields that can't wear out. Those large ones are 99.8% efficient. Of course, a 3500 horsepower aircraft engine roaring at take-off, with its myriad ingeniously shaped parts, is more impressive. But the transformer approaches perfection.*

*More recently, the Bell Laboratories have produced another near-perfect machine—the transistor. It's a crystal of germanium, with two wires and a tiny brass tube, and it does the work of a vacuum tube. No human fingers assemble complex grids and cathodes and electrodes; natural interatomic forces "assemble" the crystal. There is nothing to wear out. It's immensely important—but the pencil-eraser size brass tube, with its two tiny wires, is so unimpressive—so much less spectacular than a new Diesel streamliner.*

*The really important, really perfect machines are so easy to overlook!*

JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.

JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.

## BLINDNESS

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Sometimes One Can't See a Thing  
When One Is Too Close to It.

**OLD** Dr. Malcolm Mackay is dead and with more than usual truth, one may say he is at last at peace. His life was hard and bitter, those last few years. He was blind, of course, blinded as every one knew by the three-year-long exposure to the intolerable light of the Sun.

And he was bitter, of course, as every one knew. But somehow they could not understand that; a man so great, so loved by the population of three worlds, it seemed there could be nothing in his life to embitter him, nor in the respect and love of the worlds for him.

Some, rather unkindly, I feel, put it down to his blindness, and his age—he was eighty-seven when he died—and in this they were unjust. The acclaim his great discovery brought him was the thing which embittered him. You see, he didn't *want* acclaim for that; it was for the lesser invention he really wanted praise.

That the "Grand Old Man" may be better understood, I genuinely want people to understand better the story of his work. And his blindness, but not as most people speak of it. The blindness struck him long before the exposure to the Sun ruined his eyes. Perhaps I had better explain.

Malcolm Mackay was born in 1974, just one year after Cartwright finally succeeded in committing suicide as he had always wanted to—by dying of asphyxiation on the surface of

the Moon, when his air gave out. He was three when Carnall was drowned in Lake Erie, after returning from Luna, the first man to reach Earth again, alive. He didn't go on living, of course, but he *was* alive when he reached Earth. That we knew.

Mackay was eleven, and interested, when Randolph's expedition returned with mineralogical specimens, and the records of a year's stay on the Moon.

Mackay went to Massachusetts Institute of Technology at seventeen, and was graduated a member of the class of 1995. But he took physics—atomic physics.

Mackay had seen that on atomic power rested the only real hope of really commercial, economically sound, interplanetary travel. He was sure of that at seventeen when he entered M. I. T. He was convinced when he was graduated—and went back for more, because about that same time old Douglas A. Mackay died, and left him three-quarters of a million dollars.

Malcolm Mackay saw that the hand of Providence was stretched out to aid him. Money was the thing he'd needed. Mackay always claimed that money was a higher form of life; that it answered the three tests of life. It was sensitive to stimulation. It was able to grow by accretion. And finally—the most important, in Mackay's estimation—the old Scot pointed out it was capable of reproduction. So Malcolm Mackay put his in an incubator, a large trust company, and left it to reproduce as rapidly as possible.

He lived in shabby quarters, and in shabby clothes most of the time, so he'd have money later on, when he started his work. And he studied. Obviously, there is no question but that Mackay was one of the most highly intelligent human beings that ever lived. He started with the basis of atomic knowledge of that day, and he learned it all, too, and then he was ready to go ahead. He spent seventeen years at M. I. T. learning and teaching, till he felt that he had learned enough to make the teaching more of a nuisance than a worth-while use of his time.

By that time, the money had followed the laws of money, and life, and had reproduced itself, not once, but twice, for

the Scot had picked a good company. He had two and a quarter millions.

He was now ready to start his search for atomic power from the light elements. Atomic power from the heavy elements—thorium, uranium, and above—had offered promise, but their high cost of extraction and production had made them always expensive, special-purpose fuels. What men needed was the cheap atomic fuel the Sun uses—the atomic energy of hydrogen, which was plentiful and easily extracted in unlimited quantities from water.

There is no need to retell his early experiments. The story of the loss of three fingers on his left hand is an old one. The countless minor and semi-major explosions he had, the radiation burns he collected. But perhaps those burns weren't so wholly injurious as was thought, for thirty-five years after he left M. I. T. he was still working at an age when most men are resting—either in coffins or wheel chairs. The Grand Old Man didn't put his final determination into action until he was seventy-three.

John Burns was his laboratory assistant and mechanic then. The loss of his fingers had been serious to him, because it made delicate instrument work difficult, and John Burns, thirty-two at the time, was his mechanic, his hand, and his highly technical assistant. In May, 2047, the latest experiment having revealed only highly interesting but negative results, Malcolm Mackay looked at Burns.

"John, that settled it," he said slowly. "Something is missing, and we won't get it here in a pair of lifetimes, even long ones. You know the only place we can find it."

"I suppose you mean the Sun," replied Burns sadly. "But since we can't get near enough to that, it doesn't do us a bit of good. Houston's the only man who has come back alive, and his nearest approach was 41,743,560 miles. And it didn't do any good, anyway. The automatic rockets get nearer, but not very much nearer, the heat beats them—all of them. And you, yourself, said we'd have to get within four millions, not four tens of millions of miles. And that's utterly hopeless. Nothing could stand it that close to old Sol."

"We're going," said Mackay grimly. "I've spent close to three-quarters of a century working on the problem of atomic energy, and we're going." He paused a moment, then looked up at Burns with a kindly smile. "No, I guess it's not we who are going, but I. I'm more than willing to go, and lose perhaps two years off the tail end of my overlong life, if need be, if I can send back the word to the world that will set it free of that age-old problem of power.

"Power. Maybe we can use Sun power, after all. They've been talking about solar power since the beginning of the last century, and they haven't got it yet. Never will, I guess, because the power's too diluted. They can't build a big enough Sun glass. But if we can steal the secret of the Sun, and give them little private suns right here on Earth, that will settle the question. And give rockets some real power too, incidentally."

The old man chuckled. "You know, John, when I started, it was the dream of my life that rockets should have atomic power so they could really reach the other planets. Atomic power! And now, here I am, close to three-quarters of a century old—and I've never even left Earth. A grounder.

"And atomic power isn't so badly needed for rockets, anyway. They have good fuels now, safe ones and powerful ones. Atomic power is needed here on Earth, where factories are, and men labor in coal mines for fuel, and where they make the fuel for rockets. That's where mankind needs atomic power.

"And by all the powers of Heaven, if the Sun's where I can learn, the Sun's where I am going."

"But by that particular power of Heaven known as radiant energy, you can't," objected Burns. "The radiation makes it impossible."

"Well, I'll kill that radiation, somehow. That's the real problem now, I guess. Wonder how—we've developed a lot of different radiation screens and blocks since we began this work here; we ought to find something."

"Yes, doctor; we can stop any kind of radiation known, including Millikan, but we can't stop three or four million tons of it a second. It's not stopping it. Anything will do that.

It's a problem we've never before attempted—the problem of handling it after it's stopped.”

“We'll stop it and handle it, somehow,” determined Mackay.

Burns gave up. Mackay meant it, so that was the new problem. It was obviously impossible, Burns knew, but so was atomic power, evidently. They'd run against all the blind alleys in the universe seeking that, so they might as well try a few more in a different direction.

Malcolm threw himself into that problem with all the keenness and determination he had shown through fifty-five years of active research on the main line. This was just another obstacle on the main track. It stood between him and the Great Secret.

He experimented a little with photo-electric cells, because he felt the way to do it was to turn the heat into electric energy. Electricity is the only form of energy that can be stepped up or down. Radiant energy can be broken down from X ray to ultra-violet, to blue to red, to infra-heat. But it can't possibly be built up. Electricity can be built up or transformed down at will. So Mackay tried to turn heat into electricity.

He wasn't long in seeing the hopelessness of photo-cells. They absorbed some of the radiant energy as electricity, but about ninety-five percent turned into straight molecular motion, known as heat, just as it did anywhere else.

Then he tried super-mirrors and gave up within three months. That was the wrong way. So it must be some way of turning molecular motion of heat into electric power.

It was like threading the way through a maze. You found all the blind alleys first, then there were only the right paths left. So he started on molecular motion-electricity transformations. He tried thermo-couple metals. They worked only when you had a cool place. A cool place! That was what he was trying to get. So he quit that.

Then he got mixed up with hysteresis. He was experimenting with magnets and alternating current and that gave him

the right lead. He developed *thermlectrium* nearly a year and a half later, in 2049, of course.

The first fragment of the new alloy was put in the coil, and heat-treated till the proper conditioning had been obtained, and the secret of the heat-treating is the whole secret, really. And finally it was taken out. It was dull, silvery gray, rather heavy, being nickel-iron-cobalt-carbon steel.

It looked like any of a thousand thousand other alloys, felt like any of them then. But they put it in the closed coil. In fifteen seconds dew formed on it, in twenty, frost, and the coil was getting hot, a current of fifty amperes flowing through it. Mackay beamed on it with joy. The obstacle had been removed! The way to the Sun was clear.

He announced his plans now to the news agencies, and to the Baldwin Rocket Foundry Co. They agreed to build him a ship according to his plans—and he made up his famous plans.

Thermlectrium is a magnetic alloy, the unique property really being that its crystals are of almost exactly uniform size. When a magnet is turned end for end in a coil of wire, when the magnetic polarity is reversed, a current is induced in the circuit, at the expense of the energy which turned the magnet.

In any permanent magnet, the crystals are tiny, individual magnets, all lined up with their north poles pointing the same way. In magnetized steel, if the bar is heated, the heat-motion of the molecules turns some of them around, with the result that the magnetism is lost. In thermlectrium, even at low temperatures, the crystals turn—but they all turn together. The result is the same as though the bar had been inverted. A current is induced in the surrounding coil. And, of course, the energy which inverts the magnet, and drives the current of electricity, is the molecular motion known as heat. Heat was conquered!

Dr. Mackay drove his plans on to rapid completion. Burns insisted on going, and Mackay could not dissuade him.

The plans were strange. They were enough to dissuade any normal man. Only such a fanatic as Dr. Mackay really was, and as Burns had become, could have imagined them. Either that, or a man with colossal self-conceit. The *Prometheus* was

to leave from Luna. Then she was to circle down toward the Sun, down very, very nearly one hundred million miles till she was within three million miles of the million-mile globe of incandescent fury, and stop her fall by going into a close, circular orbit.

That means less, today. No one had ever imagined attempting anything like that. Houston, who had circled the Sun, had actually merely swung in on a comet's orbit, and let his momentum carry him away again. That wasn't difficult. But to break the vast, parabolic orbit a body would naturally attain in falling from Earth toward the Sun would require every pound of fuel the *Prometheus* could carry and break free of Luna.

The *Prometheus* could set up her orbit about the Sun. That was going to be easy. But they couldn't possibly pull loose with any known power. Only atomic power could do it. When and if they found it!

Malcolm Mackay was eager to bet his life on that proposition. Atomic energy or—eternal captivity—death. And Burns, as much a fanatic as Mackay, was willing, too.

There were only two horns to this dilemma. There was no third to escape on, no going between them. So the Grand Old Man sank every penny of his fortune in it, and would have sunk any he could borrow had he been able to get it.

The *Prometheus* rose, slowly. And during the weeks and months it was being built, Mackay and Burns spent their time gathering supplies, instruments, chemicals. For one thing, every element must be represented, and in proportion to its availability. Radium even, though radium could never be a source of atomic power, for power derived from radium would still be too expensive for commercial use. But radium might be the absolutely essential primer for the engine—so radium went. And fluorine, the deadly, unmanageable halogen, everything.

Then, gradually, the things were moved in as the ship neared completion. The outer hull of the high-temperature tungsto steel, the space filled with hydrogen under pressure, since hydrogen was the best conductor of heat practicable,

and in that interspace, the thousands of thermoelectric elements, and fans to force circulation.

The *Prometheus* was a beautiful ship when she was finished. She glowed with the gleam of a telescope mirror, polished to the ultimate. Only on one side was she black, black as space, and, here, studded with huge projectors and heaters. The power inevitably generated in absorbing the heat in the therm elements would be cast out here in tungsten bars thick as a man's arm, and glowing white-hot in an atmosphere of hydrogen gas.

She left, finally. Struggling up from Earth, she reached Luna, her first stage, and filled her fuel tanks to the last possible ounce. Then, in August, 2050, she took off at length.

Reaching the Sun was no trick at all, once she had broken free of the Moon and of Earth. Day after day she fell with steadily mounting speed. The Sun loomed larger, hotter. The great gyroscopes went into action, and the *Prometheus* turned its silvered face to the Sun, reflecting the flooding heat. Nearer and nearer. Venus fell behind, then Mercury's orbit at last.

They knew heat then. And radiation. The Sun loomed gigantic, a titanic furnace whose flames reached out a quarter of a million miles. The therm elements began to function, and the heat dropped somewhat. Then the rockets started again, started their braking action, slowly, steadily, breaking the ship to the orbit it must make, close about the Sun.

Hour after hour they droned and roared and rumbled, and the heat mounted, for all the straining power of the therm elements. Radio to Earth stopped the second day of the braking. The flooding radiations of the Sun killed it. They could still send, they knew, but they could not receive. Their signals were received by stations on the Moon, where the washing static of the Sun did not blanket all the signals that came. For they were beaming their waves, and the Sun, of course, was not.

"We must establish the orbit soon, John," said Mackay, at last. He was lying down on his couch, sick and weak with the

changing strains. "I am an old man, I fear, and I may not be able to endure much more of this."

"We will have to brake more sharply then, Dr. Mackay," replied Burns concernedly. "And then we may not be able to establish the perfectly circular orbit we need."

Mackay smiled faintly, grimly. "If it is not soon, John, no orbit will mean anything to me."

The rockets roared louder, and the ship slowed more rapidly. But it was three days yet before the orbit trimming could be started. They left the ship in an eccentric orbit at first, though, and counteracted for the librations of the ship, which tended to turn the blackened radiator side toward the Sun, by working the gyroscope planes.

Dr. Mackay recuperated slowly. It was three weeks actually, three precious, oxygen-consuming weeks, before they started the final orbit trimming. Then day after day they worked, observing, and occasionally giving a slight added rocket thrust for orbit trimming.

But finally, at a distance of three point seven three millions of miles, the *Prometheus* circled the titanic star. The sunward side, for all its polish, glowed red-hot continuously. And the inside of the ship remained a heated, desiccated furnace, for all the work of the therm elements. Even they could not perfectly handle the heat.

"Ah, John," said Mackay at last, "in some ways Earth was better, for here we have strange conditions. I wish we could get a time signal from Earth. The space is distorted here by the Sun."

Old Sol, mighty in mass and power, was warping space so that spectrum lines were not the same, their instruments were not the same, the titanic electric and magnetic fields threw their delicate apparatus awry. But they worked.

It was fortunate the therm elements produced power, as well as getting rid of the heat. With the power, they kept the functions of the ship running, breaking down the water formed in their breathing to oxygen once more, and storing the hydrogen in one of the now empty fuel tanks.

And their observations went on, and their calculations. In

six months it seemed they had never known another life than this of intolerable, blinding light if they dared to open an observation slit in the slightest; intolerable, deadly radiation if they dared to step beyond the protected walls of their laboratory and living quarters to the storage quarters without a protective suit. For the most of the ship was as transparent to the ultra-short waves of the Sun as empty space.

But it grew to be a habit with them, the sending of the daily, negative reports, the impossibility of hearing any signal from Earth, even of observing it, for there was the eternal *Gegenschein*. It was blinding here, the reflected light from the thin-strewn dust of the Sun.

That dust was slowing them down, of course. They were, actually, spiralling in toward the Sun. In some seventy-five years they would have been within reach of the prominences. But before then—one of the pans of their balance would have tipped. Atomic power—or the inevitable end.

But Mackay was happy here. His eyes turned from deep blue-gray to a pale blue with red, bloodshot balls, his skin turned first deep, deep brown from the filtering ultra-violet, then it became mottled and unhealthy. Burns' skin changed, too, but his eyes endured better, for he was younger. Still, Mackay felt sure of his goal. He looked down into the flaming heart of a Sun spot, and he examined the under side of a prominence, and he watched the ebb and flow of Sol's titanic tides of white-hot gas.

2050 passed into history, and 2051 and 2052 followed in swift succession. No hint of the great happenings of Earth and the planets reached there, only the awful burning of the Sun—and, in February of 2053, a hint of the great changes there.

"John," said Mackay softly one day, "John—I think I see some hint of the secret. I think we may make it, John!"

Burns looked at the sharp-lined spectrum that lay on the table before Mackay, and at the pages of calculations and measurements and at the data sheets. "I don't see anything much different in that, doctor. Isn't it another will-o'-the-wisp?"

"I—I hope not, John. Don't you see this—this little line here? Do you recognize it?"

"No—no, I don't think I do," he said slowly. "It's a bit too high for the 4781 line. And I don't know what's in there——"

"There isn't any there, John," said Mackay softly. "There isn't any. It's a forbidden line, an impossible line. It's the impossible line of sodium, John. It's a transformation that just couldn't take place. And it did, so I'm going to find out how it did. If I can make the impossible release take place the same way——"

"But that tells so little, so very little. Even if you could duplicate that change, make that line, you'd still be as far from the secret as from Sirius. Or Earth for that matter."

"I'll know more, though, John. You forget that only knowledge is the real secret. When I know all about the atom, I'll know how to do what I want to do. If I know all the changes that can take place, and why, then I can make that other change. Ah, if only I could see just a few miles deeper into the heart of the Sun——"

"We've seen some of the greatest Sun spots in history, and at close hand. Do you think we could see any deeper? The light—that terrible light."

"It blinds even the instruments, so there is little more we can do. But we can calculate and take more photographs for more of those lines. But now I must see what the instruments recorded when we got this line."

They recorded even more than the old man had hoped. It was enough. They duplicated that impossible line, and then they produced some more impossible lines. It was the key. It wasn't impossibly difficult then. They could design the apparatus, and did, in September, three years and one month after lifting off for the final drop to the Sun.

They made it, piece by piece, and tested it in January. It wasn't winter there; there was no winter. Only everlasting heat. And Mackay's eyes were failing rapidly. His work was over. Both because he could scarcely work any longer, and because, on January 14, 2054, the energy of the atom was

harnessed by man! The Great Secret was discovered. The hydrogen cycle of the sun.

It took the intense light of the mighty arc to stimulate the old eyes when the thing was done. Only its tremendous blinding power was visible. His ears could hear its roar, well enough, and his fingers could feel the outlines of the hulked machine. But he could no longer make it out when it at last roared its lusty greeting to human ears.

His thin lips parted in a contented smile, though, as his tough, old fingers caressed the cold metal and the smooth, cold glass. "It works, doesn't it, John? It works. John, we've done it." A shadow passed over the old man's face for an instant. "We haven't heard from Earth in over three years. Do you suppose some one else has discovered it, too? I suppose I ought not to be selfish, but I do hope they haven't. I want to give this to the world.

"John, can you make the drive apparatus yourself?"

"Yes, doctor; I can. You had all the plans worked out; and they're simple to follow. It isn't really greatly different. Only that instead of using a high-temperature gas ejected at thousands of feet a second, we'll use a high-voltage ion ejected at thousands of miles a second. And because we can burn hydrogen, as you predicted, we don't have to worry at all about power."

"No, John. We don't have to worry at all about power." The old man sighed, then chuckled contentedly. "I always wanted to live to see the day when atomic power ran the world. I guess I won't, after all. I can't see, but it won't matter. I have so few years left, I won't worry about a little thing like that. My work's done, anyway. We don't have to worry about power, John; the world doesn't any more.

"Men will never again have to worry about power. Never again will they have to grub in the Earth for fuels. Or do things a hard way, because it is less costly of power. Power—power for all the world's industry. All the wheels of Earth's factories driven by the exploding atoms. The arctic heated to a garden by it. Vast Canada opened by it to human habitation, clear to the north pole.

"No more smoke-clouded cities.

"And the atom will lift the load of labor from man's back. No more sweating for six hours every day for daily bread. An hour a day—and unlimited, infinite power. And, maybe, even, some day it will lead to successful transmutation, though I can't see it. I mean, I can't see it even mentally," he said with a little smile. "The Sun showed me the secrets it held—and took away the impious vision that gazed upon them.

"It is worth it. The world will have power—and my work is done.

"You are starting the drive apparatus?"

"Yes, doctor. The main tube is to be—"

Burns launched into a technical discussion. The doctor's eyes could not follow the plans, but the old mind was as keen as ever. It pictured every detail with a more penetrative vision than ever his eyes could. He chuckled contentedly as he thought of it.

"John, I have lost little, and gained more. I can see that tube better than you can. It's a metal tube, but I can see to its deepest heart, and I can even see the ions streaming out, slowly, precisely. My mind has a better eye than ever my body had, and now it is developing. I can see the tube when it is not yet, and I can see the heart of it, which you cannot.

"Make it up, John. We must hurry back."

The lathe hummed, powered by atomic energy, and the electric furnace glowed with a heat so intense the old scientist could see it, driven by the power of the bursting atoms.

The mental eye he had boasted of was keen, keener than his old eyes had ever been. But still it was blind. Somehow, it did not see the white-hot tungsten bars on the "night" side of the ship pouring thousands and thousands of kilowatts of power out into space. The power the therm elements were deriving from the cooling of the ship.

The drive tubes grew, and their great, metal bed bolts were turned. Then the great rocket tubes were sealed at the far end, cut, and insulated again. But now, electrically insulated. The great ion tubes took shape and were anchored, and the huge conductors ran back to the ion-gas chambers, and to the

hunched bulk of the atomic engine. Day succeeded day, and Burns cut and fashioned the metal and welded it under the blazing power of the broken atoms in their atomic generator.

And at last the ship trembled with a new, soft surge. It must be slow, for the men were used now to weightlessness, three long years of it. But gradually, gradually the *Prometheus*, bearing the fire it had stolen from the Sun, swung swifter in its orbit, and spiraled out once more, slowly, slowly. And the radio drove out its beam toward Earth.

They could not hear the messages that Earth and Luna pounded back at them, but gladly they guessed them. The ion tubes whispered and murmured softly, with a slithering rustle as of a snake in dry leaves, and the ship accelerated steadily, slowly. They ran those tubes day and night and slowly increased the power. There was no need for maximum efficiency now. No need to care as they wasted their power. There was plenty more.

Their only difficulty was that, with the mighty ion tubes working, they could not receive radio signals, even when they had gradually circled out beyond Mercury, and finally Venus, slowly growing accustomed once more to weight. They did not want to turn off their tubes, because they must get accustomed to weight once more, and they were moving very rapidly now, more and more rapidly, so that they passed Venus far too rapidly for the ships that rose from the planet to congratulate Dr. Mackay and tell him the great news.

They circled on, in the *Prometheus*, till they were used once more to Earth gravity, and then they were near Earth and had to apply the braking ion rockets.

"No stopping at the Moon, John." Malcolm Mackay smiled. "We and all humanity are through with that. We will go directly to Earth. We had best land in the Mojave desert. Tell them, tell them to keep away, for the ions will be dangerous."

John Burns drove out his message, and Earth loomed huge, and North America came slowly into view, then they were settling toward the desert.

The old scientist heard the faint, cold cry of ruptured air first, for his eyes were dark, and only his ears brought mes-

sages from outside. "That's air, John!" he cried suddenly. "We're in the air again! Earth's air! How far up are we?"

"Only another one hundred and fifty miles now, doctor. We're almost home."

"Home—I should like to see for just this second, to see it again. John—John, I'll never see Earth again. I'll never—but that means little. I'll hear it. I'll hear it and smell it in my nostrils, clean and sweet and moist, and I'll taste it in the air. Earth's air, John, thick and spicy with green things. It's autumn. I want to smell burning leaves again, John. And feel snow, and hear its soft caress on a glass pane, and hear the soft sounds men make in snow. I'm glad it's autumn. Spring has its smells, but they aren't so spicy and clean. They're not so interesting, when you can't see the color of the grass, so green—too bright, like a child's crayon drawing. Colors—I'll miss them. There weren't any out there. Colors—I'll never see the leaves again, John.

"But I'll smell them, and I'll hear the hum and whisper of a thousand thousand atomic engines making the world over for mankind.

"Where are we? The air is shrilling thickly now."

"We're less than fifty miles up. They've cleared the Mojave for fifty miles around us, but, doctor, there's a hundred thousand private air cars there—a new design. They must have developed broadcast power. They're all individually powered and apparently by electrical means."

"Broadcast power? That is good. Then atomic energy will reach every home. The apparatus would be expensive, too expensive for homes."

"The air is full of ships—there are half a dozen great stratosphere ships flying near us now; can you hear the *chug* of their propellers?"

"Is that the noise—ah! Men, men again, John. I want to hear a thousand voices all at once."

Burns laughed recklessly, carefree. "You will, from the looks of things. You will! There's nearer a thousand thousand down there now!"

"The ship is slowing?" asked Mackay.

Burns was silent for a moment. Then, suddenly, the dry rustle of the tubes changed its note, it flared for an instant, there was a soft, grating thud, a harsh scraping of sand—and the ion tubes died in silence.

"The ship is stopped, doctor. We're home."

Dimly, faintly, the sound of a thousand voices clamoring and shouting came through the heavy walls. Mackay had landed! The Grand Old Man was back! And half the world had turned out to welcome him, the man who had remade all Earth, and all Venus.

The lock opened, and to Mackay came the roar of voices, the thrum and hum and rumble of thousands and tens of thousands of propellers. There were the musical cacophony of a thousand air-car signals, and the mighty thunder of a titanic voice, rumbling, hoarse, and god-like in power, cutting through, drowning it all.

"They're welcoming you, Dr. Mackay—welcoming you."

"So I hear," said Mackay, half happily, half sadly, "but I am so tired, perhaps I can rest a bit first. I am older than you are, John. You have done as much as I; you had better answer them."

Suddenly close-by human voices cut in, excited, happy, welcoming voices, and John Burns' swift, answering speech:

"He is tired; it has been hard for him. And—you know he has lost his sight. The radiation of the Sun so close. He would rather be taken where he can rest."

"Very well—but can't he say something? Just a few words?"

Burns looked back at the old man. Malcolm Mackay shook his head.

The man outside spoke again: "Very well. We will take him directly to anywhere he wants."

Mackay smiled slowly, thoughtfully. "Anywhere, anywhere I can smell the trees. I think I'd like to go to some place in the mountains where the air is sweet and spicy with pine smells. I will be feeling better in a few days—"

They took him to a private camp in the mountains. A ten-room "cabin," and they kept the world away, and a doctor took care of him. He slept and rested, and Burns came to see

him twice the next day, but was hurried away. The next day and the next he did not come.

Because even Burns had not gathered quickly the meaning of all this. Even he had at first thought it was in celebration of the invention of the atomic generator.

At last he had to come. He came into Mackay's room slowly. His pace told the blind man something was wrong.

"John—John, what's troubling you so?"

"Nothing; I was not sure you were awake."

Mackay thought for a few seconds and smiled. "That wasn't it, but—we will let it pass now. Do they want me to speak?"

"Yes. At the special meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. And—also on the subject of the thermlectrium elements. You have done far more than you thought, doctor. You have remade the worlds already. Those cars I thought were powered by broadcast energy? I was wrong. We were blind to the possibilities of that lesser thing, the thermlectrium element. Those cars were powered by it, getting their energy from the heat of the air. All the industries of the world are powered by it. It is free power.

"The elements are cheap, small, simple beyond anything conceivable, a bar of common metal—a coil of wire. They require no control, no attention. And the energy costs nothing at all. Every home, every store, every man, has his private thermlectrium element. Every car and every vehicle is powered by it.

"And the map of the world has been twisted and changed by it in three short years. The tropics are the garden spot of the world. Square miles of land are cooled by giant thermlectrium installations, cities air-conditioned, till the power they develop becomes a nuisance, a thing they cannot get rid of. The tropics are habitable, and they have been given a brisk, cool, controlled climate by your thermlectrium elements.

"Antarctica is heated by it! There are two mining developments that suck heat from that frozen air to make power in quantities they cannot use.

"And rocket fuel costs nothing! Nothing at all. The tropical countries find the electrolytic breaking down of water the only cheap, practical way to get rid of their vast energy, without turning it right back into heat. They give the gases to whosoever will take them away.

"And Venus you have remade. Venus has two large colonies already. They are cooled, made habitable, by the thermoelectric apparatus. A ten-dollar unit will cool and power an average house forever, without the slightest wear. By moving it outside in winter, it will warm and power it. But on Venus it is all cooling. They are developing the planet now. Dr. Mackay, you have remade the worlds!"

Dr. Mackay's face was blank. Slowly a great question was forming. A great, painful question. "But—but, John—what about—atomic energy?"

"One of the greatest space lines wants to contract for it, doctor. Their interplanetary ships need it."

"One!" cried the Grand Old Man. "One—what of the others?"

"There is only one interplanetary line. The lines to the Moon are not interplanetary——"

And Dr. Mackay caught the kindness in his tone.

"I see—I see—they can use the free gases from the tropics. Free power—less than nothing.

"Then the world doesn't want my atomic energy, does it?" he said softly. His old body seemed to droop.

## WHY I SELECTED

## THE INN OUTSIDE THE WORLD

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THE INN OUTSIDE THE WORLD seems to me the best science fiction story I have done in the shorter length, for several reasons. One reason is that it is of the type I like most, a story of wonder.

By "wonder," I mean the emotional glamour that still attaches to the prodigies of the ARABIAN NIGHTS, to the old Celtic legends of enchanted islands, to the Spanish dreams of El Dorado. It has always been my belief that this element is a basic necessity in science fiction.

Once, legends and fairy tales satisfied the reader's innate hunger for wonder. In this modern day they do not, for the world is all charted now and we no longer believe in the powers of magicians and enchanterers.

But there are uncharted worlds out beyond Earth for us to dream about—a universe of them. And instead of magic, the expanding potentialities of science can supply that "temporary suspension of disbelief" without which a fantastic romance fails.

Because such "wonder" stories were always my own favorite, I have in past years written a great many of them. But it happens that in this one of them I had the chance to say something in which I thoroughly believed, and believe. That, I think, is why I consider this short story my best.

EDMOND HAMILTON

EDMOND HAMILTON

## THE INN OUTSIDE THE WORLD

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**It is Not the Reward, But  
the Struggle that Matters.**

MERRILL felt discouraged tonight, though not for himself. His despondency was for the old man in the next room of this dingy Balkan hotel, the thin, gray, spectacled old man who was one of the four most important people in post-war Europe.

Carlus Guinard had come back from exile to lead a stricken nation out of its chaotic misery, and he was the only statesman who could do it. But, tonight, even Guinard had been so crushed by defeat that he had admitted his helplessness to hold back his people from the abyss.

"Too much intolerance, too many old grudges, too many ambitious men," he said wearily to Merrill when his last conference of the day was over. "I fear it is hopeless."

Merrill was only an unimportant lieutenant, assigned by U. S. Military Intelligence to guard Guinard, but he and the old statesman had become friends in these last weeks.

"You're tired, sir," he had said, awkwardly encouraging. "Things won't look so black in the morning."

"I fear that the night over this part of Europe is to be a long, long night," murmured Guinard. His thin shoulders were sagging, his ordinarily twinkling, friendly eyes now dull and haggard.

He whispered, "Perhaps *they* could help me. It is against our laws, but—" Then, aware of the staring Merrill, he broke off. "Good night, Lieutenant."

Merrill had been worried and restless ever since. He liked and respected the world-famous old statesman, and was downcast by the other's defeat and despair. He knew what a herculean task the tired old man was attempting.

He went to the open window. Across the dark, bomb-shattered city out there moaned a chill wind. Away northward, the river glistened beneath the stars. Few lights had yet come back on in this land, though the war was over. Perhaps the lights would never come back, if Guinard failed?

What had the old man whispered, about "they" helping him? Something that was against the "laws"? Was Guinard planning a secret conference of some kind? Did he intend to slip out without his American bodyguard for that purpose?

Merrill felt sudden alarm. And it wasn't because he might lose his commission if he failed to guard the statesman. It was because he liked Guinard, and knew there were many out in that dark city who would assassinate him if they could. Guinard mustn't try to go out alone—

He went to Guinard's door and listened. And he heard a soft step inside the bedroom. It increased his apprehensions. Guinard had retired an hour before. Then he *was* trying to slip out secretly?

Merrill softly opened the door. What he saw was so unexpected and amazing that for a moment he just stood and stared.

Guinard stood, his back toward the American, in the center of the room. The old man was holding his watch above his head, and was fingering its heavy, jeweled case.

Had Guinard suddenly gone crazy from strain? It seemed so to Merrill. Yet there seemed sober purpose in Guinard's madness.

He'd noticed the old statesman's watch, before this. It was a curious, massive gold one, with a complex pattern of big jewels inset on its back.

Guinard was pressing the jewels, one after another, as he held the watch above his head. There was something so oddly suggestive of the ominous about it, that Merrill impulsively strode forward.

Guinard turned, startled, as Merrill reached his side. The old man yelled in sharp alarm.

"Get back, Lieutenant—don't—"

It all happened together. As he shouted, as Merrill reached him, from the upheld watch there dropped toward the two men a thin, wavering thread of blinding light.

It struck them and Merrill was dazed and blinded by a shock of force. It seemed to him that the floor beneath his feet vanished and that he was falling—

Merrill did not lose consciousness. But the world seemed to disappear from around him as he plunged through bellowing blackness. And then there was a sharp shock, and he was standing staggering on firm footing again.

But the hotel room was gone. The walls, the floor, the lights, had vanished as by witchcraft. The only thing remaining of all that was Carlus Guinard, whose thin arm he had been clutching.

"What—" choked Merrill. He couldn't form or speak more words than that one.

He was standing on grassy ground in a strange misty darkness. He was in the open air, but there was nothing to see. Nothing but a swirling mist through which filtered a faint green glow of light.

In that green glow, Guinard's thin face was close to him and was staring at him aghast.

"You came through with me!" Guinard exclaimed, thunder-struck. "But this—it's never happened before. It's forbidden! You don't belong!"

"Guinard, what happened?" Merrill asked hoarsely. He looked wildly around the greenish, silent mists. A gruesome possibility shook him. "Was it an explosion? Are we—dead?"

"No, no!" the old statesman hastily denied. His face was a study in perplexity and anxiety. He seemed to ignore their surroundings entirely in his concentration on Merrill. "But you, Lieutenant—you should not be in this place. Had I known you were behind me—"

Then Guinard pulled himself together. "I shall have to take you to the others," he muttered distractedly. "It's all I can do

now. And they will have to decide about you. If they don't understand—"

Distress came into his fine, haggard face at some thought that he did not voice, as he looked at Merrill.

The American could not understand. He wanted to say something but he couldn't. It was too sudden, too overwhelming.

He could only stand, staring stupidly about him. There was not a sound. Nor any movement. Nothing but the curling, greenish mists whose cool, damp tendrils silently caressed their faces.

Guinard spoke urgently. "Lieutenant, you must understand me! You have inadvertently blundered into a place where you have no right to be, into the greatest and most closely guarded of secrets."

"What is this place?" Merrill asked hoarsely. "And how did we get here like that? *How?*"

Guinard spoke slowly, trying to penetrate his dazed mind. "Listen, Lieutenant. I must tell you, since you are here. This is not our Earth. This is another world."

Merrill's brain groped for understanding. "Another world? You mean, we're on one of the other planets?"

Guinard shook his gray head quickly. "No, not any planet of any universe known to science. A different universe, a different space-time continuum, entirely."

He looked baffled. "How shall I tell you? I am a statesman, not a physicist. I only know myself what Rodemos and Zyskyn and the others have told me.

"But listen. This world, in its other space-time frame, is always close to Earth, contiguous. Held there—what did Zyskyn say?—by inter-dimensional gravitation. Meshed forever with Earth, yet forever invisible and untouchable to Earthmen."

Merrill's throat was dry, but his heart began to beat faster. A little of this, at least, he could understand.

"I've read speculations on such an interlocking world," he said slowly. "But if that's what it is, how did we get here?"

Guinard showed his watch, with its curious pattern of big

jewels on the back. "This brought us through, Lieutenant. It isn't a watch, though it looks like one. It is a compact instrument which can project enough force to thrust matter from Earth into this world."

The old man talked rapidly. "This world, and the way into it, have been known for thousands of years. A scientist of ancient Atlantis found the way first. He passed the secret down to a chosen few of each generation."

"You mean"—Merrill struggled to comprehend—"you mean that in every stage of the world's history, there have been a few people who knew about *this*?"

And he made a wild gesture toward the unearthly landscape of solemn green mists that surrounded them.

Guinard's gray head bobbed. "Yes. A few of the greatest men in each age have been admitted into the secret and have been bequeathed the jeweled Signs which are the key to entrance here. I don't claim to be worthy of belonging to the world's greatest—but they thought me so and admitted me to their brotherhood."

He went on: "And all the members of our secret brotherhood, the greatest men of every age of Earth in past and future, come often into this world and gather at our meeting-place here."

Merrill was stunned. "You mean, men of the past, present and future *meet* in this world? But—"

Guinard reminded, "I told you that this world is outside Earth's space-time. A thousand years on Earth is but a few days here. Time is different."

He elaborated hastily. "Think of the different ages of Earth as rooms along a corridor. You can't go from one room into another, from one age into another. But the occupants of all the rooms, of all the ages, can, if they have the key, come out and meet together in the corridor which is common to them all."

The old statesman's face was haggard as he concluded. "I came here tonight to seek help from the others of our brotherhood! Help that could enable me to pull my people and nation out of the abyss of anarchy. It's the only hope I have

left, now. Always, it's been against the laws of our brotherhood to give each other such help. But now—"

He clutched Merrill's wrist and pulled him forward. "I can't delay here longer. You will have to come with me, even though you are not of the initiated."

Merrill found himself being hurried along by the old statesman, through the greenish mists. The grassy ground rolled in low swales, and they crossed little streams. They could see little but the enfolding mists, and there was no sign or sound of life.

The American felt as though he walked in a weird dream. His brain was staggering at the implications of what Guinard had just told him.

A secret brotherhood of the world's greatest men of all ages, an esoteric tradition that held the key to entrance into an alien world where all those men of many ages could mix and meet! Incredible, surely—

A clear voice called suddenly from close behind them. "*Est Guinard? Salve!*"

Guinard stopped, peering back into the mists. "*Salve frater! Quis est?*"

He murmured rapidly to Merrill. "We have to have some common language, of course. And we use Latin. Those who didn't know it, learned it. You know it?"

Merrill mumbled numbly, "I was a medical student before the war. But who—"

A figure emerged from the mists, overtaking them, and gave cheerful greeting.

"I hoped to see you this visit, Guinard," he said in rattling Latin. "How go things in that strange century of yours?"

"Not well, Ikhnaton," answered the old statesman. "It's why I've come. I've got to have help."

"Help? From us others?" repeated the man called Ikhnaton. "But you know that's impossible—"

He broke off suddenly, staring at Merrill. And Merrill in turn was gazing at him with even more wonder.

The man was young, with a thin, dark, intellectual face and luminous eyes. But his costume was outlandish. A linen cloak

over a short tunic, a snake-crested gold fillet around his dark hair, a flaming disk hanging around his neck with the curious jeweled pattern of the Sign in its face.

"Ikhnaton, King of Egypt in the 14th Century, B.C.," Guinard was explaining hurriedly. "Even if you don't know much history you must have heard of him."

Ikhnaton! Merrill stared unbelievably. He'd heard of the Egyptian ruler who had been called the first great man in history, the reformer who had dreamed of universal brotherhood, back in time's dawn.

The Egyptian was frankly puzzled. "This man doesn't belong to us. Why did you bring him?"

"I didn't intend to, it was all a mistake," Guinard said hastily. "I'll explain when we reach the inn."

"There it is," Ikhnaton nodded ahead. "And it sounds like a good gathering this time. I hope so—last time I came, there was nobody here but Darwin and that stiff-necked Luther, and our argument never ended."

Warm, ruddy light glowed in the mists ahead, beckoning to them. The light came from the oblong windows of a low, squat building.

It was a curious structure, this place they called "the inn." One-storied and built of dark stone, with timber gables, it looked dreamlike and unreal here in the silent mists. There were vineyards and gardens around it, Merrill saw.

Guinard opened the door. Ruddy light and warmth and the clamor of disputing voices struck their faces. Men hailed them in Latin.

"Ho, Guinard! Come in and listen to this! Zyskyn and old Socrates are at it again!"

Merrill stood and stared. Most of the inn was a big common-room, stone-flagged, with heavy, timbered walls. A huge fireplace at one side held a leaping blaze, and its flickering light joined the reddish glow of torches in wall-sockets to illuminate the room.

There were long tables down the center. Grouped around the longest table, with their wine-cups standing unheeded

upon it now, were the most motley group of men possible to imagine.

A tall Roman in bronze sat beside a man in super-modern zipper garments, a grave, bearded man in Elizabethan ruff and hose beside a withered, ancient Chinese, a merry fellow in the gaudy clothes of 16th Century France beside a stout, sober man in the drab brown of an American Colonial. At the far end of the table, silent and brooding, sat a man wrapped in dark robe and cowl-like hood, a man with a pale, young-old face.

All this fantastically variegated company, except that brooding, cowed listener, were eagerly joining in an argument. The two chief disputants were a handsome young man in a strange, glittering garment of woven metal and a bald, stocky Greek with shrewd eyes and a broken nose. Then, Merrill thought numbly, these two disputants were Zyskyn and—Socrates?

A fat, jolly, moon-faced fellow in the costume of old Babylon waddled up to them. That he was the master of the inn, Merrill knew by the brimming wine-cups he was carrying as he greeted them.

"Welcome, friend Guinard!" he boomed. "And you too, Ikhnaton—but remember, no more arguments about theology."

His eyes fell on Merrill, behind them. And he stiffened. "But this man is not one of us!"

The booming words rang out so suddenly loud that they cut across the argument in the room, and all heads turned toward them.

The tall, bald, bleak-eyed Roman put down his goblet and strode up to them. He faced Merrill.

"How came you here?" he demanded sharply. "Do you have the Sign?"

"Wait, Caesar," begged Guinard urgently. "He doesn't have the Sign. But it's not his fault that he's here."

Caesar? Julius Caesar? Merrill could only stare at the Roman and then at the others.

The quiet, grave-faced man in Elizabethan costume interposed himself into the argument.

"You remember me, Guinard? Francis Bacon. May I ask where you and Ikhnaton found this man?"

The Egyptian king made a gesture of denial. "I never saw him until a few minutes ago."

"His name is Merrill, and he came with me," Carlus Guinard said rapidly. His voice rose with tension. "It's my fault that he's here. I was not careful enough about being alone when I came through, and he got caught in the force of the Sign and was swept with me."

Guinard hurried on. "If there's any blame for his coming, it attaches to my carelessness. But I was half-crazy tonight with worry. Back in my time, my people reel on the brink of anarchy and destruction. I have to save them. And so I have come to you others—for help."

The handsome young man in the queer flexible metal garment stared at him incredulously.

"For our help? You know we can't help you to do anything in your own time, Guinard!"

"Zyskyn is right," nodded Francis Bacon. "You surely should have known that, Guinard."

"But I *must* have help!" Guinard exclaimed feverishly. "Some of you are from times future to my own, and your greater science and wisdom can save millions of my people. At least, let me tell you!"

Caesar's curt voice cut into the excited babble that followed. "Let's take things in order. This is a serious thing you propose, Guinard. For the time being, we'll pass over the matter of this man you chanced to bring with you. His fate can be decided later. Sit down, all of you, and we'll hear what Guinard has to say."

Merrill could see that Guinard's proposal had thrown a bombshell into this group. As they returned to the table, all were still excitedly talking, all except the brooding, cowed man who had not stirred.

Merrill found himself pushed into a seat at the table by Ikhnaton. The young Egyptian king looked at him with friendly glance.

"It must seem strange to you, eh?" Ikhnaton said, over the

excited clamor. "It did to me, when I first came through. I was almost afraid to use the Sign."

"How did you get the Sign?" Merrill asked him. "How were you initiated into—this?"

Ikhnaton explained. "Rodemos of Atlantis—he isn't here tonight—was the first to find a way into this world. He passed down the secret, which is imparted to only a few men in each generation."

The Egyptian continued. "I imagine you have heard of most of these here tonight. Though some, of course, are still in your future."

Merrill learned that the handsome Zyskyn was a great scientist of the 31st century Antartican civilization. The old Chinese was Lao-tse of the 6th Century B.C. and the swarthy, slender man beside him was the Dutch philosopher Spinoza.

Stout, pawky Benjamin Franklin sat beside the great Buddhist emperor Asoka. Next to them was John Loring, a famous space-explorer of the 25th Century, and across from them the merry face of François Rabelais.

"It's incredible," Merrill said hoarsely. "I've read and heard of most of these men—Caesar, yourself—I know how long you lived and how you died."

Ikhnaton interrupted sharply. "Don't mention anything like that! It's considered bad taste to talk here of a man's personal future, even when you know it from history. It would be disconcerting, you know."

Merrill gestured past the excitedly clamoring group toward the cowed man who sat strangely silent and unmoved at the end of the table.

His face fascinated Merrill. It was smooth and young, but his dark, watching eyes had something infinitely old about them.

"Who is that?" he asked the Egyptian.

Ikhnaton shrugged. "That's Su Suum, who never talks about himself. We know only that he comes from some far future time, farther even than Zyskyn's age. He comes often, but just sits and listens."

The clamor of discussion that had been unloosed by Guinard's proposal was quelled again by the crisp voice of Julius Caesar.

"Will you not be quiet enough so that we may at least hear what Guinard has to say?" he demanded.

The uproar quieted. Men sat back down, and looked toward Guinard. Franklin polished his steel-rimmed spectacles with a silk handkerchief, while Rabelais drained his wine-cup and set it down with a sigh.

Merrill looked back and forth along the faces. From Ikhnaton of old Egypt, beside him, to the farthest end of the table where sat the silent figure of Su Suum, man of the remotest future.

Guinard was speaking urgently. "I know the laws of our brotherhood as well as you. First, to keep this world and our meetings always secret. Second, to give the Sign which is our badge of fellowship only to those who are above petty self-seeking. And third, that one age of Earth must never through us directly influence another age.

"Nevertheless," he continued earnestly, "I desire tonight that you grant an exception to that third law. I come here for my people, seeking aid to save my 20th Century land and race from utter misery."

He went on, telling them of his war-stricken land and of the danger that anarchy and terror would crush its millions. He pictured his own helplessness to halt the tide.

Loring, the space-explorer of the 25th, interrupted. "But from what I've read of your century's history, those convulsions of which you speak will finally end."

"They will end, yes, but before then millions of my people will have lived starved and stunted lives!" Guinard exclaimed. "It is to prevent that that I appeal to you for help."

"Let us be clear," said Socrates keenly. "Just what sort of help do you desire?"

Guinard looked toward Zyskyn, and John Loring, and the silent man called Su Suum.

"You three," he told them, "come from far future times when scientific progress is great. Could none of you suggest

any scientific means of psychologically pacifying my people into good-will and cooperation?"

Merrill saw that Su Suum remained silent, watching abstractedly and making no sign of assent. But young Zyskyn answered slowly.

"Why, yes, down in Antarctica our psycho-mechanists long ago solved that problem. We have certain apparatus whose subtle radiation we use to manipulate the psychology of backward peoples, and twist their thinking toward peace and cooperation."

"Give me the secret of that apparatus and with it I can save millions in my time from misery!" cried Guinard.

That the proposal was disturbing, Merrill could see. The group were silent, looking troubledly at each other.

Then old Lao-tse spoke, using the unfamiliar language slowly and with difficulty.

"I am opposed to doing that. For it would violate the laws of time and infinity which separate the ages of our Earth. It would introduce a confusion of eras which might bring on cosmic disaster."

Ikhnaton retorted warmly. "What harm could it do? Guinard would keep his use of the apparatus secret. And it would save many. I say, let us make an exception to our law and help him."

Loring, the space-explorer, looked anxiously at the bald Greek next him. "Socrates, you're one of the wisest of us. What do you say?"

The Greek rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "It is my belief that all outward things are but forms and shadows of the ideal, and I cannot credit that the ideal laws of the universe would permit transgressing the bounds of Earthly time without dire results."

Francis Bacon spoke precisely and calmly. "I hold the other opinion. Once I wrote that our object should be to extend man's dominion over all the universe. Why not conquer time as space has been conquered?"

Spinoza and Franklin shook their heads doubtfully, and then Caesar interrupted restlessly.

"Talk, talk—we have too much of it here. What Guinard wants is action and help. Are we to give it to him?"

"I say again, let us help him!" Ikhnaton exclaimed. "Why should not the future aid the past, as the past has always aided its future?"

Rabelais shook his head sorrowfully. "Men are fools. Guinard's people would have no more troubles if they forgot their hatreds and hopes and stuck to their drinking."

Zyskyn spoke troubledly to the old statesman. "Guinard, they seem to feel there is too much danger in what you ask."

Guinard's thin shoulders sagged. "Then I shall never be able to steer my people out of their misery."

Uproar of argument broke out again. Merrill ignored it. The desperation, the hopelessness, in the old statesman's face had wakened a fierce resolve in the young American.

"Guinard, there's one way to get what you want," he muttered. "This way!"

And Merrill snatched out the flat pistol inside his jacket and leveled it at Zyskyn.

"I hate to do this," he said to the dumfounded group. "But I've *seen* the misery that Guinard is trying to relieve. He's got to have your help. You'll promise him the apparatus he needs, or—"

"Or what, man of the past?" said young Zyskyn, smiling faintly at Merrill.

He made a swift motion with his hand. From a bracelet on his wrist leaped a little tongue of green light.

It hit Merrill's arm with paralyzing shock. The pistol dropped from his nerveless fingers.

The silence was broken by Caesar's laugh. "I like that young fool. At least, he doesn't just talk—he tries to act."

"He has shown that the people of his age are too barbaric to be trusted with Zyskyn's science," snapped the space-explorer, Loring.

Guinard looked down strickenly at the American. "Lieutenant, you shouldn't have done that!"

And then suddenly, through the increased uproar of dis-

puting voices that followed Merrill's impulsive action and defeat, there came a slow, chill voice.

"Will you listen to me, brothers?"

It was the man at the farthest end of the long table who was speaking. The cowed figure of Su Suum, always before silent.

Zyskyn, Caesar, Franklin—all in the room were stricken to silence by the unexpected voice. They stared wonderingly at Su Suum.

"You have often wondered about me," Su Suum said quietly. "I told you that I came from Earth's far future, but I did not tell you more than that. I preferred to listen. But now, I think, I must speak.

"I come from a time far in Earth's future, indeed. By your reckoning, it would be the 14,000th Century."

"That far?" whispered Zyskyn, astounded. "But—"

Su Suum, his strange young-old face quiet and passionless, continued. "As to who I am—I *am the last*."

A terrible realization came to Merrill, of the meaning of those quiet words. "You mean—?" Socrates was murmuring astoundedly.

"Yes," said Su Suum. "I mean that I am the last man of all men. The final survivor of the race to whose past you all belong."

His brooding eyes looked beyond them into infinite space and time. "All the history of our race, I know. I could tell you all of it, how the first star-colonists left Earth in the 34th Century, how the cooling Earth was itself evacuated in the 108th, how for thousands on thousands of years our race spread out through the galaxies and founded a cosmic empire of power and splendor you could not even imagine.

"And I could tell you, too, of how with the long ages that empire finally shrunk and withered as the galaxies faded and died. Of how the mighty realm and the trillions of men fell in inevitable decline, shrinking with the eras to fewer worlds, until at last but a remnant of them were left on a dying world far across the galaxy.

"I was the last of that remnant," Su Suum continued. "The

last of all men left in a dying, darkened universe. With me, human history concludes its glorious span as we all knew that somewhere and someday it must conclude itself."

The cowed man made a gesture. "I was lonely, in that dying, haunted universe. And before I died I wanted to come back to the little world from which our race sprang, the Earth. Dead, icy and forlorn it is in my era—and I the only man upon it.

"That is why, by means of the Sign that descended through the ages to me, I came among you. I have sat here many times with you men of the past, listening to your talk of the ages. And to me, it has been as though I relived the wonderful saga of our race."

The men—these men from as many different ages—stared at Su Suum as though he were indeed a ghost from beyond death.

Merrill finally heard old Lao-Tse ask, "Then, last of men, what is your word as to the decision we must make on Guinard's request?"

Su Suum spoke slowly. "My word is this: Even though it were possible to transgress the bounds of Earth's ages without disaster, even though you were able thus to save your peoples from confusion and struggle, would it be great gain?"

"I tell you this—no matter what great powers you win, no matter how high you carry human achievement, in the end it must all conclude with *me*. Must end with a perished race, humanity's story told, all the great goals you struggled toward fallen to dust and nothingness.

"So, it is not important that you may not attain the goals toward which you struggle. What is important is the way in which you carry on that struggle, your own courage and kindness from day to day. Though you attain the most glittering Utopia of your dreams, yet it will someday perish. But the mere passing days of struggle that you make splendid by your courage, the record that you write in the pages of the past, that can *never perish*."

Merrill saw Guinard stand up, and in the midst of a deep silence speak unsteadily.

"I am answered from the world's end," said the old statesman. "And you have given me the courage of which you speak."

He looked around the silent group. "I shall return now. May my young friend return with me? I guarantee his silence."

There was a moment's hesitation, and then Caesar made a gesture. "Let him go, friends. Guinard's guarantee is good."

Guinard held his medallion-watch above himself and Merrill, pressed the jewels on its back. The thread of blinding light from the instrument struck the American and he knew nothing.

Merrill awoke with sun streaming into his eyes. He sat up dazedly and found himself on the couch in Guinard's shabby hotel room.

The old man was bending over him. "I fear that you fell asleep in here last night, Lieutenant."

Merrill sprang to his feet. "Guinard! We're back on Earth, then! They let me come back!"

Guinard frowned at him in perplexity. "Back on Earth? I don't understand. I'm afraid you've been dreaming."

Merrill clutched his arm. "It was no dream! You were there with me, with Caesar, Socrates, all of them! And that man Su Suum—good God, the last of the human race—"

Guinard soothingly patted his shoulder. "There, Lieutenant, you've apparently had a nightmare of some kind."

Merrill stared at him. Then he spoke slowly. "I think I understand. You guaranteed my silence. You know that if you pretend it all never happened, I'll *have* to keep silent, since nobody would ever believe me."

The old statesman shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about."

Merrill felt staggered. Had it all then really been mere fabric of dream, that brotherhood of the ages? If it were—

Guinard was speaking. "Enough of this. There's work to do. Work that may or may not pull my people together. But it's got to be tried."

"But last night you were so hopeless," Merrill said wonderingly.

"That was my weakness," Guinard said quietly. "I forgot that it is not whether we win or lose the struggle that matters most, but how we bear ourselves in the fight. I shall not weaken again."

The words of Su Suum reechoed in Merrill's mind. And he knew now that it had been no dream, even though Guinard would never admit it, even though he'd never be able to convince anyone.

And Guinard knew he knew, for the statesman's eyes met his in a long, quiet look. Then the old man turned toward the door.

"Come, Lieutenant. Our work is waiting for us."

## WHY I SELECTED DON'T LOOK NOW

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*Why I selected DON'T LOOK NOW as my favorite science fiction story is because it has the technical accuracy of Jules Verne, the realism of H. G. Wells, the social implications of Tolstoi (Leo—the Count, I mean), the freedom of Laurence Sterne, and the terseness of the Bible (the King James translation, of course). Moreover, I can honestly say it is my favorite story because I have reread all my others, on publication, and they disgusted me. For one reason or another, I didn't get around to rereading DON'T LOOK NOW, and can therefore regard it with the unbiased, critical, gemlike eye of the happy creator.*

*As everyone knows who has ever written—and who hasn't?—the actual process of writing generally causes a state of psychopathic euphoria to set in. During literary gestation, the writer knows perfectly well that this yarn is the best he's ever written, and very likely the best anybody's ever written. This state of self-adulation may last for an indefinite period. In my case, unfortunately, it seldom does. If I didn't maintain it artificially, by cheers, cries of "Bravo!" and a built-in self-reflexive claque, I probably would never submit a finished story to an editor. I would just tear it and myself, up.*

*But luckily I have not reread DON'T LOOK NOW since it was written, so I can very fairly say it's my favorite yarn.*

*Anyway, my wife wrote it.*

HENRY KUTTNER

HENRY KUTTNER  
DON'T LOOK NOW

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**That Man Beside You May Be a Martian.  
They Own Our World, but Only a Few Wise  
and Far-Seeing Men Like Lyman Know It!**

THE man in the brown suit was looking at himself in the mirror behind the bar. The reflection seemed to interest him even more deeply than the drink between his hands. He was paying only perfunctory attention to Lyman's attempts at conversation. This had been going on for perhaps fifteen minutes before he finally lifted his glass and took a deep swallow.

"Don't look now," Lyman said.

The brown man slid his eyes sidewise toward Lyman, tilted his glass higher, and took another swig. Ice-cubes slipped down toward his mouth. He put the glass back on the red-brown wood and signaled for a refill. Finally he took a deep breath and looked at Lyman.

"Don't look at what?" he asked.

"There was one sitting right beside you," Lyman said, blinking rather glazed eyes. "He just went out. You mean you couldn't see him?"

The brown man finished paying for his fresh drink before he answered. "See who?" he asked, with a fine mixture of boredom, distaste and reluctant interest. "Who went out?"

"What have I been telling you for the last ten minutes? Weren't you listening?"

"Certainly I was listening. That is—certainly. You were talking about—bathtubs. Radios. Orson—"

"Not Orson. H. G. Herbert George. With Orson it was just a gag. H. G. *knew*—or suspected. I wonder if it was simply intuition with him? He couldn't have had any proof—but he did stop writing science fiction rather suddenly, didn't he? I'll bet he knew once, though."

"Knew what?"

"About the Martians. All this won't do us a bit of good if you don't listen. It may not anyway. The trick is to jump the gun—with proof. Convincing evidence. Nobody's ever been allowed to produce the evidence before. You *are* a reporter, aren't you?"

Holding his glass, the man in the brown suit nodded reluctantly.

"Then you ought to be taking it all down on a piece of folded paper. I want everybody to know. The whole world. It's important. Terribly important. It explains everything. My life won't be safe unless I can pass along the information and make people believe it."

"Why won't your life be safe?"

"Because of the Martians, you fool. They own the world."

The brown man sighed. "Then they own my newspaper, too," he objected, "so I can't print anything they don't like."

"I never thought of that," Lyman said, considering the bottom of his glass, where two ice-cubes had fused into a cold, immutable union. "They're not omnipotent, though. I'm sure they're vulnerable, or why have they always kept under cover? They're afraid of being found out. If the world had convincing evidence—look, people always believe what they read in the newspapers. Couldn't you—"

"Ha," said the brown man with deep significance.

Lyman drummed sadly on the bar and murmured, "There must be some way. Perhaps if I had another drink. . . ."

The brown-suited man tasted his collins, which seemed to stimulate him. "Just what is all this about Martians?" he asked Lyman. "Suppose you start at the beginning and tell me again. Or can't you remember?"

"Of course I can remember. I've got practically total recall. It's something new. Very new. I never could do it before. I can even remember my last conversation with the Martians." Lyman favored the brown man with a glance of triumph.

"When was that?"

"This morning."

"I can even remember conversations I had last week," the brown man said mildly. "So what?"

"You don't understand. They make us forget, you see. They tell us what to do and we forget about the conversation—it's post-hypnotic suggestion, I expect—but we follow their orders just the same. There's the compulsion, though we think we're making our own decisions. Oh, they own the world, all right, but nobody knows it except me."

"And how did you find out?"

"Well, I got my brain scrambled, in a way. I've been fooling around with supersonic detergents, trying to work out something marketable, you know. The gadget went wrong—from some standpoints. High-frequency waves, it was. They went through and through me. Should have been inaudible, but I could hear them, or rather—well, actually I could *see* them. That's what I mean about my brain being scrambled. And after that, I could see and hear the Martians. They've geared themselves so they work efficiently on ordinary brains, and mine isn't ordinary any more. They can't hypnotize me, either. They can command me, but I needn't obey—now. I hope they don't suspect. Maybe they do. Yes, I guess they do."

"How can you tell?"

"The way they look at me."

"How do they look at you?" asked the brown man, as he began to reach for a pencil and then changed his mind. He took a drink instead. "Well? What are they like?"

"I'm not sure. I can see them, all right, but only when they're dressed up."

"Okay, okay," the brown man said patiently. "How do they look, dressed up?"

"Just like anybody, almost. They dress up in—in human

skins. Oh, not real ones, imitations. Like the Katzenjammer Kids zipped into crocodile suits. Undressed—I don't know. I've never seen one. Maybe they're invisible even to me, then, or maybe they're just camouflaged. Ants or owls or rats or bats or—"

"Or anything," the brown man said hastily.

"Thanks. Or anything, of course. But when they're dressed up like humans—like that one who was sitting next to you awhile ago, when I told you not to look—"

"That one was invisible, I gather?"

"Most of the time they are, to everybody. But once in a while, for some reason, they—"

"Wait," the brown man objected. "Make sense, will you? They dress up in human skins and then sit around invisible?"

"Only now and then. The human skins are perfectly good imitations. Nobody can tell the difference. It's that third eye that gives them away. When they keep it closed, you'd never guess it was there. When they want to open it, they go invisible—like *that*. Fast. When I see somebody with a third eye, right in the middle of his forehead, I know he's a Martian and invisible, and I pretend not to notice him."

"Uh-huh," the brown man said. "Then for all you know, I'm one of your visible Martians."

"Oh, I hope not!" Lyman regarded him anxiously. "Drunk as I am, I don't think so. I've been trailing you all day, making sure. It's a risk I have to take, of course. They'll go to any length—any length at all—to make a man give himself away. I realize that. I can't really trust anybody. But I had to find *someone* to talk to, and I—" He paused. There was a brief silence. "I could be wrong," Lyman said presently. "When the third eye's closed, I can't tell if it's there. Would you mind opening your third eye for me?" He fixed a dim gaze on the brown man's forehead.

"Sorry," the reporter said. "Some other time. Besides, I don't know you. So you want me to splash this across the front page, I gather? Why didn't you go to see the managing editor? My stories have to get past the desk and rewrite."

"I want to give my secret to the world," Lyman said stub-

bornly. "The question is, how far will I get? You'd expect they'd have killed me the minute I opened my mouth to you—except that I didn't say anything while they were here. I don't believe they take us very seriously, you know. This must have been going on since the dawn of history, and by now they've had time to get careless. They let Fort go pretty far before they cracked down on him. But you notice they were careful never to let Fort get hold of genuine proof that would convince people."

The brown man said something under his breath about a human interest story in a box. He asked, "What do the Martians do, besides hang around bars all dressed up?"

"I'm still working on that," Lyman said. "It isn't easy to understand. They run the world, of course, but why?" He wrinkled his brow and stared appealingly at the brown man. "Why?"

"If they do run it, they've got a lot to explain."

"That's what I mean. From our viewpoint, there's no sense to it. We do things illogically, but only because they tell us to. Everything we do, almost, is pure illogic. Poe's *Imp of the Perverse*—you could give it another name beginning with M. Martian, I mean. It's all very well for psychologists to explain why a murderer wants to confess, but it's still an illogical reaction. Unless a Martian commands him to."

"You can't be hypnotized into doing anything that violates your moral sense," the brown man said triumphantly.

Lyman frowned. "Not by another human, but you can by a Martian. I expect they got the upper hand when we didn't have more than ape-brains, and they've kept it ever since. They evolved as we did, and kept a step ahead. Like the sparrow on the eagle's back who hitch-hiked till the eagle reached his ceiling, and then took off and broke the altitude record. They conquered the world, but nobody ever knew it. And they've been ruling ever since."

"But—"

"Take houses, for example. Uncomfortable things. Ugly, inconvenient, dirty, everything wrong with them. But when men like Frank Lloyd Wright slip out from under the Mar-

tians' thumb long enough to suggest something better, look how the people react. They hate the thought. That's their Martians, giving them orders."

"Look. Why should the Martians care what kind of houses we live in? Tell me that."

Lyman frowned. "I don't like the note of skepticism I detect creeping into this conversation," he announced. "They care, all right. No doubt about it. They *live* in our houses. We don't build for our convenience, we build, under order, for the Martians, the way they want it. They're very much concerned with everything we do. And the more senseless, the more concern."

"Take wars. Wars don't make sense from any human viewpoint. Nobody really wants wars. But we go right on having them. From the Martian viewpoint, they're useful. They give us a spurt in technology, and they reduce the excess population. And there are lots of other results, too. Colonization, for one thing. But mainly technology. In peace time, if a guy invents jet-propulsion, it's too expensive to develop commercially. In war-time, though, it's got to be developed. Then the Martians can use it whenever they want. They use us the way they'd use tools or—or limbs. And nobody ever really wins a war—except the Martians."

The man in the brown suit chuckled. "That makes sense," he said. "It must be nice to be a Martian."

"Why not? Up till now, no race ever successfully conquered and ruled another. The underdog could revolt or absorb. If you know you're being ruled, then the ruler's vulnerable. But if the world doesn't know—and it doesn't—

"Take radios," Lyman continued, going off at a tangent. "There's no earthly reason why a sane human should listen to a radio. But the Martians make us do it. They like it. Take bathtubs. Nobody contends bathtubs are comfortable—for us. But they're fine for Martians. All the impractical things we keep on using, even though we know they're impractical—"

"Typewriter ribbons," the brown man said, struck by the thought. "But not even a Martian could enjoy changing a typewriter ribbon."

Lyman seemed to find that flippant. He said that he knew all about the Martians except for one thing—their psychology.

"I don't know *why* they act as they do. It looks illogical sometimes, but I feel perfectly sure they've got sound motives for every move they make. Until I get that worked out I'm pretty much at a standstill. Until I get evidence—proof—and help. I've got to stay under cover till then. And I've been doing that. I do what they tell me, so they won't suspect, and I pretend to forget what they tell me to forget."

"Then you've got nothing much to worry about."

Lyman paid no attention. He was off again on a list of his grievances.

"When I hear the water running in the tub and a Martian splashing around, I pretend I don't hear a thing. My bed's too short and I tried last week to order a special length, but the Martian that sleeps there told me not to. He's a runt, like most of them. That is, I think they're runts. I have to deduce, because you never see them undressed. But it goes on like that constantly. By the way, how's your Martian?"

The man in the brown suit set down his glass rather suddenly.

"My Martian?"

"Now listen. I may be just a little bit drunk, but my logic remains unimpaired. I can still put two and two together. Either you know about the Martians, or you don't. If you do, there's no point in giving me that, 'What, *my* Martian?' routine. I know you have a Martian. Your Martian knows you have a Martian. My Martian knows. The point is, do *you* know? Think hard," Lyman urged solicitously.

"No, I haven't got a Martian," the reporter said, taking a quick drink. The edge of the glass clicked against his teeth.

"Nervous, I see," Lyman remarked. "Of course you *have* got a Martian. I suspect you know it."

"What would I be doing with a Martian?" the brown man asked with dogged dogmatism.

"What would you be doing without one? I imagine it's illegal. If they caught you running around without one they'd probably put you in a pound or something until claimed. Oh,

you've got one, all right. So have I. So has he, and he, and he—and the bartender." Lyman enumerated the other barflies with a wavering forefinger.

"Of course they have," the brown man said. "But they'll all go back to Mars tomorrow and then you can see a good doctor. You'd better have another dri—"

He was turning toward the bartender when Lyman, apparently by accident, leaned close to him and whispered urgently,

*"Don't look now!"*

The brown man glanced at Lyman's white face reflected in the mirror before them.

"It's all right," he said. "There aren't any Mar—"

Lyman gave him a fierce, quick kick under the edge of the bar.

*"Shut up! One just came in!"*

And then he caught the brown man's gaze and with elaborate unconcern said, "—so naturally, there was nothing for me to do but climb out on the roof after it. Took me ten minutes to get it down the ladder, and just as we reached the bottom it gave one bound, climbed up my face, sprang from the top of my head, and there it was again on the roof, screaming for me to get it down."

*"What?"* the brown man demanded with pardonable curiosity.

"My cat, of course. What did you think? No, never mind, don't answer that." Lyman's face was turned to the brown man's, but from the corners of his eyes he was watching an invisible progress down the length of the bar toward a booth at the very back.

"Now why did he come in?" he murmured. "I don't like this. Is he anyone you know?"

*"Is who—?"*

"That Martian. Yours, by any chance? No, I suppose not. Yours was probably the one who went out a while ago. I wonder if he went to make a report, and sent this one in? It's possible. It could be. You can talk now, but keep your voice

low, and stop squirming. Want him to notice we can see him?"

"I can't see him. Don't drag me into this. You and your Martians can fight it out together. You're making me nervous. I've got to go, anyway." But he didn't move to get off the stool. Across Lyman's shoulder he was stealing glances toward the back of the bar, and now and then he looked at Lyman's face.

"Stop watching me," Lyman said. "Stop watching him. Anybody'd think you were a cat."

"Why a cat? Why should anybody—do I look like a cat?"

"We were talking about cats, weren't we? Cats can see them, quite clearly. Even undressed, I believe. They don't like them."

"Who doesn't like who?"

"Whom. Neither likes the other. Cats can see Martians—sh-hl—but they pretend not to, and that makes the Martians mad. I have a theory that cats ruled the world before Martians came. Never mind. Forget about cats. This may be more serious than you think. I happen to know my Martian's taking tonight off, and I'm pretty sure that was your Martian who went out some time ago. And have you noticed that nobody else in here has his Martian with him? Do you suppose—" His voice sank. "Do you suppose they could be *waiting for us outside?*"

"Oh, Lord," the brown man said. "In the alley with the cats, I suppose."

"Why don't you stop this yammer about cats and be serious for a moment?" Lyman demanded, and then paused, paled, and reeled slightly on his stool. He hastily took a drink to cover his confusion.

"What's the matter now?" the brown man asked.

"Nothing." Gulp. "Nothing. It was just that—he *looked* at me. With—you know."

"Let me get this straight. I take it the Martian is dressed in—is dressed like a human?"

"Naturally."

"But he's invisible to all eyes but yours?"

"Yes. He doesn't want to be visible, just now. Besides—" Lyman paused cunningly. He gave the brown man a furtive glance and then looked quickly down at his drink. "Besides, you know, I rather think you *can* see him—a little, anyway."

The brown man was perfectly silent for about thirty seconds. He sat quite motionless, not even the ice in the drink he held clinking. One might have thought he did not even breathe. Certainly he did not blink.

"What makes you think that?" he asked in a normal voice, after the thirty seconds had run out.

"I—did I say anything? I wasn't listening." Lyman put down his drink abruptly. "I think I'll go now."

"No, you won't," the brown man said, closing his fingers around Lyman's wrist. "Not yet you won't. Come back here. Sit down. Now. What was the idea? Where were you going?"

Lyman nodded dumbly toward the back of the bar, indicating either a juke-box or a door marked MEN.

"I don't feel so good. Maybe I've had too much to drink. I guess I'll—"

"You're all right. I don't trust you back there with that—that invisible man of yours. You'll stay right here until he leaves."

"He's going now," Lyman said brightly. His eyes moved with great briskness along the line of an invisible but rapid progress toward the front door. "See, he's gone. Now let me loose, will you?"

The brown man glanced toward the back booth.

"No," he said, "he isn't gone. Sit right where you are."

It was Lyman's turn to remain quite still, in a stricken sort of way, for a perceptible while. The ice in *his* drink, however, clinked audibly. Presently he spoke. His voice was soft, and rather soberer than before.

"You're right. He's still there. You can see him, can't you?"

The brown man said, "Has he got his back to us?"

"You *can* see him, then. Better than I can maybe. Maybe there are more of them here than I thought. They could be anywhere. They could be sitting beside you anywhere you go, and you wouldn't even guess, until—" He shook his head a

little. "They'd want to be *sure*," he said, mostly to himself. "They can give you orders and make you forget, but there must be limits to what they can force you to do. They can't make a man betray himself. They'd have to lead him on—until they were sure."

He lifted his drink and tipped it steeply above his face. The ice ran down the slope and bumped coldly against his lip, but he held it until the last of the pale, bubbling amber had drained into his mouth. He set the glass on the bar and faced the brown man.

"Well?" he said.

The brown man looked up and down the bar.

"It's getting late," he said. "Not many people left. We'll wait."

"Wait for what?"

The brown man looked toward the back booth and looked away again quickly.

"I have something to show you. I don't want anyone else to see."

Lyman surveyed the narrow, smoky room. As he looked the last customer beside themselves at the bar began groping in his pocket, tossed some change on the mahogany, and went out slowly.

They sat in silence. The bartender eyed them with stolid disinterest. Presently a couple in the front booth got up and departed, quarreling in undertones.

"Is there anyone left?" the brown man asked in a voice that did not carry down the bar to the man in the apron.

"Only—" Lyman did not finish, but he nodded gently toward the back of the room. "He isn't looking. Let's get this over with. What do you want to show me?"

The brown man took off his wrist-watch and pried up the metal case. Two small, glossy photograph prints slid out. The brown man separated them with a finger.

"I just want to make sure of something," he said. "First—why did you pick me out? Quite a while ago, you said you'd been trailing me all day, making sure. I haven't forgotten that.

And you knew I was a reporter. Suppose you tell me the truth, now?"

Squirming on his stool, Lyman scowled. "It was the way you looked at things," he murmured. "On the subway this morning—I'd never seen you before in my life, but I kept noticing the way you looked at things—the wrong things, things that weren't there, the way a cat does—and then you'd always look away—I got the idea you could see the Martians too."

"Go on," the brown man said quietly.

"I followed you. All day. I kept hoping you'd turn out to be—somebody I could talk to. Because if I could *know* that I wasn't the only one who could see them, then I'd know there was still some hope left. It's been worse than solitary confinement. I've been able to see them for three years now. Three years. And I've managed to keep my power a secret even from them. And, somehow, I've managed to keep from killing myself, too."

"Three years?" the brown man said. He shivered.

"There was always a little hope. I knew nobody would believe—not without proof. And how can you get proof? It was only that I—I kept telling myself that maybe you could see them too, and if you could, maybe there were others—lots of others—enough so we might get together and work out some way of proving to the world—"

The brown man's fingers were moving. In silence he pushed a photograph across the mahogany. Lyman picked it up unsteadily.

"Moonlight?" he asked after a moment. It was a landscape under a deep, dark sky with white clouds in it. Trees stood white and lacy against the darkness. The grass was white as if with moonlight, and the shadows blurry.

"No, not moonlight," the brown man said. "Infra-red. I'm strictly an amateur, but lately I've been experimenting with infrared film. And I got some very odd results."

Lyman stared at the film.

"You see, I live near—" The brown man's finger tapped a certain quite common object that appeared in the photo-

graph. "—and something funny keeps showing up now and then against it. But only with infra-red film. Now I know chlorophyll reflects so much infra-red light that grass and leaves photograph white. The sky comes out black, like this. There are tricks to using this kind of film. Photograph a tree against a cloud, and you can't tell them apart in the print. But you can photograph through a haze and pick out distant objects the ordinary film wouldn't catch. And sometimes, when you focus on something like this—" He tapped the image of the very common object again. "You get a very odd image on the film. Like that. A man with three eyes."

Lyman held the print up to the light. In silence he took the other one from the bar and studied it. When he laid them down he was smiling.

"You know," Lyman said in a conversational whisper, "a professor of astrophysics at one of the more important universities had a very interesting little item in the *Times* the other Sunday. Name of Spitzer, I think. He said that if there were life on Mars, and if Martians had ever visited earth, there'd be no way to prove it. Nobody would believe the few men who saw them. Not, he said, unless the Martians happened to be photographed. . . ."

Lyman looked at the brown man thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "it's happened. You've photographed them."

The brown man nodded. He took up the prints and returned them to his watch-case. "I thought so, too. Only until tonight I couldn't be sure. I'd never seen one—fully—as you have. It isn't so much a matter of what you call getting your brain scrambled with supersonics as it is of just knowing where to look. But I've been seeing *part* of them all my life, and so has everybody. It's that little suggestion of movement you never catch except just at the edge of your vision, just out of the corner of your eye. Something that's *almost* there—and when you look fully at it, there's nothing. These photographs showed me the way. It's not easy to learn, but it can be done. We're conditioned to look directly at a thing—the particular thing we want to see clearly, whatever it is. Perhaps

the Martians gave us that conditioning. When we see a movement at the edge of our range of vision, it's almost irresistible not to look directly at it. So it vanishes."

"Then they can be seen—by anybody?"

"I've learned a lot in a few days," the brown man said. "Since I took those photographs. You have to train yourself. It's like seeing a trick picture—one that's really a composite, after you study it. Camouflage. You just have to learn how. Otherwise we can look at them all our lives and never see them."

"The camera does, though."

"Yes, the camera does. I've wondered why nobody ever caught them this way before. Once you see them on film, they're unmistakable—that third eye."

"Infra-red film's comparatively new, isn't it? And then I'll bet you have to catch them against that one particular background—you know—or they won't show on the film. Like trees against clouds. It's tricky. You must have had just the right lighting that day, and exactly the right focus, and the lens stopped down just right. A kind of minor miracle. It might never happen again exactly that way. But . . . don't look now."

They were silent. Furtively, they watched the mirror. Their eyes slid along toward the open door of the tavern.

And then there was a long, breathless silence.

"He looked back at us," Lyman said very quietly. "He looked at us . . . that third eye!"

The brown man was motionless again. When he moved, it was to swallow the rest of his drink.

"I don't think that they're suspicious yet," he said. "The trick will be to keep under cover until we can blow this thing wide open. There's got to be some way to do it—some way that will convince people."

"There's proof. The photographs. A competent cameraman ought to be able to figure out just how you caught that Martian on film and duplicate the conditions. It's evidence."

"Evidence can cut both ways," the brown man said. "What I'm hoping is that the Martians don't really like to kill—unless

they have to. I'm hoping they won't kill without proof. But—" He tapped his wrist-watch.

"There's two of us now, though," Lyman said. "We've got to stick together. Both of us have broken the big rule—*don't look now*—"

The bartender was at the back, disconnecting the juke-box. The brown man said, "We'd better not be seen together unnecessarily. But if we both come to this bar tomorrow night at nine for a drink—that wouldn't look suspicious, even to them."

"Suppose—" Lyman hesitated. "May I have one of those photographs?"

"Why?"

"If one of us had—an accident—the other one would still have the proof. Enough, maybe, to convince the right people."

The brown man hesitated, nodded shortly, and opened his watch-case again. He gave Lyman one of the pictures.

"Hide it," he said. "It's—evidence. I'll see you here tomorrow. Meanwhile, be careful. Remember to play safe."

They shook hands firmly, facing each other in an endless second of final, decisive silence. Then the brown man turned abruptly and walked out of the bar.

Lyman sat there. Between two wrinkles in his forehead there was a stir and a flicker of lashes unfurling. The third eye opened slowly and looked after the brown man.

## WHY I SELECTED THE LOST RACE

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*Of all the tasks a writer can be asked to perform, he is surest to fail when he tries to name his "best" story. So in naming THE LOST RACE I specify that it is merely my favorite story at the moment. I hedge further by saying I hope to do better next week—or next year.*

*I like the yarn because it gave me a chance to talk about so many of my pet theories, of which one or two may even have sense to them. A moon-rocket is impractical though not impossible at the moment simply because the fuel is too cheap, by the pound. The best rocket-fuel we've got hasn't too many times the energy-content of coal, and its value per pound is proportionate. Produce a fuel that is really practical and safe for a space-ship, and you'll have a fuel that steamship companies will bid up to almost any price you can name, because with it they can carry cargo in the space now occupied by coal-bunkers and oil-tanks. In terms of light-years of travel, of course a ship's fuel will be worth more than the ship itself! Which is one of the notions I wanted to play with.*

*Another is the matter of tedium in space-travel. Human beings being what they are, I think that sheer boredom is going to be the second biggest problem awaiting us in space-travel, fuel being the first. Also I had fun sorting out my ideas about precognition. Rhine's work is promising, but I suspect that complete success would make us very sorry.*

*Most of all, though, I enjoyed working around to the very*

*last sentence of the story. One finds a craftsmanlike satisfaction in having the last word of all wrap everything up in a neat package. This whole yarn leads up to the last sentence, and the point of the entire story is missing until the very last word. I like that. It isn't too often that I manage it.*

*But there is one more thing. In one sense or another, there really was a Lost Race. And—poor devils!—I suspect that they'd have felt pretty much the way the Lost Race of my yarn did, if they'd guessed. . . .*

MURRAY LEINSTER

MURRAY LEINSTER

## THE LOST RACE

---

**He Was an Ordinary Mortal in Love, but to  
Marry His Beloved He Had to Help Discover  
the Secret of a Civilization that Had Vanished.**

WHEN Jimmy Briggs signed on the *Carilya* he had every reason to think it would be a normal, but regrettably long voyage. He had almost enough credits saved up to get married on, and he needed a long trip to give him the rest. He knew the *Carilya* was bound for Cetus Alpha Two with a cargo for the new Space-Guard base there, and that she'd be taking a new route and making the customary one or two obligatory landings, on the way. All in all, it looked just the sort of trip he needed. And the *Carilya* was a brand-new ship, bessendium-fueled, five thousand tons cargo capacity, and eight men in the crew. The pay would be good, and he'd come back and get married.

But after he'd taken the psycho tests and was certified honest and reported on board—he couldn't leave the space-port once he'd been on duty—he found that Danton was the chief engineer. Then he was not pleased. Danton was married to Jimmy's girl's best friend, and Jimmy knew what a life she led. He knew other things justifying sympathy—even more sympathy than her current unhappiness—but anyhow Danton alone was enough to make anybody prefer to ship on another vessel. He regarded Jimmy with ironic eyes the instant he came on board, and immediately tried to pump him about what his wife Jane had been doing.

"I haven't seen Jane," Jimmy told him. "I was busy with my

own affairs! Sally and I had a lot of being-together to do, because I'll be away a year. When I get back we're going to get married. I didn't bother asking about your wife. Come to think of it, I did see her for a minute on the vision-screen. She'd called Sally for something or other. She said you'd shipped out. But that was all."

Danton ground his teeth.

"We haven't lifted yet," he raged, "and she's already spreading the word I've gone."

"Sally's her best friend," snapped Jimmy. "Should Jane try to keep it a secret from her? Look here, Danton! You'd better ask to be relieved and stay aground if you can't trust Janel And I'm busy!"

He went on to put away his dunnage. And he found he would share quarters with Ken Howell. He swore, as Howell looked up from a bunk and saw him. Howell was the man Jane had originally intended to marry. They'd quarreled, and he'd signed on for a voyage to Centaurus. When he got back she was married to Danton. Jimmy's girl, Sally, said indignantly that Danton had lied to bring it about, and that he ought to be jailed. But it didn't change the situation. Jane was married to Danton, and that was that. Jimmy put down his bag and said wrathfully:

"This is going to be a sweet voyage! Did you know Danton was going to be on board?"

"No," said Howell. "I wouldn't have signed on if I had."

"Has he seen you?" demanded Jimmy.

"He has," Howell said steadily. "He grinned at me and said that at least this time he didn't have to worry about my hanging around Jane while he was gone!"

Jimmy unpacked in speechless rage. Space-travel on an interstellar trip isn't too easy on the nerves, anyhow. Months on end of monotonous voyaging makes for ragged tempers. It's a standard and only partly humorous saying among spacemen that the Lost Race committed suicide because it did too much space-traveling. There isn't even much relaxation when a trip is over, unless a man takes his discharge.

The reason is bessendium, of course, which is the perfect

space-ship fuel, with an atomic number of one hundred and seven and absolutely controllable fissionability. Five pounds of bessendium will power a ship like the *Carilya* for four thousand light-years of flight in overdrive. But it is worth eight million credits per pound, and there is an avid black market for it. A space-ship's fuel is worth more than the ship and its cargo together, and with half a chance a man can put it in his pocket and walk away with it. So the precautions for its safe-keeping are extreme. In space a man fights tedium and nerves. On the ground he feels he's watched every second. And he is.

With Danton on board the voyage was bound to be bad anyhow. With Howell also on board, it would be explosive. Jimmy contemplated the future with a violent indignation. He couldn't be philosophical about it. For instance, when the *Carilya* lifted and they watched the surface of the earth change from a seeming flat plane to a monstrous bowl, and then finally flicker into its actual shape of a colossal ball, Danton was watching with him from a stern-port. When the Earth looks like a ball, you're in space.

"Now," said Danton, grinding his teeth, "Jane knows I can't watch her! But she can't take up with Howell, anyhow! Bad luck for him!"

Jimmy walked away. He kept busy while the *Carilya* went cautiously up beyond the plane of the ecliptic, meteor-detectors out, and then sighted on Dabla and went into overdrive. In overdrive she was safe from any external accident, but she was absolutely on her own. If anything happened short of her destination, it would be just too bad. Overdrive speed is so huge a multiple of the speed of light that it would take forty times the whole Space-Guard fleet six months to search along the path a ship should cover in a day. So if the *Carilya* didn't turn up in port, there'd be no use looking for her. She'd be gone. Period.

Jimmy didn't worry about that. A spaceman doesn't. You face failure of machinery when you have to. But it isn't only in prison that men go stir-crazy. Locked in a beryllium-steel hull, hurtling endlessly through the featureless nothing that is

overdrive, nerves crack and men quarrel for no reason. Any one of the thousands of theories about the Lost Race is good for a fist-fight on any space voyage any day. More than once a man has jumped hysterically out of an air-lock for no cause that sober sense can fathom. Many a ship has come to port with its crew fitter for an insane asylum than the tedious examinations they have to undergo to make sure they haven't hidden morsels of the ship's fuel in their possessions or even their bodies. And the situation on the *Carilya* was bad from the beginning.

But after one week's journeying, the stars winked into being and the *Carilya* was only some fifty million miles from Dabla, which was good astrogation. The *Carilya* reported by space-radio and of course her crew-members had the privilege of sending personal messages back to Earth. The messages would go by the first ship to make the run—on overdrive, of course.

Jimmy got his message off. Howell, he noticed, sent nothing. Danton grinned unpleasantly at Jimmy after the *Carilya* went back for more weeks of travel in the weird half-reality which is overdrive.

"I sent Jane a message," said Danton, chuckling. "Told her I'd been hurt a little in an accident involving Howell and myself. She'll read that as a fight. And she knows me! She'll figure that if it's started already, one of us won't come back! And she won't know which to expect! She'll keep busy wondering."

Jimmy said coldly:

"Do you intend that only one of you will go back?"

"It's my intention," snarled Danton, "to figure out some way to get aground and stay where I'll know what is going on! If only I get a chance to clean up."

Jimmy shrugged and moved away. Danton wouldn't have admitted murderous intention, of course. If he had any such plan, he would make devious, elaborate arrangements for a seeming accident to Howell. And he'd have nearly a year of maddening space-travel in which to contrive it. The psychology of men in space is the psychology of men in prison, with

nothing to think of but crazy grievances and wild plans for impossible actions. It was just important enough for Jimmy to sound Howell out, indirectly.

"What do you think about?" he asked Howell in apparent casualness. "You don't read a lot. You don't play games. You don't do much talking. What do you do with your mind?"

Howell looked at him and shrugged.

"I don't think about Danton, if that's what you mean," he said evenly. "I'd crack up. I used to, sometimes—Jane and the trick he played to make her think I'd married a space-port floozie before I shoved off, one time. But that's not healthy to remember."

"What do you think about, then?" demanded Jimmy.

"The Lost Race," said Howell drily. "I've read everything that anybody's ever written about the Lost Race, and listened to all the crazy theories that have sprung up in ships' fore-castles. I'm trying to fit them together and throw away the stuff that cancels out, to see if there's anything left."

Jimmy was relieved. A man who puzzles over the Lost Race can go crazy—it's happened—but he isn't objectionable. The pursuit leads to an argumentative streak and impassioned convictions, but nobody can be expected to do anything about it. The Lost Race, of course, is that unknown breed of creature which built the smashed cities on Mars, and the smashed installations on Titan, and the blown-up cities on the Centaurean planets, and the utterly devastated ruins on Sirius Four and Arcturus Three and some hundreds of other oxygen-atmosphere planets. Maybe they built on earth, but if so a hundred thousand years of the Earth's climate has wiped out their traces. Their ruins are found in an area two thousand light-years across. They had metals and alloys—scraps of which have markedly advanced human metallurgy—and they built roads and dug canals and moved earth and stone in incredible masses. They must have mastered space travel, and they must have had arts and possibly music and literature. But above all they had a genius for the destruction of their own edifices, so that all that is left is rubble and dust. It is as if they committed suicide some fifty to a hundred thousand

years ago, and painstakingly destroyed every vestige of their civilization in the process. And nobody knows any more than that.

"Are you getting anywhere?" asked Jimmy. "I wouldn't mind hearing a new guess about them."

Howell shook his head.

"They weren't like us," he said. "If we land on a new planet, somebody's sure to scribble on a bit of rock, 'John Smith of Earth stood here, June 28, 1994.' We like to leave evidence of ourselves. If we knew the human race were going to die out, we'd probably tidy everything up and try to prepare records for somebody—or something—to find a million years from now, so they'd admire us. The Lost Race didn't. They wanted to end. They wanted the universe to be as if they had never existed."

"It's been offered that they were exterminated," objected Jimmy, "by another race that hated them."

Howell shook his head.

"The exterminators would have left a boast if they'd hated them," he said drily. "Mere destruction wouldn't have been enough. Genghis Khan built a pyramid of skulls, after his enemies were destroyed, to make a boast. Maybe they just got fed up with themselves."

Jimmy abruptly told him of Danton's message to his wife Jane. Howell said evenly:

"What of it? I'd like to do something for Jane, but that doesn't necessarily mean doing something to Danton. After all, he's doing that pretty thoroughly himself. I couldn't possibly avenge myself as thoroughly as he's doing for me. And if he does kill me, he'll pay for it, and I don't particularly care."

Jimmy had a queer conviction that Howell meant it. But he didn't feel at ease. The voyage was beginning to have its effect upon him, too. The first month or so always fixes the pattern for the rest. Danton had an occupation in his morbid suspicion of his wife and—this voyage—his hatred of Howell. It was not a healthy occupation, to be sure. Howell speculated on the Lost Race. Other members of the crew carved plastic

or wrote poetry or did anything at all to keep from being bored to insanity. Something had to be done.

The *Carilya* hurtled on in overdrive. Days passed. Weeks passed. One month. Six weeks. Then—

They came out of overdrive and gazed fascinatedly through the ship's ports at the stars. There were no longer any familiar constellations, but there was a yellow sun off to port with at least three planets. The *Carilya* headed toward the sun, its meteor-detectors weaving restlessly through space. The Space-Guard was undermanned and short of ships, so the licensing of a voyage usually stipulated a landing or two for first-contact reports. The Guard was feverishly expanding its explorations in hopes of finding a Lost Race city that wasn't completely smashed and in the effort was hopping from one star-cluster to another without exhaustive exploration anywhere. So commercial ships were called on to do surveys the Guard couldn't at the moment attempt. It was safe enough, certainly. The Lost Race had left behind no other race that might be inimical to man. First-landings were still so commonplace that at least a dozen times a year a freighter turned up with news of an Earth-type planet that could be colonized, and her skipper hopefully applied for full property rights in a world as large and perhaps as rich as the home of the human race.

A fourth and fifth planet turned up as the *Carilya* neared the yellow sun. But Number Two had seas and cloud-banks and a polar ice-cap. The *Carilya* swung up to it, matched velocity, and prepared to descend.

Then it checked. An infra-red scanner had found a huge area barren of all vegetation. The *Carilya* swung round the world's bulge to descend beside that place, which could be nothing but another blasted city of the Lost Race.

A mile up, Jimmy Briggs saw an oddity. It was a stretch of unshattered highway with a round, unpulverized area at its end. He called the control-room and pointed it out, but the *Carilya* did not adjust again. She went on down and down, slowly and gingerly, and at last grounded with a barely perceptible bump. Then a pause. Gravity, magnetic, and baro-

metric readings. Air-analysis. Needless, this last, because Lost Race ruins were found only on oxygen-type planets. A bacteria-type test. Then—

"All clear to land, if you wish," said the skipper's voice over the speaker-system.

Jimmy Briggs got ready to go outside and breathe fresh air. He was sticking a blaster in his pocket when Howell came to their joint cabin.

"I heard your report on that funny business astern," he said. He looked animated. "I got a squint at it myself. It looks like there was a rise of ground between it and the city proper, and the blasts that smashed the city missed it. It won't be true, of course, but we might look!"

"Sure!" said Jimmy. "My idea exactly!"

Danton came out of the engine-room as they went by. It occurred to Jimmy that he hadn't seen Danton in days. There were only eight men on the ship, but once in the absolute eventlessness of overdrive, it was possible to miss seeing any one of them. Danton locked the engine-room door behind him. His eyes glittered as he looked at Howell. Jimmy realized that he'd had nearly two months of brooding, with a pathological case of jealousy to start with. He nodded briefly and hurried out of the air-lock.

"I never thought to ask you," he said curtly. "Do you run into Danton often?"

Howell said without emotion:

"I've no need to, and I avoid him when I can. He's played dirty tricks and he's going crazy, in his own way. I think his suspicion of Jane is a result, and not a cause. I worked out something about the Lost Race that might apply to him."

He enlarged on his theory as they left the ship and started walking. Jimmy smelled green stuff and growing things. He barely glanced at the desolate square miles of rubble that had been a city. To land on a planet which was not Earth was no longer a novelty, and surely Lost Race ruins were not oddities any longer. The two men from the *Carilya* pushed through knee-high stuff like moss, looking for the highway Jimmy thought he'd glimpsed from the air. A hundred-foot

hummock with giant canes clothing its near side was the clue. A quarter of a mile, and they found shattered stone road surface underfoot.

"It comes out of the fact that there is precognition," said Howell, tramping along beside Jimmy. "There is foreknowledge of things to come. It's been proved. It's a function of the subconscious mind. Besides the demonstrable cases, we have hunches we can't account for, and fairly often they work out."

Jimmy nodded, sniffing pleasurably and looking about him as he moved on.

"Surely! Hunches are precognition—except when they're wishful thinking," he agreed.

"And we have consciences," Howell went on. "They're functions of the subconscious, too. It's not far-fetched to guess that a bad conscience is a leak from the subconscious, which sees some bad breaks coming as a result of some dirty trick we've played. On that basis, Danton has a bad time because his subconscious is warning him of something unpleasant in the offing. He can't read the warning clearly. He's got precognition of disaster, but he can't or won't recognize its cause. So he's scared. Jealousy is a form of fear. If conscience doth make cowards of us all—because it's precognition—then it'll make some of us insanely jealous."

"Let's not think about Danton just now," said Jimmy. "Look!"

A horned beast stared at them, and broke into headlong flight, then spread giant wings and flapped over a nearby forest-edge and vanished. Jimmy blinked.

"What I really worked out," said Howell, dismissing the beast with oblique comment, "—you've got a blaster in case of need, haven't you? So have I—what I really worked out was that maybe the Lost Race died of finding out the future. We humans have courage to go on because we don't know the future. But if our fathers had foreseen all they were going to have to endure in the Third World War, for instance, they probably couldn't have taken it. Not knowing, they only had to meet it moment by moment and day by day. So they lived through it and stayed sane."

"Mmmmmmm," said Jimmy, agreeing.

"Suppose the Lost Race saw the future in its entirety? Suppose they saw the inevitable result of something they'd done? It was in the future. They couldn't avoid it if they lived on into that future. Suppose they saw—oh—that the atomic power they had been using had altered their germ-plasm and that their race was destined to turn into a race of monsters which they considered horrible and obscene. What would they do?"

Jimmy looked startled.

"I suppose they'd commit suicide." Then he said blankly, "They did!"

"Right," said Howell. "There's a new theory of what could have happened to the Lost Race. It may be nonsense, but it explains everything, even to the smashing of their cities so that no race which followed them could duplicate their civilization and share their fate."

Suddenly the highway underfoot ceased to be rubble. It was behind the hundred-foot hillock. And it was absolutely unbroken. Crawling green things grew over it, but they had not cracked it. And ahead there was a roofless structure, not shattered or smashed or damaged save by creeping vines which grew over it.

The two of them fell silent. Jimmy drew a quick breath. They had come upon an artificial amphitheatre built by the Lost Race, unharmed unless by time. It faced a metal hood not unlike a bandstand-shell both in size and form. Before the hood there was a small object like a podium. They gazed.

"This," said Jimmy, "is It! A thing the Lost Race didn't smash! We must take photos and get them to the Space Guard. They will go happily insane. What is it, do you suppose?"

"It looks," said Howell humorously, "like a lecture platform. Maybe they listened to lectures until they all went mad. But that thing yonder puzzles me."

They climbed over lush vegetation to the "thing" some three and a half feet high. It was of metal, and it looked rather like a seat, but no human could have comfortably sat in it. It slanted sharply, and there was a carved-out slot as if

for a tail. Howell climbed up and sat awkwardly in it, his legs dangling over. Then he gasped.

The hollow part of the bandstand-shell was no longer hollow. A thick mistiness filled it, swirling strangely here and there. Howell leaped out of the queer seat. The mistiness vanished instantly. Howell looked at Jimmy—and then looked back. They poked around, wordless and not quite believing. Then Jimmy said abruptly, "I'll try it!" He climbed into the seat.

Mists swirled. They were vaguely colored and there were traces of form, here and there. Jimmy said, "The Skipper'll have to see this! I wish he were here now."

Then the mists cleared—and the Skipper was there! The mists had coalesced into his form. He stood outside the air-lock of the *Carilya*—also plainly in view—inside the metal hood. He was full size and in three dimensions. He was talking to Danton. Jimmy gaped, and slid off the seat. The Skipper and Danton and the visible part of the space ship vanished together. Instantly. "Television?" Howell queried. "Still working after a hundred thousand years?"

Jimmy gulped. He blinked. He'd thought of the Skipper and wished to see him. And he'd seen him.

"I—thought of the Skipper—" He swallowed. "I—tuned him in by thinking of him . . . Wait a minute!"

He climbed into the seat again. Mists. He stared with all his might. Then, in this queer hood on the unnamed planet of a merely numbered sun, he saw the signing-on office in the space-port back on Earth. He recognized the man administering the psycho test to somebody wearing the psycho mask. Then he closed his eyes and shook his head. He opened them again.

The space-port office was wiped out. He was looking into the living-room of Sally's home. Sally came in the door. While he watched hungrily, she went to the little viewer Jimmy had given her and flicked the lever. Jimmy saw his own image on the viewer-screen, some hundreds of light-years distant, moving in the vision-recording he'd made for Sally to remember him by. He slipped off.

"Sally! It—went all the way back to Earth!" he said thickly. "You try it!"

Howell said oddly: "I saw. One creature could show thousands of others what he tuned in on. One person or creature had to control it." He paused. "Go back and tell the Skipper, Jimmy."

Jimmy was dazed. He turned and plunged back toward the ship. Television! Across light-centuries! He'd seen Sally as she was at that instant. The marvel of the vision overwhelmed the greater marvel of the working of such a technical device after a thousand centuries. He was like a sleepwalker when he arrived at the ship and told the Skipper what he'd found.

The whole crew followed him back. Howell stood aside as they arrived. The Skipper tried it first. He perched in the awkward, uncomfortable seat. The mists formed and cleared, and he looked—and the others looked with him—at the office of the space line which owned the *Carilya*. Men the others did not know moved and spoke to each other in the three-dimensional scene. The Skipper gaped at them. The scene dissolved abruptly into another. A fat woman—the Skipper's wife—cooked on an induction-heating stove. He gaped again and the scene flickered, and a child on fat, wobbly legs waddled before them, clutching a toy.

The Skipper got off the seat. He blew his nose loudly.

"It works. That last was my grandson. Fat little beggar! Now, how the devil—"

But the others were clamoring crazily over the seat. It was extraordinary how every man ignored the technical aspects of the discovery in their hunger to make use of its human side. They had been seven weeks in space without news from home. They had expected to be forty-odd weeks more without communication. They ignored the wonder of the device and the greater wonder that it still functioned. They clamored to see their homes and their families, as men hopelessly imprisoned might have clamored to look in an actually working crystal ball.

All but Danton. And Howell. Howell stood back very quietly, watching the others, Danton hung back, biting his

lips, his eyes like coals. Suddenly Howell went back to the ship.

At sundown the others trailed back to the *Carilya*, babbling to each other. Danton remained behind. An hour after sunset, the Skipper sent for him. The absence of dangerous intelligent beings was certain. The lack of deadly carnivores was not so sure. Two oilers went after Danton, armed and with lights.

They came back with Danton, and he had all the look of a madman. He was hoarse, as if he had been screaming curses. His eyes were bloodshot and glittering. There was foam on his lips. When the two oilers released him, he bolted into his cabin and locked himself in, muttering incoherencies in a rage-thickened voice.

Jimmy found Howell staring at the ceiling of the cabin. His expression was distinctly queer. Jimmy said breathlessly:

"I still can't believe it! Television without a transmitter! And above light-speed! It's impossible! But it's true!"

"Maybe not," said Howell detachedly. "Maybe it's not impossible, that is. It certainly isn't true!"

"What?" Jimmy could not believe his ears. "Not true? Did you try it?"

Howell nodded abstractedly.

"That's why I say it isn't true. I thought of a sister I've got, and there she was in that hollow space, going about her regular affairs in a perfectly normal fashion, in a room I remember to the last detail."

"Then—"

"The house she lived in," said Howell briefly, "was to be torn down, last time I visited her. In fact, it was torn down before we lifted from Earth. But I've no idea what her new home looks like. So subconsciously I imagined her in a room I did know, and that's what I saw."

Jimmy's mouth dropped open.

"You mean—that thing simply took pictures out of our heads and made them visible up in that shell space?"

"Yes," said Howell. "I tried. I thought of the World President, and there he was. But there wasn't any background. I don't know of any background for him. I've only seen him on

vision-screens. There's no doubt about it. The thing simply takes pictures out of your head and makes them real and visible for others to see. They can probably be photographed, for that matter. But they wouldn't mean anything unless the person in the seat was—say—clairvoyant. Or unless he had precognition. Then they'd mean plenty!"

He lifted his head to look at Jimmy.

"A man with proved precognition—foresight—a gift of seeing the future . . . That gadget would make his powers available to his fellows. Once you proved someone reliably capable of seeing the future—which can be done—you'd have something. Maybe the Lost Race got that. Checks and counterchecks of course, until they were sure they saw what was coming. . . ."

Jimmy sat down. When you thought, though, it was better not to have actual vision at a distance. There'd be no privacy.

"Even if you're right, the Space Guard will go crazy! An artifact of the Lost Race—not only intact but working."

"The Space Guard?" said Howell without intonation. "What do you think's happening to Danton? He stayed behind to look at images all by himself. He doesn't know that what he saw was his own imaginings only. He is insanely jealous. I think he saw his most abominable fears realized to the very last atom of horror. What'll happen to him?"

It was not pleasant to think of. Jimmy lay awake for a long time. He did not like Danton. Sally had told him convincingly of the trick he'd used to get Jane to marry him. She had been a fool to be taken in, perhaps, but she'd surely suffered enough for her folly! While Danton must be literally in hell. Everything he feared and that he tormented himself by suspecting, must have taken form under the metal hood—in color, in three dimensions, and in life size. He must have seen himself mocked intolerably. . . .

When morning came there was simply no question about what the crew of the *Carilya* would do. A first-landing had been required by the Space Guard, and it was highly desirable as a break in the awful monotony of overdrive travel. But the discovery of a Lost Race artifact justified anything in the

way of delay. The entire crew—all eight men—struggled back to the amphitheatre, carrying the equipment the Skipper had decided on. They set up a camera to photograph the images formed. Other cameras to photograph every possible detail of the amphitheatre. Grubbing-tools to clear away the vines.

It was an extraordinary scene. The weird, unearthlike vegetation: the curiously alien shell of deeply tarnished metal, with the queer-shaped seat before it, and eight men in spacecraft uniform staring at the image of the Skipper's grandchild waddling about and playing with blocks. He was actually on Earth, multiple millions of billions of miles away. But the camera purred, taking his picture.

Then there was a racking, muffled "*Boom!*" a mile away. Then the eerie, lunatic whistling of a lifeboat screaming for the sky.

The eight of them gasped. Instinctively, every man counted all the others. But they were all on hand. Then they ran for the *Carilya*, forgetting the cameras and the hood itself.

The airlock door was open. Smoke welled out. A lifeboat blister gaped wide, and it was empty. They fought their way into the stifling vapor. It was thickest toward the engine-room. The Skipper himself was first into the compartment which was the heart of the ship.

And the ship's engines were wreckage. The *Carilya* would never lift from this unnamed planet without new engines. And the fuel-container gaped wide. The bessendium fuel had vanished. No man was missing. Every one was still at hand. Only a lifeboat was gone—a lifeboat and the unthinkable precious fuel-block. No food. No stores. That was all.

The Skipper's face went gray. Exactly this thing had not happened before, perhaps, but disasters enough like it were nightmares to spacemen. The *Carilya* was now missing. Permanently. She would never be searched for. It was not practical. No other ship might touch on this planet for a thousand years. The crew of the *Carilya* was marooned in absolute helplessness, literally until it rotted. He said hoarsely:

"It—looks like we found more than a relic of the Lost Race. It looks like a survivor of the Lost Race found us! And he—it—

took our fuel, smashed our engines, and went off in a lifeboat. Crazy! A lifeboat can't use bessendium! And its drive is good only for half a light-year or less!"

But Howell said:

"There are other planets. Or maybe there's a colony of survivors somewhere else on this world." Then to Jimmy he said wryly: "Maybe one of them with precognition foresaw our arrival, and they made plans ahead of time."

But something stuck absurdly in Jimmy's mind. He said bewilderedly:

"But look! That smoke was nitriol—human explosive! Our stuff! An intelligent creature might work out a drive and the controls of a lifeboat blister and a lifeboat itself from inspection. That's physics! But how'd he know what was explosive? That's chemistry! How could he know it was an explosive without analyzing it?"

Howell jumped. Jimmy started blindly forward to talk to the Skipper. But Howell caught his arm and drew him back.

"Wait!" he said fiercely. "Hold it! You've said something!"

The Skipper was organizing for an unheard-of emergency. A guard at the airlock. Hunting-parties of two each, to comb the area immediately around the ship for signs of intelligent life. They would carry walkie-talkies for reporting. Meanwhile break out cargo and search for weapons and anything else the situation required.

Howell and Jimmy made one of the two hunting pairs. They went cautiously away from the ship. Then Howell said roughly:

"We're going back to that hood. The cameras are still running. We'll turn them off—and arrange things."

Jimmy was beginning to see the situation as it affected all of them. Marooned for all time. With a ship for shelter, and stores, and a full cargo of supplies for a Space-Guard base, but utterly without hope of ever leaving. He'd never see Sally again. She'd never know what had happened to him. She'd imagine the *Carilya* disabled and floating helplessly until her crew starved or suffocated.

But Howell led the way directly to the shell in which

images formed. He turned off the cameras. But he hid two of them, triggering them to the vines by the seat before the shell.

"I've got a hunch," he said grimly, "which does *not* come from the subconscious. I think you're right about that explosion. After all, any of us could have set a time-bomb to wreck the engines, and any of us could have set time-controls to open the blister and send the lifeboat off untenanted."

"But he'd be marooned with the rest!" protested Jimmy. "And what'd he gain?"

"Five pounds of bessendium," said Howell. "Forty million credits, salable in the black market anywhere. And if he is a certain sort of man—other satisfactions."

Howell's face was savagely stern. He put back the vines so they would not seem to have been disturbed. But the cameras would photograph any images formed in the metal shell.

They went on and faithfully searched for signs of alien intelligent beings. They found nothing. Strange enough creatures, to be sure. They saw flightless birds—at least they had feathers—with teeth. Once they saw what looked like a tiny lizard spinning a web of sticky stuff. And once they passed a hole in the ground, two inches across, from which shrill singing of a bird-like quality issued. But there was no sign of intelligent life anywhere.

Back at the ship there was feverish activity. They were dead men, all eight of them. Perhaps in a thousand years a ship might descend again on this planet. It might or might not find the corroded remains of the *Carilya*. But they were dead to all the rest of humanity. They might as well be dead physically. It was absurd to be mounting blasters to defend the *Carilya* against the fellows of the assumed Lost Race creature which had smashed the ship's engines and gone off in a lifeboat. All of them had the look of newly condemned criminals. But each of them differed in his reaction. Danton looked like a madman, with raging eyes. But all worked with desperate haste.

The other searching-party found no sign of intelligent life, either. Toward sunset, two more searching-parties went out.

Danton was in one of them. Jimmy was called on to help the Skipper check over the ship's manifest for useful articles. With a certain irony he pointed to the notation of a needle-boat carried in the *Carilya's* hold for the base on Cetis Alpha Two. The Skipper nodded gloomily.

"An explorer," he said wearily. "The Guard's trying to find unsmashed traces of the Lost Race. They're short-handed, because Guard pay is low. So they're going in for two-man ships. If they don't go crazy, two men can map a star-cluster as well as a cruiser's forty. If we had our fuel, we could get back to Earth in that!"

But the fuel was gone. Jimmy and the Skipper went on picking out cases to be opened. They worked until exhaustion stopped them.

Jimmy had just reached his cabin when Howell turned up, smelling of crushed jungle growths. He was deathly pale. He had the rolls of film from the cameras.

"They turned on," he said harshly, "and I've got the film. But you're not going to look, Jimmy. I look first!"

He threaded the film in the viewer and turned it so that Jimmy could not see. Then there was silence. For fifteen minutes or more he watched, and a deadly fury filled his face. It was a cold and horrible rage. Then he pulled out the film and deliberately touched a light to it. It shriveled, smoked, and fell to ash. Then he sat still, his lips tautened to a thin line.

At long last he stood up. He said tonelessly:

"Danton used the gadget again, to see what he thought his wife was doing. And I've just looked into his mind. If you ever get a chance to do that, Jimmy—don't!" He paused, and added evenly: "Apparently there are two things intelligent people shouldn't do. They shouldn't look into the future, and they shouldn't look into each other's minds."

He went out. Jimmy wearily tried not to think of the fact that he would never see Sally again. He was very glad that he'd kept busy so that now he was exhausted. He fell asleep.

When he reported for duty next morning the Skipper seemed strangely abstracted and uneasy. He said shortly:

"Howell sprang a queer theory on me just now. How's his

stability? You share a cabin with him. Is he over-imaginative?"

"I don't think he deludes himself," said Jimmy tiredly. He'd waked without any feeling of having rested. All night he'd dreamed of Sally. She'd given up hope of ever seeing him again, and she was crying. And he'd been unable to speak to her or comfort her.

"I'm going to send the remaining lifeboat off on an aerial search," said the Skipper slowly. "Howell suggested it—and he may be right. And we're going to make a more thorough search in the jungle around here. I'll leave Danton as ship-guard and the rest of us will hunt the jungle with a fine-tooth comb."

Jimmy was apathetic. Despair had settled on him. There was no conceivable hope. The *Carilya* was a wreck, and she could never lift again, and there was no fuel, and none could be improvised, and there were no engines, and there was no faintest chance of any other vessel coming this way, or of landing on this planet if it did, and even then with tens of millions of square miles of surface. . . .

The rest of the crew members were as numbed as he was. The remaining lifeboat took off and went away across the jungle. There were three men in it. Three more—including Howell and Jimmy—marched away with the Skipper to search in the jungle. Danton stayed behind as ship-guard, with orders to send up sound-bombs in case of any alarm.

But the men on foot did not go far. Once out of sight of the ship, the Skipper halted them.

"I'm taking Howell's word for something," he said heavily. "It's not likely, but I'm clutching at straws. We're going to get to where we can watch the ship from hiding."

Howell said briefly:

"I'm sure of part of it. I think the rest, psychologically, is pretty certain."

He led the way in a long circuit. They came to the back of the hillock which had shielded the amphitheatre and the metal shell from the blasts which had destroyed the city. The life-boat had landed there and the three men were waiting. All seven climbed the hillock's far side. Presently they could

see the *Carilya* between the canes of the giant grass which covered the hill.

They waited, watching. Around them, the unfamiliar cries of living things filled the air. Wind whispered among the huge grass-blades overhead.

Howell said in a low tone to Jimmy: "Danton used the gadget to see what his wife was doing. He saw his own imaginings only. But he didn't know it. He thought—still thinks—they were real. So he's a crazy man. He simply can't face the prospect of spending a year on the way to Cetus Alpha and back, imagining her acting as he thinks is now proved. He's got to get back to Earth quick and kill her. For him there's simply no alternative. Remember I said Genghis Khan built a pyramid of skulls? Danton's got to do that. He's got to boast. So I think we'll be called back presently. Also, he'll have prepared to escape after he kills her, so he can gloat over it afterward." Howell concluded wryly, "It's bad business, Jimmy, to coddle oneself by indulging in hate. I've done it, and it's bad!"

There was a stirring. A man pointed, startled.

Down below and far away, a great cargo-panel opened in the *Carilya's* side. Danton had opened it. Then objects came tumbling out. The cargo unloader was pushing them. The Skipper winced as cases crashed open. Then a long, sharp nose peered out. The needle-ship which was part of the *Carilya's* cargo poked out its bow, and then trundled down the slanting cargo-panel to the ground. It was in the open air.

Bewildered babblings up on the hill. Sudden, hopeless hope.

"Stay here!" ordered the Skipper harshly. But he turned a tortured face to Howell. "You're sure?"

"I'm positive," said Howell steadily.

Danton appeared, a minute figure. He opened the port of the needle-boat and went in, and came out again and went back to the *Carilya*. He returned to the needle-boat. After a moment there was the muffled, droning thunder of a bessen-dium fuel drive in test operation.

Cries broke from the throats of the men on the hill. They

would have plunged toward the ship, but the Skipper restrained them. His face was bitter and angry.

"You're right, Howell!" he snapped. "Now what?"

"The sound-bombs, I think," said Howell quietly. "He can't help boasting to us before he leaves. I doubt he intends to kill any of us, though. He'd prefer to leave us alive to hate him. That would be a tribute to his power."

The droning stopped. Danton moved about. Then there was a small report, and something hurtled skyward and burst with a terrific detonation in mid-air. Two others followed. Sound-bombs. The recall.

The Skipper led the way downhill. But the crewmen could not keep discipline. An oiler ran ahead, babbling. Then there was a stampede. Only the Skipper and Howell and Jimmy descended with any pretense of dignity. When they reached the ship, Danton stood in the port of the needle-boat, snarling triumphantly at his former comrades. He had a blaster bearing upon them. They pleaded abjectly, hysterically, to be allowed on board.

His face contorted when he saw Howell and Jimmy.

"I wanted to tell you, Howell!" he cried hoarsely. "I'm going back to Earth! I took the fuel and sent off a lifeboat to get my chance. And I've got it! That thing you found—it showed me what Jane's been doing."

He seemed suddenly to rave, snarling unspeakable things. Howell watched him steadily.

"I'll land without notice," raved Danton. "I'll get to Jane when she doesn't expect it, and I'll blast anybody she's got with her, and then I'll take her off: I'll take her off to space in this ship, and I'll kill her! But not too fast! I'll keep her strong with stimulus so she won't die, and I'll kill her slowly, and she'll take a month to die! And you can picture that while you're rotting here!"

But Howell shook his head, smiling without mirth.

"Oh, no! The thing I found doesn't show what's happening back on Earth! It shows only what's happening in your own mind, Danton! And I got pictures of that last night, when you went back and looked at your own imaginings for the second

time. I got pictures of the needle-boat, too, when you thought you inspected it with that same gadget, and of where you'd hidden the bessendium when you thought you made sure it hadn't been disturbed. You're not going to do anything you plan, Danton! You can't take off: I've fixed the controls so you can test-run the engines, but you can't put on the power! I've even got—"

Danton was taken aback for an instant. Then he shrieked with fury. The blaster in his hand came up, aimed at Howell. At that distance it would wipe out the Skipper and Jimmy, too, but—

The Skipper fired first, and Danton seemed to be all flame. And then Howell said mildly:

"You didn't need to do that, Skipper. I'd switched blasters on him, too. His wouldn't have fired. But it may be just as well. . . ."

The needle-boat took off two days later, duly freighted with adequate photographs of the Lost Race artifact, of the *Carilya*, of her engine-room, and sworn visirecords of the situation and its origin. The Skipper stayed with his ship, because of course there would be another ship coming now with new engines. Four crew members stayed with him, too, because they had no objection to a vacation with pay—since rescue was sure. Only Howell and Jimmy went back in the needleboat, which meant that they had as much of comfort as anybody can possibly have in space.

In overdrive, headed back, Howell was very quiet. But Jimmy babbled happily. Lifeboat pay is high. On landing, he'd be able to get married and have six months ashore before he needed to ship out again. He was on top of the world, even light-years above it.

Howell listened patiently enough. But the day before they cut overdrive and saw the stars again, he said:

"I've got plans, too, Jimmy. But you ought to know what I learned about the Lost Race. Clearing brush away to take those last pictures, I found a skeleton of one of them. Here's a picture of it. Take a look!"

Jimmy looked. Mere traces of bones, in a sense, yet fully recognizable. There were rust-streaks, too, of metal objects the member of the Lost Race had had about him when he died.

"Definitely anthropoid," said Howell drily. "See? But he had a tail. And he was plenty civilized! That's a belt. You can't tell much about the skull, because apparently he blew his head off after the city was smashed and he was the only member of his race left. But do you see?"

Jimmy continued to inspect the picture. It was magnificent, of course, to have found not only an artifact but a skeleton of one of the Lost Race. But he was much more concerned about his own romance. Howell looked at him, smiling.

"They made a wonderful civilization over an area two thousand light-years across. Then they made a gadget that would show, unmistakably, the things one's brain contains. If they put somebody with well-developed precognition in the seat we saw, they could see the future. They did. What they saw made them smash their civilization and commit suicide. Remember?"

Jimmy said, "Sure, I remember that was your new theory."

"Now I've got evidence for it," said Howell drily. "I guessed that they found out their atomic power had changed their race so their descendants would be monsters. They killed themselves rather than face it, and smashed their civilization so no later race would suffer the same ghastly fate. Look at this skeleton. What do you see?"

Jimmy blinked. So Howell said patiently:

"Remember that mutations, even from radio-activity, are of individual points from mutated individual genes. Now mutate a few familiar features of that skeleton. Make the tail into a coccyx. Shorten the arm-bones and shift the hip-sockets so the creature would walk upright. Those are relatively mild. There must have been others we can't tell from a skeleton alone. But those would be enough to make a chap like this see descendants so changed as monsters. And he'd rather die, and his whole race preferred to die, rather than live to see their descendants become such ghastly creatures as"—and Howell smiled faintly—"as men!"

## WHY I SELECTED

### DR. GRIMSHAW'S SANITARIUM

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*To begin with, I don't think it's a particularly brilliant story. It's better now than when first published (because I have revised it) but still not out of the top drawer. The reason I select it is that for originality of theme and for logical interweaving of all the parts, it is the best one I have written within the restrictions of length the editors have laid down. The reason I find it something less than perfect is that it was written back in the pre-historic days of science fiction, when there was only one magazine in the field; and because science fiction as a whole has gone a long way since then.*

*It is being written by people who know a whole lot more about writing than we did in the old days (that's why it was necessary to revise this story)—that is, about things like dialog, the way to convey information, emphasis and movement. It is also being written by people who know a whole lot more about science; and I am not sure that all the effects of this are good.*

*I am afraid that science fiction is developing a kind of shorthand of its own, so that it is in danger of being understood by only a few people. Say "space-suit" to someone who doesn't spend all his time on sci-f, and he won't know what on Earth you're talking about, for instance. Still less will he understand "de-gravitator."*

*I think the first job the science fiction writer of today faces is that of taking an occasional look back to the old days when we had to explain everything to readers who never heard of science fiction; and this is one of the reasons why DR. GRIMSHAW'S SANITARIUM is offered here now.*

FLETCHER PRATT

FLETCHER PRATT

## DR. GRIMSHAW'S SANITARIUM

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### A Private Prison, Detective John Doherty Found, Where They Actually Made Little Ones Out of Big Ones!

*Note by the editors:* The following manuscript represents either a hoax or the true explanation of the Grimshaw Sanitarium scandal. If a hoax, it is an extraordinarily good one, since it fits all the exterior facts of that case. On the other hand, there is not the slightest evidence that the central statement with regard to Dr. Grimshaw's experiments has any basis whatever in fact, and experimenters who have attempted to reproduce his results have been uniformly unsuccessful.

Under the circumstances, the editors have decided to present this manuscript to the public in the form in which it was deciphered. What is *your* opinion?

For the benefit of readers who are not familiar with the Grimshaw case, the known facts are these:

Dr. Adelbert Grimshaw, a physician of German extraction, opened a private sanitarium for nervous cases at Gowanda, near the State Hospital for the Insane. It was a very select institution, catering to wealthy patients, but Dr. Grimshaw had a considerable charity ward in which indigent feeble-minded patients were cared for.

Dr. Grimshaw's success was from the first phenomenal. Well-attested cases of complete recovery from both dementia

praecox and paranoia are recorded from his institution, and at the time the extraordinarily high death-rate was not noticed.

The Grimshaw Sanitarium scandal was precipitated by the case of Harlan Ward. This young man, the heir of the automobile manufacturer, after being graduated from college, embarked on an extensive post-graduate course in the speakeasy technique of the period, and in 1927 was committed to Dr. Grimshaw's Sanitarium as an alcoholic. He was discharged as cured some eight months later, but about a year after the discharge was caught in a dope raid, and returned to the institution as an addict. While his wife and parents were in Europe they received a cablegram from Dr. Grimshaw announcing Harlan Ward's death.

On returning to the United States, they made arrangements for the removal of the body from its temporary resting-place in the Trinity (Episcopal) Chapel of Gowanda to the family vault at Short Hills, Long Island. While passing through New York City, the hearse carrying the casket was struck by another car. The hearse was overturned and the casket broken. Instead of the body, it proved to contain an ingeniously constructed dummy stuffed with sand, dressed in Harlan Ward's clothes, and with the face represented by a well-made wax mask.

There was an immediate investigation, in the course of which exhumation orders were issued for several other patients who had died at Dr. Grimshaw's Sanitarium. In every case the body was similarly missing, and a sand-stuffed dummy with a mask face was found in the coffin. None of the bodies has ever been discovered. The death certificates in all these cases bore the signature of Dr. Grimshaw himself.

By the time investigation reached this stage, he had disappeared, and efforts to trace him have so far been unsuccessful. His assistant, Dr. Benjamin Voyna, was apprehended however, and the State Police succeeded in piecing together enough of the partially-destroyed papers of the sanitarium to show that Grimshaw and Voyna had been the distributing centers of a drug ring which for some time had given much

trouble to the authorities. Several patients at the sanitarium were found to be addicts although they had originally been committed for other reasons, and there is very little doubt that Harlan Ward was one of these.

The peculiarity of the drug cases was that the addicts exhibited none of the symptoms of the well-known narcotics. Dr. Voyna obstinately refused to tell what drug had been used, and before his arrest, succeeded in destroying whatever supplies he had, so that the question of the specific drug remains unsolved to this day.

Of the other facts uncovered by the investigation there is only one that has any real bearing on the authenticity of the manuscript here presented. It was found that Dr. Grimshaw had been engaged in the business of supplying circus side-shows with midgets. All these midgets were at best morons, and some of them so feeble-minded as to be unable to dress themselves. Grimshaw supplied them against cash payments on a basis that constituted genuine human slavery; and most of them were drug addicts.

Dr. Voyna ultimately received a sentence of five years, the heaviest allowable for dope peddling under United States law. If Grimshaw is ever found, it is doubtful whether any other charge can be substantiated against him. He undoubtedly caused the disappearance, if not the death, of many persons, but there is nothing on which to base a kidnapping charge, and for a charge of murder, the production of a *corpus delicti*, or evidence that someone has been murdered, is necessary.

The manuscript is said to have been found in Grimshaw's Sanitarium when it was raided by the State Troopers. One of the troopers, while searching the main living room of the sanitarium, found three gelatine capsules in a corner of the fireplace—or says he found them there. They appeared to be of no particular importance; he dropped them in his pocket and forgot about them.

The subsequent history of the capsules is obscure. They turned up in the hands of one Harry Kamajian, an itinerant peddler of Olean, N. Y., who asked a druggist of that city whether they were good for headaches. Upon opening one of

the capsules the druggist found it contained, not drugs, but a roll of thin paper, apparently cut from the India-paper edition of some book, and inscribed with minute characters.

The other two capsules were similar. The characters were finer than anything but the most minute engraving and were only deciphered with the aid of a microscope. The druggist, who refuses to allow his name to be used, declines to submit the originals for examination unless he is paid for the privilege. It will be noted that there is a gap in the manuscript, presumably representing a fourth capsule, which has not been discovered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Into whatever hands this may fall, I pray to God that the finder will bring it to the police as soon as he can. I herewith lay a complaint that Dr. Adelbert Grimshaw is engaged in the drug traffic. I charge that he is a murderer. Dr. Voyna must be in it, too.

I fear that in spite of anything we can do, this will fall into Grimshaw's own hands, in which it will only afford him a view of how he looks to other people—Sherman and Kraicki, Arthur Kaye and myself. Not that it will matter to you, Dr. Grimshaw. We who are about to die salute you! Behold your mirror. But if you who read this are not Dr. Grimshaw, will you do me one last favor? Please notify Miss Millicent Armbruster of 299 Wallace Avenue, Buffalo, that John Doherty is dead.

But notify the police above all. Here's a clue; if they are skeptical, tell them to find out where Arthur Kaye is buried and to examine the coffin that is supposed to contain his remains. That ought to be convincing. They won't find any.

What I have written here already sounds tense and hysterical, now that I read it, as though I were one of the psychiatric patients of this place, suffering from some sort of delusion of persecution. I am not—and it's all true. Look, whoever you are that reads this, check up on me. It's easy. My name is John Doherty. I am a graduate of Hamilton College, class of '16, a member of Theta Alpha. I'm one of the fools who didn't want

to go into an ordinary business and so got a job with a private detective. His name is Morrison; he had an office in the Binghamton Bank for Savings building.

Look: this is how it happened. You can run a check on it. The Eye—that's the Pinkertons—offered me a job and I took it. They put me on a job guarding a money shipment from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, where they thought maybe the messenger was crooked, but weren't quite sure. I was locked in the express car with him and the money; it was a night trip. He was crooked, all right. During the night he waited till I looked a little bit dopey, then pulled his gun and tried to let me have it. I got him, but he hit me on the top of the head and after they pulled us both out of the car, I had to have an operation—trepanning, I think they call it.

I still know I was not nuts or anything, but after I got over the operation, I couldn't seem to think straight all the time, so the Eye sent me down here to Grimshaw's. Look: I'm going to give the whole story, because it's all evidence, maybe not the kind you can bring into a court, but it can be checked up. When I got to this place, they gave me a long series of tests. I could recognize them all right as a modified Binet-Simon, and wondered why Grimshaw should bother putting a college man through that routine. That's how much I didn't know. I didn't know the physical tests they gave me, either.

The routine at the sanitarium was easy. It was the first time I had a real rest since I could remember. We were kept in our rooms most of the time except in the afternoon, when all the patients went out for exercise in the park, with a garden and a small stream running through it. I got to know some of the other patients. You can check on them—Arthur Kaye, a big man with a high forehead, a broker, who was in here for dipsomania; Kraicki, who was Polish, and used to say he was a nobleman, but I think he was just weak in the head. Sherman was the interne in our wing. I got along fine with him, he liked the same sort of books I did. The four of us formed a little group and were together a good deal.

We started by trying to play bridge, but the game broke up early. Kraicki couldn't keep his mind on it. He was amusing,

you understand, but he just couldn't learn to play bridge. You might as well have tried to teach a cow to roller-skate. So we just talked.

That's the trouble, you see. We didn't have anything to do but talk, and I got bored as hell. I used to be an athlete at college—football and lacrosse—and just sitting around or looking at a movie in the evening got me down. We weren't getting treatments of any kind, just living at the place, apparently, and I didn't have anything to do. So I began figuring out some way to get rid of the boredom, and the only way I could think of was to break a rule.

The most interesting rule to break seemed one connected with the wall. At the left side of the park it was; a high stone wall that kept our part of the sanitarium separate from that where the charity patients were. Sherman remarked one day that nobody but Grimshaw and Voyna were allowed in that part, and the building where the charity patients lived was only connected with the rest of the institution by a covered passage with an iron gate in it. I don't like to run into things I can't find out—that's one of the reasons I went into this business—and besides, here was something for me to do. So I began figuring on how to get over that wall to find out what all this business of the charity patients was about.

This is the way I worked it. I arranged a dummy for my bed. Then, in the afternoon, when we were called for exercise right after lunch, I slipped around the door of the dining room into the big clothes closet there is there, and waited till the attendant bringing up the rear of the procession got past. After he had turned the corner I went back into the dining room, out the window quick, and into the other side of the park, not the charity patient side, but our own side, only not where the attendants were watching. I slipped down the side of the building to the edge of the stream where there are some rhododendron bushes; you can check on this. There I lay down and waited for dark. I knew that nobody would count us in, and the night attendant would only flash his light through the peephole in the door. The dummy would take care of him all right.

After the lights in the main building went out, I moved along the wall until I found a tree growing close enough against it, climbed over with some trouble and dropped on the other side. There was no one in the grounds. I tried the door, more to assure myself of being unable to get in than with any hope of entering. To my surprise, it was unlocked. The lower hall was paved with stone, scrubbed clean, and had only a single unshaded bulb at the far end. There was no sound but a rather subdued moaning upstairs somewhere, which was not at all surprising since the loonies who were the bulk of Dr. Grimshaw's patients were usually making a noise of some kind, somewhere.

I was about to go upstairs and see what I could through the peep-holes when I heard steps and the grating of a key in the lock of the passage door. The stairs were too far away, the door by which I had entered would cut me off, but there was another door to my immediate right, and it was fortunately unlocked. I grabbed at it, and found myself in a broom-closet, surrounded by mops, where I had hardly installed myself before steps came down the hall. There was a key-hole; through it I made out Grimshaw and Voyna, on either side of a boy of about twelve, who was dressed in what appeared to be a long one-piece suit of pajamas.

Abreast of my place of concealment, they turned on the light in another room and went in, leaving the door open behind them. I could only catch a glimpse or two of what was going on as the figures moved back and forth, truncated by my key-hole, but Grimshaw's voice was perfectly clear:

"Now will you listen to us and take it? The tests show you need it, and you know you'll feel better afterward."

"No, I won't," said another voice. "I know what it is; it's dope you're giving me. I don't care what you do. You can make a midget out of me and maybe I can't help it, but I ain't going to be no dope-fiend."

It was the boy and he was not a boy, as I realized instantly, with a kind of cold horror; though the rest of it, I did not quite understand.

"Swine!" said Grimshaw. There was the sound of a blow. "Do as I say!"

"I won't!" said the voice of the little man. "Go to hell!"

There was another blow, and something like a whimper, then Voyna's voice:

"The injection—"

"Nah, have I not told you many times that this must be oral?" said Grimshaw.

"*Aber, Herr Doktor,*" began Voyna, and then both of them started jabbering in German, which is something I don't understand. Then they shut the door.

I slipped out of the broom-closet and to the outer door, my taste for exploration cured for the evening. I already had a good deal to work out, and doubted whether anything I could find on the upper floors of the charity ward would throw more light. Besides, I didn't want to be cut off up there, with Grimshaw and Voyna in the room below.

That night I slept out under the trees, not wanting to take the chance on prowling the corridors, for if something funny really were going on, it might be dangerous. At that point, I honestly didn't know what to make of it. The midget could easily be plain bugs, but Grimshaw and Voyna hadn't treated him the way you treat mental cases. Also, that reference to dope was a sticker. I'd done enough private eye work to know what a good cover for peddling the junk a sanitarium like Grimshaw's could be. The part about making a midget out of somebody wasn't good sense, but I'm no medic, so that didn't figure by itself.

In the morning I got back to the dining room in time to join the rest at breakfast, but didn't do anything till afternoon, when I decided to ask Sherman about it. The trouble was that I couldn't seem to get rid of Kaye and Kraicki; they hung around until I had to tell them the story as well as Sherman. When I had finished, the interne said:

"Oh, I think you're borrowing—" and then he stopped.

"I know, I know," I said. "This is just suspicion. But you'd be surprised in my business how much you build up on sus-

picion and the tipoff. What I'm asking is whether you have anything that would confirm it, one way or another."

"Only more suspicion, I'm afraid," said Sherman. "There's the fact that nobody but Grimshaw and Voyna go into the charity ward—that is, except one or two of the attendants, who are just strong-arm men. I know they have a private laboratory—none of us go there, either—and he could be making his own type of drugs. It's just incredible that he could produce midgets, but—"

"But what?"

"But I *have* seen a car around here from the Great Neiderlinger Shows. Two or three times."

It was like that, all indefinite and a little nutsy, so I figured the thing to do was really settle matters. I didn't get the chance. Things broke loose that night. We four always ate at one table together, and it wasn't a good meal at dinner, because Kraicki had been pretty much upset by what we were talking about during the afternoon and kept fidgeting. It finally became so noticeable that Grimshaw himself came over to the table and said he'd like to see Kraicki in his office after dessert.

It took just that. Kraicki leaped to his feet and in a voice you could hear clear across the dining-room, shouted:

"Ha, ha! So I will be a dopish or a midget like those others. I tell you, you will not do this to Count Kraicki. No never."

Grimshaw just stood and looked from one to the other of us. None of us said anything, but he must have realized what we knew and what we suspected from the looks on our faces. After a minute, he smiled a crooked smile, kind of, and said:

"No, I will not do it to Count Kraicki." Then he went back to his place as though nothing had happened.

I've seen plenty of guys look like that before, the business I'm in, and I know it always means trouble, but I didn't know how much trouble it meant this time, or how quick on the trigger Grimshaw was. I didn't think of warning Sherman, who was the only one of us that could have made a getaway.

Anyway, this is what happened. About one o'clock in the morning there was someone at the door. I'm a light sleeper

and I was on my feet by the time they came in, so I let the first one have it right on the button, and down he went. But Grimshaw had thought of that, too. The second one got my arm in a ju-jitsu grip and the third one was on my back and pretty soon they had me stretched out. Then they turned on the light, and Grimshaw was standing over me. I saw I had clipped him at least once in the rough-house and felt good about that.

"Sol" he said. "You have serious delusions of persecution, my friend. You imagine things about this place where we are good to you, my friend the detective. Your injury is more serious than I have thought. We must place you in the disturbed ward for a little while, Mr. Doherty."

I started to ask the attendants whether they were going to let the big crook get away with this, but before I could get anywhere, Grimshaw pulled out the old hypodermic and let me have it, and next thing I passed out.

The next thing I knew I was coming to in a different room. I couldn't tell where it was, but I guessed somewhere in the charity ward, because the angle on what trees I could see through the window was different. They had me in a strait-jacket and kept doping me so that I lost count of time. Once I was operated on; I can remember coming to with my head and neck in a plaster cast and the feeling of nausea which is the after-effect of ether.

After this Voyna used to come in and feed me from a spoon, and then in the evening Grimshaw would give me another injection. I felt terribly ill and depressed all the time. In the morning I'd wake up with a blinding headache, and after that wore off, have a horrible sensation of weakness. I began to wonder if he wasn't doing something to drive me insane, because the room seemed to grow in size, and the strait-jacket got looser and looser.

One day it was so loose that I actually wriggled out of it. I hadn't figured my getaway much beyond that point, though, and when Grimshaw came in, I could think of nothing better than trying to jump him. It didn't work; I was so weak he handled me like a punk, and when he got me into the bed

again, I knew something was screwy, because he had not only handled me easily, but he seemed to be more than a head taller than I was, and I'm a six-footer. I suppose that should have been the tipoff—that and what the midget had said when I heard him. But you have to remember that I wasn't feeling too good—really off my nut, I guess—and couldn't make head or tail of what I did see. Once I was taken out on the balcony for air and I thought I saw Arthur Kaye lying on another deck chair near mine, all muffled up, but he didn't speak, and I was feeling too sick. I used to have dreams about giants walking around the room with weapons in their hands.

The first really conscious day I had was I don't know how many weeks later, when Grimshaw told us about it. The night before he hadn't given me the usual injection. In the morning I woke to look at a ceiling that seemed miles overhead and lower down the foot of the bed was a long distance away. The room was gigantic.

Grimshaw came in a little later, with a bundle in his arms. I couldn't believe it at first; he looked over fifteen feet tall. The bundle he set down on the bed; it turned out to be Arthur Kaye, the big man, clad in a pajama-like garment like myself, only now we were midgets smaller than the one I'd seen in the charity ward.

"Look: what goes on?" I said to Kaye. He looked a little dazed but he said:

"I don't understand," and stood up on the bed beside me, and by that time Grimshaw was back with Voyna and two other bundles that were Sherman and Kraicki.

Voyna went out. Grimshaw looked down at all four of us standing on the bed together and began talking. His voice was so loud and so deep in pitch that I had a little trouble in getting what he was talking about, and so I won't be able to put this down in his exact words, but I'll try to come as near as I can, and for God's sake, whoever finds this, make sure that somebody gets it. It's the most important of all. This is what he said:

"Allow me to congratulate you, gentlemen. You have advanced the cause of general science immeasurably. You four

are the participants in what will be known as the Grimshaw experiment, and I wish to thank you for placing me in the front rank of the world's endocrinologists.

"Dr. Sherman, you at least will be able to understand the references. To the rest of you, I will offer a few words of explanation—Mr. Kaye, Count Kraicki, and our estimable detective friend, Mr. Doherty. There are certain glands in the body, gentlemen, which are called respectively, but not at all respectfully—oh, by no means, respectfully—the thyroid, parathyroid, and pituitary glands. They are known as the ductless glands and they have no obvious function. It has been widely assumed that their true function is the discharge into the blood-stream of the various vitamins that maintain the human balance.

"Gentlemen, this is an error. You are the proof. It has been discovered that if the thyroid glands of a young animal, say a sheep or dog, were destroyed, it would become a dwarf of the species, and it has been presumed that this was solely due to lack of vitamins. Investigation has also shown that if a thyroid or pituitary gland were injured there resulted a giant—a seven-foot circus monster. These things are well known, gentlemen. Even in adults there are changes. Dr. Haussler has recorded how an abnormally developed pituitary gland caused a man's fingers to become short, wide and stubby, long after he was fully grown.

"It is my discovery, gentlemen, that the interlock between the endocrine glands and dwarfism or giantism is not due to vitamins, but to an enzyme. *Ach*, it will revolutionize medicine! I call this enzyme 'Theta.' I have isolated it, and I am well on the road to synthesis. Here is the formula."

He held out a sheet of paper. I didn't understand the symbols on it, but Sherman gave an exclamation, as Grimshaw went on:

"You see the importance? Colossal! But it must be proved to the scientific world. Therefore I have produced artificial dwarfs by the correct stimulation of the endocrines, combined with injections of enzyme Theta. But there was a drawback; animals did not yield satisfactory results. The enzyme appears

to be confined to man in its effects. By the use of it, I have produced midgets as small as two feet, six inches in height. Unfortunately, it was impossible to release any of these creatures into the world as normal midgets. American civilization is so prejudiced against research! I have been forced to introduce my midgets to the use of narcotics, and even of a single narcotic of my own composition, in order to retain control of them.

"But with you four, gentlemen, the experiment is on an altogether higher plane. You are to be the first of a new order of super-midgets, or sub-midgets, *hein?* That is a joke, not so? My moron patients usually died when I attempted extremely small size, but all of you except possibly Mr. Kraicki, are of a mental constitution to withstand the treatments and emerge as complete individuals only a few inches in size. I am preparing a report on this. It will not be publishable during my lifetime, but afterward the name of Grimshaw—"

*Note by the editors*—At this point the gap in the manuscript occurs, presumably representing the lost capsule. As to the details given in the manuscript: no report of Dr. Grimshaw's experiments has been discovered. If there ever was such a report, it was presumably destroyed by Voyna before his arrest. A Pinkerton detective named Dougherty (not Doherty) was committed to Dr. Grimshaw's Sanitarium in 1922. A man named Arthur Kaye was also under treatment there at the same time, but it has been impossible to trace anyone named Kraicki or an interne named Sherman. The deaths of Dougherty and Kaye were reported at widely separated intervals; that of the detective in 1923, that of Kaye not until March, 1924. A Miss Millicent Armbruster did live at the address given in the Doherty manuscript. The records show she married a man named Kellett in October, 1922, after which all trace of her is lost.

The contents of the remaining capsule follow:

—stumbled over a grass root, and we had to stop for him. The grass was forest-like in its density, and if we had not waited we certainly would have lost him. The beetle got away

in the excitement, so we had no meat that night, either. Kaye climbed a chick-weed and reported that the garden was still too far away for us to make that night, so we camped in a tuft of grass. It was cold. The piece of bandage was so rough it rasped our skins and the three asleep had to use all the silk for coverlets. I had the second watch. Every time I stumbled into a grass-blade it would deluge me with icy dew, like a shower bath.

In the morning Kraicki began to whine about not getting enough to eat, and we practically had to drag him along. An hour's journey brought us to a decaying twig, which offered material for a fire, provided we could find anything to cook over a fire. We pulled some of the fibers loose and took them along. I was surprised at the amount we could carry, but Sherman said it was because we were on "the right side of the square-cube law," whatever that is. There would be no difficulty about making the fire, that we knew, between the pebbles and the piece of watch-spring Sherman had found the day before.

A little farther along Sherman, who was in the lead, gave a shout from behind a tuft of grass. We found him standing over a June-bug, which was lying on its back, kicking feebly. I attacked it with the piece of watch-spring, but the shell turned my point and all I got was a nasty scratch on the back from one of the barbed legs. Sherman suggested we turn him over and work under the wing-cases, but I was afraid he would fly away before we could do anything, so we decided to build a pyre over the insect and cook it where it lay.

Striking a spark from a stone may be easy for Indians, but it wasn't for us. When we did get the fire alight, the heat produced so much activity on the June-bug's part that it kicked the wood away and we were back where we started. Kaye and I finally got a stone—it was as big as our two bodies—and managed to bash the June-bug's head in. It wiggled a little after that, but there was no objection to our fire. We had forgotten how quickly flame would run through the few fibers of twig we had, and it was a good deal of a task to keep the blaze burning till our meal was cooked.

The meat in the legs, just where they swell out before joining the body was good; not unlike crab-meat to the taste. That in the body was not so well cooked and very fat besides. Kraicki was the only one who would eat much of it.

By the time we had finished the June-bug it was already late afternoon, and we decided against trying for the garden that night. There was a good deal of June-bug meat left and we did not wish to get too far from our base of supply until we had some assurance of more. The question of weapons was partly solved by working loose the wing-cases of the June-bug and splitting them down with the watch-spring. Properly sharpened on a stone they made not inefficient poniards.

Kaye, who is something of an antiquarian, set to work in the afternoon to make a sling out of some of the tough grass fibers. He practiced with it until dark, and managed to knock a couple of flies off grass blades. It was an interesting, but impractical feat, as after the first try, none of us cared to attempt fly-meat again. Next morning he did manage to knock over a bee, however, and we got some valuable meat from that. About a week later he managed to remove from our path a very grim-looking spider.

My paper is running short. I must compress this account. Our main problem was clothing. After we had solved the food difficulty, we decided on a journey around the park, hoping to find a handkerchief someone had dropped. We never did find that, but down at the edge of the stream we came on a chair where one of the internes had left not only a medicine case, but a book, some writing paper and a bottle of ink.

This was a real treasure. Kaye and I hammered the catch of the medicine case open with a stone. Besides various oddments of no particular use to us, it contained a number of capsules, from which we emptied the contents, whereupon we had baskets as carryalls, and very useful they were. We succeeded in breaking one of the bottles, and with the sharpened shards of glass managed to fashion some tools and weapons. It was an interesting plunge into the stone age.

I must hurry. The paper on which we tried to write a rec-

ord was too heavy and the beetle's leg which I tried to use for a pen was too scratchy. But the book, by great good luck turned out to be Brinkley's "History of Japan"—on India paper. We worried a couple of the fly-leaves loose.

Even then I doubt whether I would have taken the time to write this record but for what happened the other day. We were fairly comfortable in our grass hut and well supplied with both clothing and food after Sherman killed the mole and Kraicki made the discovery that the yellow centers of some grass stems made good vegetables, like asparagus in taste. We figured on getting into the house for the winter; it probably wouldn't be too hard to forage for food.

But three days ago the change came. Sherman and Kraicki had gone hunting together, while Kaye and I were experimenting with various materials for bows, when Sherman burst in on us, very pale and with his moleskin jacket disordered.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Where's Kraicki?"

"Gone," he choked out. "Grimshaw's got a cat."

That's why I'm leaving this record. I hope to God somebody besides Grimshaw finds it.

## WHY I SELECTED

## THE ULTIMATE CATALYST

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*The Editors have asked me for a short statement saying why THE ULTIMATE CATALYST is my favorite s-f story. It is quite simple. Suppose you had only one child. Would not that child be your favorite? So here; this is the only short story I have ever written. All my other s-f works have been full book-length novels. But in addition to this irrefutable logic, I like the story because its weird pure s-f chemistry shocked my friends among the professional chemists to the soles of their boots. Being an academic man myself, nothing gives me greater pleasure than to take some of the excelsior out of over-stuffed shirts. I did this chemical story deliberately with malice aforethought.*

*It worked.*

JOHN TAINÉ

JOHN TAINE

## THE ULTIMATE CATALYST

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### Kadir Rules Amazonia—But the Animal and Plant Kingdoms Are Beyond His Sway!

**THE** Dictator shoved his plate aside with a petulant gesture. The plate, like the rest of the official banquet service, was solid gold with the Dictator's monogram, K.I.—Kadir Imperator, or Emperor Kadir—embossed in a design of machine guns round the edge. And, like every other plate on the long banquet table, Kadir's was piled high with a colorful assortment of raw fruits.

This was the dessert. The guests had just finished the main course, a huge plateful apiece of steamed vegetables. For an appetizer they had tried to enjoy an iced tumblerful of mixed fruit juices.

There had been nothing else at the feast but fruit juice, steamed vegetables, and raw fruit. Such a meal might have sustained a scholarly vegetarian, but for soldiers of a domineering race it was about as satisfying as a bucketful of cold water.

"Vegetables and fruit," Kadir complained. "Always vegetables and fruit. Why can't we get some red beef with blood in it for a change? I'm sick of vegetables. And I hate fruit. Blood and iron—that's what we need."

The guests stopped eating and eyed the Dictator apprehensively. They recognized the first symptoms of an imperial rage. Always when Kadir was about to explode and lose control of his evil temper, he had a preliminary attack of the blues, usually over some trifle.

They sat silently waiting for the storm to break, not daring to eat while their Leader abstained.

Presently a middle-aged man, halfway down the table on Kadir's right, calmly selected a banana, skinned it, and took a bite. Kadir watched the daring man in amazed silence. The last of the banana was about to disappear when the Dictator found his voice.

"Americano!" he bellowed like an outraged bull. "Mister Beetle!"

"*Doctor* Beetle, if you don't mind, Senhor Kadir," the offender corrected. "So long as every other white man in Amazonia insists on being addressed by his title, I insist on being addressed by mine. It's genuine, too. Don't forget that."

"Beetle!" The Dictator began roaring again.

But Beetle quietly cut him short. "'Doctor' Beetle, please. I insist."

Purple in the face, Kadir subsided. He had forgotten what he intended to say. Beetle chose a juicy papaya for himself and a huge, greenish plum for his daughter, who sat on his left. Ignoring Kadir's impotent rage, Beetle addressed him as if there had been no unpleasantness. Of all the company, Beetle was the one man with nerve enough to face the Dictator as an equal.

"You say we need blood and iron," he began. "Do you mean that literally?" the scientist said slowly.

"How else should I mean it?" Kadir blustered, glowering at Beetle. "I always say what I mean. I am no theorist. I am a man of action, not words!"

"All right, all right," Beetle soothed him. "But I thought perhaps your 'blood and iron' was like old Bismarck's—blood and sabres. Since you mean just ordinary blood, like the blood in a raw beefsteak, and iron not hammered into sabres, I think Amazonia can supply all we need or want."

"But beef, red beef—" Kadir expostulated.

"I'm coming to that in a moment." Beetle turned to his daughter. "Consuelo, how did you like that greenbeefo?"

"That *what?*" Consuelo asked in genuine astonishment.

Although as her father's laboratory assistant she had

learned to expect only the unexpected from him, each new creation of his filled her with childlike wonderment and joy. Every new biological creation her father made demanded a new scientific name. But, instead of manufacturing new scientific names out of Latin and Greek, as many reputable biologists do, Beetle used English, with an occasional lapse into Portuguese, the commonest language of Amazonia. He had even tried to have his daughter baptized Buglette, as the correct technical term for the immature female offspring of a Beetle. But his wife, a Portuguese lady of irreproachable family, had objected, and the infant was named Consuelo.

"I asked how you like the greenbeefo," Beetle repeated. "That seedless green plum you just ate."

"Oh, so that's what you call it." Consuelo considered carefully, like a good scientist, before passing judgment on the delicacy. "Frankly, I didn't like it a little bit. It smelt like underdone pork. There was a distinct flavor of raw blood. And it all had a rather slithery wet taste, if you get what I mean."

"I get you exactly," Beetle exclaimed. "An excellent description." He turned to Kadir. "There! You see we've already done it."

"Done what?" Kadir asked suspiciously.

"Try a greenbeefo and see."

Somewhat doubtfully, Kadir selected one of the huge greenish plums from the golden platter beside him, and slowly ate it. Etiquette demanded that the guests follow their Leader's example.

While they were eating the greenbeefos, Beetle watched their faces. The women of the party seemed to find the juicy flesh of the plums unpalatable. Yet they kept on eating and several, after finishing one, reached for another.

The men ate greedily. Kadir himself disposed of the four greenbeefos on his platter and hungrily looked about for more. His neighbors on either side, after a grudging look at their own diminishing supplies, offered him two of theirs. Without a word of thanks, Kadir devoured the offerings.

As Beetle sat calmly watching their greed, he had difficulty

in keeping his face impassive and not betraying his disgust. Yet these people were starving for flesh. Possibly they were to be pardoned for looking more like hungry animals than representatives of the conquering race at their first taste in two years of something that smelt like flesh and blood.

All their lives, until the disaster which had quarantined them in Amazonia, these people had been voracious eaters of flesh in all its forms from poultry to pork. Now they could get nothing of the sort.

The dense forests and jungles of Amazonia harbored only a multitude of insects, poisonous reptiles, gaudy birds, spotted cats, and occasional colonies of small monkeys. The cats and the monkeys eluded capture on a large scale, and after a few half-hearted attempts at trapping, Kadir's hardy followers had abandoned the forests to the snakes and the stinging insects.

The chocolate-colored waters of the great river skirting Amazonia on the north swarmed with fish, but they were inedible. Even the natives could not stomach the pulpy flesh of these bloated mud-suckers. It tasted like the water of the river, a foul soup of decomposed vegetation and rotting wood. Nothing remained for Kadir and his heroic followers to eat but the tropical fruits and vegetables.

Luckily for the invaders, the original white settlers from the United States had cleared enough of the jungle and forest to make intensive agriculture possible. When Kadir arrived, all of these settlers, with the exception of Beetle and his daughter, had fled. Beetle remained, partly on his own initiative, partly because Kadir insisted that he stay and "carry on" against the snakes. The others traded Kadir their gold mines in exchange for their lives.

The luscious greenbeefos had disappeared. Beetle suppressed a smile as he noted the flushed and happy faces of the guests. He remembered the parting words of the last of the mining engineers.

"So long, Beetle. You're a brave man and may be able to handle Kadir. If you do, we'll be back. Use your head, and make a monkey of this dictating brute. Remember, we're counting on you."

Beetle had promised to keep his friends in mind. "Give me three years. If you don't see me again by then, shed a tear and forget me."

"*Senhorina Beetle!*" It was Kadir roaring again. The surfeit of greenbeefos restored his old bluster.

"Yes?" Consuelo replied politely.

"I know now why your cheeks are always so red," Kadir shouted.

For a moment neither Consuelo nor her father got the drift of Kadir's accusation. They understood just as Kadir started to enlighten them.

"You and your traitorous father are eating while we starve."

Beetle kept his head. His conscience was clear, so far as the greenbeefos were concerned, and he could say truthfully that they were not the secret of Consuelo's rosy cheeks and his own robust health. He quickly forestalled his daughter's reply.

"The meat-fruit, as you call it, is not responsible for Consuelo's complexion. Hard work as my assistant keeps her fit. As for the greenbeefos, this is the first time anyone but myself has tasted one. You saw how my daughter reacted. Only a great actress could have feigned such inexperienced distaste. My daughter is a biological chemist, not an actress."

Kadir was still suspicious. "Then why did you not share these meat-fruits with us before?"

"For a very simple reason. I created them by hybridization only a year ago, and the first crop of my fifty experimental plants ripened this week. As I picked the ripe fruit, I put it aside for this banquet. I thought it would be a welcome treat after two years of vegetables and fruit. And," Beetle continued, warming to his invention, "I imagined a taste of beef—even if it is only green beef, 'greenbeefo'—would be a very suitable way of celebrating the second anniversary of the New Freedom in Amazonia."

The scientist's sarcasm anent the 'new freedom' was lost upon Kadir, nor did Kadir remark the secret bitterness in Beetle's eyes. What an inferior human being a dictator was, the scientist thought! What stupidity, what brutality! So long

as a single one remained—and Kadir was the last—the Earth could not be clean.

"Have you any more?" Kadir demanded.

"Sorry. That's all for the present. But I'll have tons in a month or less. You see," he explained, "I'm using hydroponics to increase production and hasten ripening."

Kadir looked puzzled but interested. Confessing that he was merely a simple soldier, ignorant of science, he deigned to ask for particulars. Beetle was only too glad to oblige.

"It all began a year ago. You remember asking me when you took over the country to stay and go on with my work at the antivenin laboratory? Well, I did. But what was I to do with all the snake venom we collected? There was no way of getting it out of the country now that the rest of the continent has quarantined us. We can't send anything down the river, our only way out to civilization—"

"Yes, yes," Kadir interrupted impatiently. "You need not remind anyone here that the mountains and the jungles are the strongest allies of our enemies. What has all this to do with the meat-fruit?"

"Everything. Not being able to export any venom, I went on with my research in biochemistry. I saw how you people were starving for flesh, and I decided to help you out. You had slaughtered and eaten all the horses at the antivenin laboratory within a month of your arrival. There was nothing left, for this is not a cattle country, and it never will be. There was nothing to do but try chemistry. I already had the greenhouses left by the engineers. They used to grow tomatoes and cucumbers before you came."

"So you made these meat-fruits chemically?"

Beetle repressed a smile at the Dictator's scientific innocence.

"Not exactly. But really it was almost as simple. There was nothing startlingly new about my idea. To see how simple it was, ask yourself what are the main differences between the higher forms of plant life and the lower forms of animal life.

"Both are living things. But the plants cannot move about

from place to place at will, whereas, the animals can. A plant is, literally, 'rooted to the spot.'

"There are apparent exceptions, of course, like water hyacinths, yeast spores, and others that are transported by water or the atmosphere, but they do not transport themselves as the living animal does. Animals have a 'dimension' of freedom that plants do not have."

"But the beef—"

"In a moment. I mentioned the difference between the freedoms of plants and animals because I anticipate that it will be of the utmost importance in the experiments I am now doing. However, this freedom was not, as you have guessed, responsible for the greenbeefos. It was another, less profound, difference between plants and animals that suggested the 'meat-fruit.'"

Kadir seemed to suspect Beetle of hidden and unflattering meanings, with all this talk of freedom in a country dedicated to the 'New Freedom' of Kadir's dictatorship. But he could do nothing about it, so he merely nodded as if he understood.

"Plants and animals," Beetle continued, "both have 'blood' of a sort. The most important constituents in the 'blood' of both differ principally in the metals combined chemically in each.

"The 'blood' of a plant contains chlorophyll. The blood of an animal contains haemoglobin. Chemically, chlorophyll and haemoglobin are strangely alike. The metal in chlorophyll is magnesium; in haemoglobin, it is iron.

"Well, it occurred to chemists that if the magnesium could be 'replaced' chemically by iron, the chlorophyll could be converted into haemoglobin! And similarly for the other way about: replace the iron in haemoglobin by magnesium, and get chlorophyll!

"Of course it is not all as simple or as complete as I have made it sound. Between haemoglobin and chlorophyll is a long chain of intermediate compounds. Many of them have been formed in the laboratory, and they are definite links in the chain from plant blood to animal blood."

"I see," Kadir exclaimed, his face aglow with enthusiasm at the prospect of unlimited beef from green vegetables. He leaned over the table to question Beetle.

"It is the blood that gives flesh its appetizing taste and nourishing strength. You have succeeded in changing the plant blood to animal blood?"

Beetle did not contradict him. In fact, he evaded the question.

"I expect," he confided, "to have tons of greenbeefos in a month, and thereafter a constant supply as great as you will need. Tray-culture—hydroponics—will enable us to grow hundreds of tons in a space no larger than this banquet hall."

The "banquet hall" was only a ramshackle dining room that had been used by the miners before Kadir arrived. Nevertheless, it could be called anything that suited the Dictator's ambition.

"Fortunately," Beetle continued, "the necessary chemicals for tray-culture are abundant in Amazonia. My native staff has been extracting them on a large scale for the past four months, and we will have ample for our needs."

"Why don't you grow the greenbeefos in the open ground?" one of Kadir's officers inquired a trifle suspiciously.

"Too inefficient. By feeding the plants only the chemicals they need directly, we can increase production several hundredfold and cut down the time between successive crops to a few weeks. By properly spacing the propagation of the plants, we can have a constant supply. The seasons cut no figure."

They seemed satisfied, and discussion of the glorious future in store for Amazonia became general and animated. Presently Beetle and Consuelo asked the Dictator's permission to retire. They had work to do at the laboratory.

"Hydroponics?" Kadir inquired jovially. Beetle nodded, and they bowed themselves out of the banquet hall.

Consuelo withheld her attack until they were safe from possible eavesdroppers.

"Kadir is a lout," she began, "but that is no excuse for your filling him up with a lot of impossible rubbish."

"But it *isn't* impossible, and it *isn't* rubbish," Beetle protested. "You know as well as I do—"

"Of course I know about the work on chlorophyll and haemoglobin. But you didn't make those filthy green plums taste like raw pork by changing the chlorophyll of the plants into haemoglobin or anything like it. How did you do it, by the way?"

"Listen, Buglette. If I tell you, it will only make you sick. You ate one, you know."

"I would rather be sick than ignorant. Go on, you may as well tell me."

"Very well. It's a long story, but I'll cut it short. Amazonia is the last refuge of the last important dictator on earth. When Kadir's own people came to their senses a little over two years ago and kicked him out, he and his top men and their women came over here with their 'new freedom.' But the people of this continent didn't want Kadir's brand of freedom. Of course a few thousand crackpots in the larger cities welcomed him and his gang as their 'liberators,' but for once in history the mass of the people knew what they did not want. They combined forces and chased Kadir and his cronies up here.

"I never have been able to see why they did not exterminate Kadir and company as they would any other pests. But the presidents of the United Republics agreed that to do so would only be using dictatorial tactics, the very thing they had united to fight. So they let Kadir and his crew live—more or less—in strict quarantine. The temporary loss of a few rich gold mines was a small price to pay, they said, for world security against dictatorships.

"So here we are, prisoners in the last plague spot of civilization. And here is Kadir. He can dictate to his heart's content, but he can't start another war. He is as powerless as Napoleon was on his island.

"Well, when the last of our boys left, I promised to keep them in mind. And you heard my promise to help Kadir out. I am going to keep that promise, if it costs me my last snake."

They had reached the laboratory. Juan, the night-nurse for the reptiles, was going his rounds.

"Everything all right, Juan?" Beetle asked cordially.

He liked the phlegmatic Portuguese who always did his job with a minimum of talk. Consuelo, for her part, heartily disliked the man and distrusted him profoundly. She had long suspected him of being a stool-pigeon for Kadir.

"Yes, Dr. Beetle. Good night."

"Good night, Juan."

When Juan had departed, Consuelo returned to her attack.

"You haven't told me yet how you made these things taste like raw pork."

She strolled over to the tank by the north window where a luxuriant greenbeefo, like an overdeveloped tomato vine, grew rankly up its trellis to the ceiling. About half a dozen of the huge greenish "plums" still hung on the vine.

Consuelo plucked one and was thoughtfully sampling its quality.

"This one tastes all right," she said. "What did you do to the others?"

"Since you really want to know, I'll tell you. I took a hypodermic needle and shot them full of snake blood. My pet constrictor had enough juice in him to do the whole job without discomfort to himself or danger to his health."

Consuelo hurled her half-eaten fruit at her father's head, but missed. She stood wiping her lips with the back of her hand.

"So you can't change the chlorophyll in a growing plant into anything like haemoglobin? You almost had me believing you could."

"I never said I could. Nor can anybody else, so far as I know. But it made a good story to tell Kadir."

"But why?"

"If you care to analyze one of these greenbeefos in your spare time, you will find their magnesium content extraordinarily high. That is not accident, as you will discover if you analyze the chemicals in the tanks. I shall be satisfied if I can get Kadir and his friends to gorge themselves on greenbeefos

when the new crop comes in. Now, did I sell Kadir the green-beefo diet, or didn't I? You saw how they all fell for it. And they will keep on falling as long as the supply of snake blood holds out."

"There's certainly no scarcity of snakes in this charming country," Consuelo remarked. "I'm going to get the taste of one of them out of my mouth right now. Then you can tell me what you want me to do in this new culture of green-beefos you've gone in for."

So father and daughter passed their days under the last dictatorship. Beetle announced that in another week the lush crop of greenbeefos would be ripe. Kadir proclaimed the following Thursday "Festal Thursday" as the feast day inaugurating "the reign of plenty" in Amazonia.

As a special favor, Beetle had requested Kadir to forbid any sightseeing or other interference with his work.

Kadir had readily agreed, and for three weeks Beetle had worked twenty hours a day, preparing the coming banquet with his own hands.

"You keep out of this," he had ordered Consuelo. "If there is any dirty work to be done, I'll do it myself. Your job is to keep the staff busy as usual, and see that nobody steals any of the fruit. I have given strict orders that nobody is to taste a greenbeefo till next Thursday, and Kadir has issued a proclamation to that effect. So if you catch anyone thieving, report to me at once."

The work of the native staff consisted in catching snakes. The workers could see but little sense in their job, as they knew that no venom was being exported. Moreover, the eccentric Doctor Beetle had urged them to bring in every reptile they found, harmless as well as poisonous, and he was constantly riding them to bestir themselves and collect more.

More extraordinary still, he insisted every morning that they carry away the preceding day's catch and dump it in the river. The discarded snakes, they noticed, seemed half dead. Even the naturally most vicious put up no fight when they were taken from the pens.

Between ten and eleven every morning Beetle absented him-

self from the laboratory, and forbade anyone to accompany him. When Consuelo asked him what he had in the small black satchel he carried with him on these mysterious trips, he replied briefly:

"A snake. I'm going to turn the poor brute loose."

And once, to prove his assertion, he opened the satchel and showed her the torpid snake.

"I must get some exercise, and I need to be alone," he explained, "or my nerves will snap. Please don't pester me."

She had not pestered him, although she doubted his explanation. Left alone for an hour, she methodically continued her daily inspection of the plants till her father returned, when she had her lunch and he resumed his private business.

On the Tuesday before Kadir's Festal Thursday, Consuelo did not see her father leave for his walk, as she was already busy with her inspection when he left. He had been gone about forty minutes when she discovered the first evidence of treachery.

The foliage of one vine had obviously been disturbed since the last inspection. Seeking the cause, Consuelo found that two of the ripening fruits had been carefully removed from their stems. Further search disclosed the theft of three dozen in all. Not more than two had been stolen from any one plant.

Suspecting Juan, whom she had always distrusted, Consuelo hastened back to her father's laboratory to await his return and report. There she was met by an unpleasant surprise.

She opened the door to find Kadir seated at Beetle's desk, his face heavy with anger and suspicion.

"Where is your father?"

"I don't know."

"Come, come. I have made women talk before this when they were inclined to be obstinate. Where is he?"

"Again I tell you I don't know. He always takes his exercise at this time, and he goes alone. Besides," she flashed, "what business is it of yours where he is?"

"As to that," Kadir replied carelessly, "everything in Amazonia is my business."

"My father and I are not citizens—or subjects—of Amazonia."

"No. But your own country is several thousand miles away, Senhorina Beetle. In case of impertinent questions I can always report—with regrets, of course—that you both died by one of the accidents so common in Amazonia. Of snakebite, for instance."

"I see. But may I ask the reason for this sudden outburst?"

"So you have decided to talk? You will do as well as your father, perhaps better."

His eyes roved to one of the wire pens.

In it were half a dozen small red snakes.

"What do you need those for, now that you are no longer exporting venom?"

"Nothing much. Just pets, I suppose."

"Pets? Rather an unusual kind of pet, I should say." His face suddenly contorted in fear and rage. "Why is your father injecting snake blood into the unripe meat-fruit?" he shouted.

Consuelo kept her head. "Who told you that absurdity?"

"Answer me!" he bellowed.

"How can I? If your question is nonsense, how can anybody answer it?"

"So you refuse. I know a way to make you talk. Unlock that pen."

"I haven't the key. My father trusts nobody but himself with the keys to the pens."

"No? Well, this will do." He picked up a heavy ruler and lurched over to the pen. In a few moments he had sprung the lock.

"Now you answer my question or I force your arm into that pen. When your father returns I shall tell him that someone had broken the lock, and that you had evidently been trying to repair it when you got bitten. He will have to believe me. You will be capable of speech for just about three minutes after one of those red beauties strikes. Once more, why did your father inject snake blood into the green meat-fruits?"

"And once more I repeat that you are asking nonsensical questions. Don't you dare—"

But he did dare. Ripping the sleeve of her smock from her arm, he gripped her bare wrist in his huge fist and began dragging her toward the pen. Her frantic resistance was no match for his brutal strength. Instinctively she resorted to the only defense left her. She let out a yell that must have carried half a mile.

Startled in spite of himself, Kadir paused, but only for an instant. She yelled again.

This time Kadir did not pause. Her hand was already in the pen when the door burst open. Punctual as usual, Beetle had returned exactly at eleven o'clock to resume his daily routine.

The black satchel dropped from his hand.

"What the hell—" A well-aimed laboratory stool finished the sentence. It caught the Dictator squarely in the chest. Consuelo fell with him, but quickly disengaged herself and stood panting.

"You crazy fool," Beetle spat at the prostrate man. "What do you think you are doing? Don't you know that those snakes are the deadliest of the whole lot?"

Kadir got to his feet without replying and sat down heavily on Beetle's desk. Beetle stood eying him in disgust.

"Come on, let's have it. What were you trying to do to my daughter?"

"Make her talk," Kadir muttered thickly. "She wouldn't—"

"Oh, she wouldn't talk. I get it. Consuelo! You keep out of this. I'll take care of our friend. Now, Kadir, just what did you want her to talk about?"

Still dazed, Kadir blurted out the truth.

"Why are you injecting snake blood into the unripe meat-fruit?"

Beetle eyed him curiously. With great deliberation he placed a chair in front of the Dictator and sat down.

"Let us get this straight. You ask why I am injecting snake blood into the greenbeefos. Who told you I was?"

"Juan. He brought three dozen of the unripe fruits to show me."

"To show you what?" Beetle asked in deadly calm. Had that fool Juan brains enough to look for the puncture-marks made by the hypodermic needle?

"To show me that you are poisoning the fruit."

"And did he show you?"

"How should I know? He was still alive when I came over here. I forced him to eat all three dozen."

"You had to use force?"

"Naturally. Juan said the snake blood would poison him."

"Which just shows how ignorant Juan is." Beetle sighed his relief. "Snake blood is about as poisonous as cows' milk."

"Why are you injecting—"

"You believed what that ignorant fool told you? He must have been drinking again and seeing things. I've warned him before. This time he goes. That is, if he hasn't come to his senses and gone already of his own free will."

"Gone? But where could he go from here?"

"Into the forest, or the jungle," Beetle answered indifferently. "He might even try to drape his worthless hide over a raft of rotten logs and float down the river. Anyhow, he will disappear after having made such a fool of himself. Take my word for it, we shan't see Juan again in a month of Sundays."

"On the contrary," Kadir retorted with a crafty smile, "I think we shall see him again in a very few minutes." He glanced at the clock. It showed ten minutes past eleven. "I have been here a little over half an hour. Juan promised to meet me here. He found it rather difficult to walk after his meal. When he comes, we can go into the question of those injections more fully."

For an instant Beetle looked startled, but quickly recovered his composure.

"I suppose as you say, Juan is slow because he has three dozen of those unripe greenbeefos under his belt. In fact I shouldn't wonder if he were feeling rather unwell at this very moment."

"So there is a poison in the fruits?" Kadir snapped.

"A poison? Rubbish! How would you or anyone feel if you had been forced to eat three dozen enormous green apples, to say nothing of unripe greenbeefos? I'll stake my reputation against yours that Juan is hiding in the forest and being very sick right now. And I'll bet anything you like that nobody ever sees him again. By the way, do you know which road he was to follow you by? The one through the clearing, or the cut-off through the forest?"

"I told him to take the cut-off, so as to get here quicker."

"Fine. Let's go and meet him—only we shan't. As for what I saw when I opened that door, I'll forget it if you will. I know Consuelo has already forgotten it. We are all quarantined here together in Amazonia, and there's no sense in harboring grudges. We've got to live together."

Relieved at being able to save his face, Kadir responded with a generous promise.

"If we fail to find Juan, I will admit that you are right, and that Juan has been drinking."

"Nothing could be fairer. Come on, let's go."

Their way to the Dictator's "palace"—formerly the residence of the superintendent of the gold mines—lay through the tropical forest.

The road was already beginning to choke up in the gloomier stretches with a rank web of trailing plants feeling their way to the trees on either side, to swarm up their trunks and ultimately choke the life out of them. Kadir's followers, soldiers all and new to the tropics, were letting nature take its course. Another two years of incompetence would see the painstaking labor of the American engineers smothered in rank jungle.

Frequently the three were compelled to abandon the road and follow more open trails through the forest till they again emerged on the road. Dazzling patches of yellow sunlight all but blinded them temporarily as they crossed the occasional barren spots that seem to blight all tropical forests like a leprosy. Coming out suddenly into one of these blinding patches, Kadir, who happened to be leading, let out a curdling oath and halted as if he had been shot.

"What's the matter?" Consuelo asked breathlessly, hurrying

to overtake him. Blinded by the glare she could not see what had stopped the Dictator.

"I stepped on it." Kadir's voice was hoarse with disgust and fear.

"Stepped on what?" Beetle demanded. "I can't see in this infernal light. Was it a snake?"

"I don't know," Kadir began hoarsely. "It moved under my foot. Ugh! I see it now. Look."

They peered at the spot Kadir indicated, but could see nothing. Then, as their eyes became accustomed to the glare, they saw the thing that Kadir had stepped on.

A foul red fungus, as thick as a man's arm and over a yard long, lay directly in the Dictator's path.

"A bladder full of blood and soft flesh," Kadir muttered, shaking with fright and revulsion. "And I stepped on it."

"Rot!" Beetle exclaimed contemptuously, but there was a bitter glint in his eyes. "Pull yourself together, man. That's nothing but a fungus. If there's a drop of blood in it, I'll eat the whole thing."

"But it moved," Kadir expostulated.

"Nonsense. You stepped on it, and naturally it gave beneath your weight. Come on. You will never find Juan at this rate."

But Kadir refused to budge. Fascinated by the disgusting object at his feet, the Dictator stood staring down at it with fear and loathing in every line of his face.

Then, as if to prove the truth of his assertion, the thing did move, slowly, like a wounded eel. But, unlike an eel, it did not move in the direction of its length. It began to roll slowly over.

Beetle squatted, the better to follow the strange motion. If it was not the first time he had seen such a freak of nature, he succeeded in giving a very good imitation of a scientist observing a novel and totally unexpected phenomenon. Consuelo joined her father in his researches. Kadir remained standing.

"Is it going to roll completely over?" Consuelo asked with evident interest.

"I think not," Beetle hazarded. "In fact, I'll bet three to one

it only gets halfway over. There—I told you so. Look, Kadir, your fungus is rooted to the spot, just like any other plant.”

In spite of himself, Kadir stooped down and looked. As the fungus reached the halfway mark in its attempted roll, it shuddered along its entire length and seemed to tug at the decayed vegetation. But shuddering and tugging got it nowhere. A thick band of fleshy rootlets, like coarse green hair, held it firmly to the ground. The sight of that futile struggle to move like a fully conscious thing was too much for Kadir’s nerves.

“I am going to kill it,” he muttered, leaping to his feet.

“How?” Beetle asked with a trace of contempt. “Fire is the only thing I know of to put a mess like that out of its misery—if it is in misery. For all I know, it may enjoy life. You can’t kill it by smashing it or chopping it into mincemeat. Quite the contrary, in fact. Every piece of it will start a new fungus, and instead of one helpless blob rooted to the spot, you will have a whole colony. Better leave it alone, Kadir, to get what it can out of existence in its own way. Why must men like you always be killing something?”

“It is hideous and—”

“And you are afraid of it? How would you like someone to treat you as you propose treating this harmless fungus?”

“If I were like that,” Kadir burst out, “I should want somebody to put a torch to me.”

“What if nobody knew that was what you wanted? Or if nobody cared? You have done some pretty foul things to a great many people in your time, I believe.”

“But never anything like this!”

“Of course not. Nobody has ever done anything like this to anybody. So you didn’t know how. What were you trying to do to my daughter an hour ago?”

“We agreed to forget all that,” Consuelo reminded him sharply.

“Sorry. My mistake. I apologize, Kadir. As a matter of scientific interest, this fungus is not at all uncommon.”

“I never saw one like it before,” Consuelo objected.

“That is only because you don’t go walking in the forest as

I do," he reminded her. "Just to prove I'm right, I'll undertake to find a dozen rolling fungi within a hundred yards of here. What do you say?"

Before they could protest, he was hustling them out of the blinding glare into a black tunnel of the forest. Beetle seemed to know where he was going, for it was certain that his eyes were as dazed as theirs.

"Follow closely when you find your eyes," he called. "I'll go ahead. Look out for snakes. Ah, here's the first beauty! Blue and magenta, not red like Kadir's friend. Don't be prejudiced by its shape. Its color is all the beauty this poor thing has."

If anything, the shapeless mass of opalescent fungus blocking their path was more repulsive than the monstrosity that had stopped Kadir. This one was enormous, fully a yard in breadth and over five feet long. It lay sprawled over the rotting trunk of a fallen tree like a decomposing squid.

Yet, as Beetle insisted, its color was beautiful with an unnatural beauty. However, neither Consuelo nor Kadir could overcome their nausea at that living death. They fled precipitately back to the patch of sunlight. The fleshy magenta roots of the thing, straining impotently at the decaying wood which nourished them, were too suggestive of helpless suffering for endurance. Beetle followed at his leisure, chuckling to himself. His amusement drew a sharp reprimand from Consuelo.

"How can you be amused? That thing was in misery."

"Aren't we all?" he retorted lightly, and for the first time in her life Consuelo doubted the goodness of her father's heart.

They found no trace of Juan. By the time they reached the Dictator's palace, Kadir was ready to agree to anything. He was a badly frightened man.

"You were right," he admitted to Beetle. "Juan was lying, and has cleared out. I apologize."

"No need to apologize," Beetle reassured him cordially. "I knew Juan was lying."

"Please honor me by staying to lunch," Kadir begged. "You cannot? Then I shall go and lie down."

They left him to recover his nerve, and walked back to the

laboratory by the long road, not through the forest. They had gone over halfway before either spoke. When Beetle broke the long silence, he was more serious than Consuelo ever remembered him having been.

"Have you ever noticed," he began, "what arrant cowards all brutal men are?" She made no reply, and he continued. "Take Kadir, for instance. He and his gang have tortured and killed thousands. You saw how that harmless fungus upset him. Frightened half to death of nothing."

"Are you sure it was nothing?"

He gave her a strange look, and she walked rapidly ahead. "Wait," he called, slightly out of breath.

Breaking into a trot, he overtook her.

"I have something to say that I want you to remember. If anything should ever happen to me—I'm always handling those poisonous snakes—I want you to do at once what I tell you now. You can trust Felipe."

Felipe was the Portuguese foreman of the native workers.

"Go to him and tell him you are ready. He will understand. I prepared for this two years ago, when Kadir moved in. Before they left, the engineers built a navigable raft. Felipe knows where it is hidden. It is fully provisioned. A crew of six native river men is ready to put off at a moment's notice. They will be under Felipe's orders. The journey down the river will be long and dangerous, but with that crew you will make it. Anyhow, you will not be turned back by the quarantine officers when you do sight civilization. There is a flag with the provisions. Hoist it when you see any signs of civilization, and you will not be blown out of the water. That's all."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because dictators never take their own medicine before they make someone else taste it for them."

"What do you mean?" she asked in sudden panic.

"Only that I suspect Kadir of planning to give me a dose of his peculiar brand of medicine the moment he is through with me. When he and his crew find out how to propagate the greenbeefos, I may be bitten by a snake. He was trying something like that on you, wasn't he?"

She gave him a long doubtful look. "Perhaps," she admitted. She was sure that there was more in his mind than he had told her.

They entered the laboratory and went about their business without another word. To recover lost time, Consuelo worked later than usual. Her task was the preparation of the liquid made up by Beetle's formula, in which the greenbeefos were grown.

She was just adding a minute trace of chloride of gold to the last batch when a timid rap on the door of the chemical laboratory startled her unreasonably. She had been worrying about her father.

"Come in," she called.

Felipe entered. The sight of his serious face gave her a sickening shock. What had happened? Felipe was carrying the familiar black satchel which Beetle always took with him on his solitary walks in the forest.

"What is it?" she stammered.

For answer Felipe opened his free hand and showed her a cheap watch. It was tarnished greenish blue with what looked like dried fungus.

"Juan's," he said. "When Juan did not report for work this afternoon, I went to look for him."

"And you found his watch? Where?"

"On the cut-off through the forest."

"Did you find anything else?"

"Nothing belonging to Juan."

"But you found something else?"

"Yes. I had never seen anything like them before."

He placed the satchel on the table and opened it.

"Look. Dozens like that one, all colors, in the forest. Doctor Beetle forgot to empty this bag when he went into the forest this morning."

She stared in speechless horror at the swollen monstrosity filling the satchel. The thing was like the one that Kadir had stepped on, except that it was not red but blue and magenta. The obvious explanation flashed through her mind, and she struggled to convince herself that it was true.

"You are mistaken," she said slowly. "Doctor Beetle threw the snake away as usual and brought this specimen back to study."

Felipe shook his head.

"No, Senhorina Beetle. As I always do when the Doctor comes back from his walk, I laid out everything ready for tomorrow. The snake was in the bag at twelve o'clock this morning. He came back at his regular time. I was busy then, and did not get to his laboratory till noon. The bag had been dropped by the door. I opened it, to see if everything was all right. The snake was still there. All its underside had turned to hard blue jelly. The back was still a snake's back, covered with scales. The head had turned green, but it was still a snake's head. I took the bag into my room and watched the snake till I went to look for Juan. The snake turned into this. I thought I should tell you."

"Thank you, Felipe. It is all right; just one of my father's scientific experiments. I understand. Goodnight, and thank you again for telling me. Please don't tell anyone else. Throw that thing away and put the bag in its usual place."

Left to herself, Consuelo tried not to credit her reason and the evidence of her senses. Then inconsequential remarks her father had dropped in the past two years, added to the remark of today that dictators were never the first to take their own medicine, stole into her memory to cause her acute uneasiness.

What was the meaning of this new technique of his, the addition of a slight trace of chloride of gold to the solution? He had talked excitedly of some organic compound of gold being the catalyst he had sought for months to speed up the chemical change in the ripening fruit.

"What might have taken months the old way," he had exclaimed, "can now be done in hours. I've got it at last!"

What, exactly, had he got? He had not confided in her. All he asked of her was to see that the exact amount of chloride of gold which he prescribed was added to the solutions. Everything she remembered now fitted into its sinister place in one sombre pattern.

"This must be stopped," she thought.

It must be stopped, yes. But how?

The next day the banquet took place.

"Festal Thursday" slipped into the past, as the long shadows crept over the banquet tables—crude boards on trestles—spread in the open air. For one happy, gluttonous hour the bearers of the "New Freedom" to a benighted continent had stuffed themselves with a food that looked like green fruit but tasted like raw pork. Now they were replete and somewhat dazed.

A few were furtively mopping the perspiration from their foreheads, and all were beginning to show the sickly pallor of the gourmand who has overestimated his capacity for food. The eyes of some were beginning to wander strangely. These obviously unhappy guests appeared to be slightly drunk.

Kadir's speech eulogizing Beetle and his work was unexpectedly short. The Dictator's famous gift for oratory seemed to desert him, and he sat down somewhat suddenly, as if he were feeling unwell. Beetle rose to reply.

"Senhor Kadir! Guests, and bearers to Amazonia of the New Freedom, I salute you! In the name of a freedom you have never known, I salute you, as the gladiators of ancient Rome saluted their tyrant before marching into the arena where they were to be butchered for his entertainment."

Their eyes stared up at him, only half-seeing. What was he saying? It all sounded like the beginning of a dream.

"With my own hands I prepared your feast, and my hands alone spread the banquet tables with the meat-fruits you have eaten. Only one human being here has eaten the fruit as nature made it, and not as I remade it. My daughter has not eaten what you have eaten. The cold, wet taste of the snake blood which you have mistaken for the flavor of swine-flesh, and which you have enjoyed, would have nauseated her. So I gave her uncontaminated fruit for her share of our feast."

Kadir and Consuelo were on their feet together, Kadir cursing incoherently, Consuelo speechless with fear. What insane thing had her father done? Had he too eaten of— But he must have, else Kadir would not have touched the fruit!

Beetle's voice rose above the Dictator's, shouting him down,

"Yes, you were right when you accused me of injecting snake blood into the fruit. Juan did not lie to you. But the snake blood is not what is making you begin to feel like a vegetable. I injected the blood into the fruit only to delude all you fools into mistaking it for flesh. I anticipated months of feeding before I could make of you what *should* be made of you.

"A month ago I was relying on the slow processes of nature to destroy you with my help. Light alone, that regulates the chemistry of the growing plant and to a lesser degree the chemistry of animals, would have done what must be done to rid Amazonia and the world of the threat of your New Freedom, and to make you expiate your brutal past.

"But light would have taken months to bring about the necessary *replacement of the iron in your blood by magnesium*. It would have been a slow transformation, almost, I might say, a lingering death. By feeding you green beef I could keep your bodies full at all times with magnesium in chemically available form to *replace every atom of iron in your blood!*

"Under the slow action of photosynthesis—the chemical transformations induced by exposure to light—you would have suffered a lingering illness. You would not have died. No! You would have lived, but not as animals. Perhaps not even as degenerated vegetables, but as some new form of life between plant and the animal. You might even have retained your memories.

"But I have spared you this—so far as I can prophesy. You will live, but you will not remember—much. Instead of walking forward like human beings, you will roll. That will be your memory.

"Three weeks ago I discovered the organic catalyst to hasten the replacement of the iron in your blood by magnesium and thus to change your animal blood to plant blood, chlorophyll. The catalyst is merely a chemical compound which accelerates chemical reactions without itself being changed.

"By injecting a minute trace of chloride of gold into the fruits, I—and the living plant—produced the necessary catalyst. I have not yet had time to analyze it and determine its

exact composition. Nor do I expect to have time. For I have perforce, taken the same medicine that I prescribed for you!

"Not so much, but enough. I shall remain a thinking animal a little longer than the rest of you. That is the only unfair advantage I have taken. Before the sun sets we shall all have ceased to be human beings, or even animals."

Consuelo was tugging frantically at his arm, but he brushed her aside. He spoke to her in hurried jerks as if racing against time.

"I did not lie to you when I told you I could *not* change the chlorophyll in a living plant into haemoglobin. Nobody has done that. But did I ever say I could not change *the haemoglobin in a living animal into chlorophyll*? If I have not done that, I have done something very close to it. Look at Kadir, and see for yourself. Let go my arm—I must finish."

Wrenching himself free he began shouting against time.

"Kadir! I salute you. Raise your right hand and return the salute."

Kadir's right hand was resting on the bare boards of the table. If he understood what Beetle said, he refused to salute. But possibly understanding was already beyond him. The blood seemed to have ebbed from the blue flesh, and the coarse hairs on the back of the hand had lengthened perceptibly even while Beetle was demanding a salute.

"Rooted to the spot, Kadir! You are taking root already. And so are the rest of you. Try to stand up like human beings! Kadir! Do you hear me? Remember that blue fungus we saw in the forest? I have good reason for believing that was your friend Juan. In less than an hour you and I and all these fools will be exactly like him, except that some of us will be blue, others green, and still others red—like the thing you stepped on.

"It rolled. Remember, Kadir? That red abomination was one of my pet fungus snakes—shot full of salts of magnesium and the catalyst I extracted from the fruits. A triumph of science. I am the greatest biochemist that ever lived! But I shan't roll farther than the rest of you. We shall all roll together—or try to. 'Merrily we roll along, roll along'—I can see already you

are going to be a blue and magenta mess like your friend Juan."

Beetle laughed harshly and bared his right arm. "I'm going to be red, like the thing you stepped on, Kadir. But I've stepped on the lot of you!"

He collapsed across the table and lay still. No sane human being could have stayed to witness the end. Half mad herself, Consuelo ran from the place of living death.

"Felipe, Felipe! Boards, wood—bring dry boards, quick, quick! Tear down the buildings and pile them up over the tables. Get all the men, get them all!"

Four hours later she was racing down the river through the night with Felipe and his crew. Only once did she glance back. The flames which she herself had kindled flapped against the black sky.

## WHY I SELECTED

## PROJECT SPACESHIP

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*How often have I written stories in which my hero saved the universe. Or the race. Or did something the effects of which will echo in men's minds for generations. But such achievements were easy in the far future. There, with the reader out of his element, vast accomplishments seemed a part of every day life.*

*Obtaining even a part of the same effect in the present day or near future is an undertaking of a different order. It is, oh, much harder to convince your reader, or yourself, that the main character is a key figure. In the present we have a way of measuring heroes against difficulties we know about. If he is engaged on too great an enterprise, he tends to be unbelievable, a mere puppet operating against a background of adventure.*

*In writing PROJECT SPACESHIP, I deliberately tried to overcome these various difficulties. I tried to make each character of the story an individual in his own right. The events of the story were always exciting to me. But I thought of them as something happening to, or being made to happen by, people who were human beings first, and only secondly participants in a tremendous project.*

*Authors can of course be blind to the faults of their own work. Nevertheless, I believe that in PROJECT SPACESHIP I was partially successful in gaining the effects I wanted.*

*Accordingly, I have selected it as my best science fiction short story yet published.*

A. E. VAN VOGT

A. E. VAN VOGT

## PROJECT SPACESHIP

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**Robert Merritt Discovers that the  
Biggest Barrier between Man and  
Interplanetary Travel Is — Man!**

**MERRITT** recognized the crisis when VA-2 attained a speed of 4,000 miles an hour.

Modeled on the German V-2 bomb the rocket climbed toward the noonday sun on a column of crooked fire, as its gyroscopic stabilizers worked in their spasmodic fashion to balance the torpedo structure.

Loaded with instruments instead of a warhead it shot up 764 miles. It topped the highest peak of the planet's 500-mile-deep atmosphere. It broke into the emptiness of space and, for a few moments on the television screen near the launching rack, the stars showed as bright pinpoints against a background of black velvet.

In spite of its velocity it was never in danger of leaving Earth's gravitational field. It came down. And, after they had exhumed the scarred shell from the desert sands, there was a meeting at which Merritt was appointed a committee of one. He was charged with the positive duty of persuading the government of the United States "to finance and build a spaceship capable of transporting human beings in and through the airless void above the atmosphere of this planet."

The sum of one thousand dollars was voted him for initial expenses.

Merritt tiptoed into his apartment about 2 o'clock. His excitement, now that he was home and near Ilsa, subsided rapidly. As he undressed in the living room, using only one dim light, he wondered what Ilsa would think of his mission.

"Bob, is that you?"

Merritt hesitated.

"What time is it, Bob?"

Merritt, carrying his shoes, trousers, coat and shirt, walked into the bedroom. Ilsa was sitting up, lighting a cigarette. She was a dark-haired olive-complexioned young woman with passionate lips. She put out her hand and Merritt handed her the check and, while she studied it, he climbed into his pajamas and explained what it was for. She began to laugh before he finished, a staccato laugh.

"With one thousand dollars," she said finally, controlling herself, "you expect to persuade a *political* government to build a machine more expensive than any battleship ever constructed. My dear, I was married to a Washington lobbyist and I assure you it isn't done on the cheap."

It was the first time in the four years since their marriage that she had mentioned her first husband. Merritt glanced at her sharply. He saw that her cheeks were flushed, that she was furious with him.

"Really," she said, "I wish you wouldn't waste your time with that bunch of dreamers. Spaceships! Such nonsense. Besides, what good is it? I wish you'd get busy and make some money for us."

Merritt did not answer. He had a theory about money making. But it was not one he could expound to a woman whose first husband had amassed a fortune after she divorced him.

He climbed into his bed. "You have no objection, I hope," he said, "to my spending the thousand before I come around to your way of thinking?"

Ilsa shrugged. "It'll give you a trip. But it's so silly. What are you going to do first?"

"Go see a schoolmate of mine named Norman Lowery. He's

secretary to Professor Hillier, the mathematician and physicist. We have to build up to the President by degrees, you know."

"I'll bet you do," said Ilsa.

She began to laugh again. She was still at it when Merritt made his first attempt to kiss her. She pushed him away.

"Don't try to get around me," she said bitterly. "I'm just beginning to realize that I'm doomed to be the wife of a low-salaried husband. You'll have to be gentle with me while I get used to the idea."

Merritt said nothing. Life had become progressively tense of recent months. Almost, he had come to believe that men with obsessions shouldn't marry. It was too hard on the woman.

"The trouble with you," said Ilsa, her voice softening, "is that you're a living misrepresentation. You give the impression that you're bound for the top but you don't even try to get started."

"Maybe I'm further along than you think," Merritt ventured.

"Nuts!"

She finally let him kiss her—on the neck, not the lips. "I feel as if I would poison you after what I've said. And I'm not quite prepared for that yet."

Norman Lowery met Merritt at the station. He looked older by at least ten years than when Merritt had seen him two years previously. He led Merritt toward an imposing Cadillac and, after they had started, said, "Don't be too surprised when you see Professor Hillier."

That was Merritt's first inkling that something was wrong. "What do you mean?" Sharply.

"You'll see."

Merritt studied his friend's profile in narrow-eyed thoughtfulness but he asked no questions. The big car was out of the town now, bowling along a paved highway at sixty miles an hour.

After about ten minutes it turned off into a valley and came presently to a little dream village. Several large build-

ings dominated the scene. And there were about two dozen houses in all, scattered along the banks of a pretty winding stream.

As Lowery turned up the driveway of the largest bungalow he said, "Professor Hillier is independently wealthy—luckily for him—and all this is his property. Those buildings over there are his labs. His assistants and their families live in the houses."

He added, "Notice how we're closed in by steep hills. That's in case of an atomic bomb attack on the big dam twenty-five miles south. All the buildings, including the residences are steel and concrete under their stucco exteriors and paneled interiors, though the professor only laughs at that in his sensible moments."

Merritt did not like the reference to "sensible moments." As the car parked in the driveway he climbed out slowly and took another look along the valley.

He thought, "To me atomic energy is open sesame to the future. To these people—"

He wasn't sure just what was wrong. But there was a pressing negativeness here as if a man had built himself a mausoleum and was waiting for death to step closer. Long before, Merritt had rejected headlong retreat from the vulnerable cities, had aligned himself with the hundred million whose only hope of escape was that their leaders would have the common sense to solve the problem of the doomsday bomb.

Merritt asked finally, "Has this place got a name?"

"Hillier Haven."

At least it fitted.

They entered the house through French windows, which opened into a spacious living room. There was a bar in one corner. Lowery ducked through an opening in its side and popped up behind it.

"I'll mix you a drink," he said, "then go look for the professor. This is his house, you know, or did I say that before? He and his daughter and I live here. Very cozy." He laughed grimly. "What'll you have?"

Merritt had a whisky and soda. He sat down in an easy chair and watched Lowery disappear into the garden beyond the French windows. The minutes passed. After about half an hour he climbed to his feet and walked over to a half-open door that had been intriguing him for some time. It was a library lined with books. Merritt returned to his chair. He was an avaricious reader but not today—not this month.

Another half hour went by. He could feel himself growing tenser. He had already paced the length of the room several times. Now he did it again but without any sense of relaxation.

He had a vision of himself during the next few months, waiting for men like Professor Hillier to condescend to give him a hearing. He began to realize the massiveness of the task he had set himself. He was going to try to push an idea into men who had hacked their own way to success through the equivalent of granite.

Men whose characters were as different and inflexible as their achievements. Men of great talent and great power. He, Robert Merritt, who could scarcely pay his bills every month, was going to do all that.

"We're nuts!" he thought. "The whole bunch of us. Imagine—a few hundred fanatics trying to push America into a spaceship! Ilsa was right."

But he stayed where he was.

A door opened, and a girl came in. She was slim and blond with gray eyes. She paused as she saw Merritt. She came forward, smiling.

"You must be Robert Merritt," she said. "Norman told me about you. I'm Drusilla Julia, Professor Hillier's daughter."

She looked cool and refreshing and sane. Merritt answered her smile and said, "Your father must be a student of ancient Rome."

"Oh, you recognize the origin of my names." She was pleased.

After a moment however she frowned. "Norman has been telling me about what your club is trying to do. Just what are your plans?"

Merritt told her what VA-2 had accomplished. He went on, "VB-2 is now under construction. It will be somewhat different from the first ship"—he hesitated—"in that its acceleration will never be above six gravities."

He watched her face to see if she had any inkling of what that meant. For a moment she didn't seem to. And then her eyes lighted up.

She said in a low, intense tone, "You're going to put a human being into it. You wonderful men! You wonderful young men! The future really does belong to you, doesn't it?"

She didn't look so old herself. About twenty-two, Merritt estimated sardonically. If the young people of this age were destined to explore the planets, then she could be right in there pitching. But he liked her for knowing something.

The question most often asked him by people was, "But how can a ship fly in space where there's no air for the explosions to push against?" He saw that her enthusiasm was subsiding.

She said, "Actually, that isn't what I meant when I asked you about your plans. What I want to know is what do you expect of father?"

Merritt explained that they wanted the famous Professor Hillier, atomic bomb scientist, to be ready to go to Washington at the proper time to help persuade President Graham to support Project Spaceship. When he had finished, the expression on the girl's face was distinctly unhappy.

"Can't you," she asked, "obtain the support of some other scientist?"

Merritt said simply, "We need a household name. Years ago there was Edison, then it was Einstein, now it's Hillier. You can't fight a thing like that. It's just so. Besides, some of the more famous atomic scientists will have nothing to do with the government since atomic energy was virtually placed under military control."

He shrugged. "Naturally, since no secret is involved, our members basically support the scientists. But we're willing to work with the material we have. We've found individual

military men absolutely cooperative. They've given us German V-One and V-Two bombs.

"Jet and other planes have been turned over to us in almost any quantity we could ever hope to need. The armed forces are full of young eager officers and men who are only too anxious for somebody to reach the planets."

His voice was warming to the level of enthusiasm. He realized suddenly, that he was being boyish. He stiffened.

He said quietly, "The world is as full as ever of the spirit of adventure. But people have to be cajoled and set on the right path to the future."

"My father," said Drusilla Julia Hillier, "is going to be difficult. I'll be frank about that." She went on earnestly, "Mr. Merritt, as you know, he was one of the atomic bomb scientists. After the war he visited Hiroshima and—well, it affected him.

"Norman and I have prepared a letter which we have already shown father, and which we are trying to persuade him to sign. So far he has not done so. I'm afraid it will be up to you to persuade him."

The French windows opened and Lowery strode in. "'Lo, Dru," he said. He looked at Merritt. "Sorry, I've been so slow but it's taken me all this time to locate the professor." His voice had a peculiar note in it, as he added, "Will you come this way, and meet him in one of his favorite poses."

The girl said, her color high, "Be seeing you at dinner, Mr. Merritt."

Merritt went out, puzzled. Outside he began in an irritated tone, "For heaven's sake, Norman, what's going on here? This mystery is—"

He stopped. They had rounded a line of shrubs and there was a man lying on the grass under the trees. He was a gaunt old fellow with white hair, and a distinctively long head. His face was partly hidden by one arm. His expensive clothes were disheveled and his posture twisted and ungainly.

As Merritt gaped in a gathering comprehension Lowery said, "Liquor has been unfair to Professor Hillier. It just wasn't meant for him. One or two glasses of the mildest concoctions

and his whole system backfires like that. He's very determined, though. He's going to lick it yet, he says. Well, shall we go back into the house?"

Merritt went without a word. But he was thinking that getting a full-grown spaceship into the air was going to be more difficult than he had dreamed.

Professor Hillier came in to dinner. His eyes were quite bloodshot but he didn't stagger. He shook hands affably with Merritt.

"If I remember correctly," he said, "you came out and had a look at me. My daughter and her—ahem—I believe they're going to get married, but you never can tell about these moral young men—believe in letting visitors form their own conclusions. A very poor policy if you ask me. This world is too full of infidels and other non-drinkers."

Merritt wasn't sure just what he ought to say.

Before he could speak Drusilla said, smiling, "Father still lives in the era in which young people, when thrown together, automatically fall for each other. Norman and I have our own friends and personally I have yet to meet the young man I am going to marry."

Merritt glanced at his friend. Lowery was staring straight ahead with studied indifference and Merritt had his first realization of the situation that existed here. Boy loves girl but girl does not love boy. And the ass was making his situation hopeless by aging under the strain.

They sat down to dinner. The professor said, "Who's going to fly VB-Two?"

Merritt parted his lips to answer, then stopped himself, and looked at his host narrow-eyed. He couldn't have asked for a better question but after what he had heard of this man he'd have to take care not to let himself be drawn into a trap. He replied cautiously:

"The choice is between two men."

He went on to explain the tests that had been given every member of the Rocket Club. The important thing was the ability to withstand acceleration. The army had several wonderful men whose anti-acceleration capacities were almost

miraculous. Several of these had offered privately to perform the flight. But it had been decided not to use them for fear of arousing the ire of the high command.

"So," Merritt concluded, "we'll have to do it ourselves. A salesman, named John Errol, is the most likely man." He saw that it would be unnecessary to name the second in line.

"What," asked Professor Hillier, "are your plans for getting to the President?"

Merritt was surer of himself now. At least he was getting a chance to explain. He said, "The route is rather complicated. We have selected key men whose support we feel we must get before we can even approach the President. We want to interest a top brass hat in both the army and the navy.

"It happens that one of our members knows a high naval official who has practically guaranteed us support. But if the army should turn thumbs down it might stop us for years.

"However, all that is still more than a month away. We all agree that we must first obtain the support of Professor Hillier. Unless some famous scientist will say that space flight is possible it will be difficult to convince the so-called hard-headed businessmen."

Professor Hillier was scowling. "Businessmen!" he snarled. "Yaah!"

Merritt thought: "Oh-oh, here it comes."

The professor had been eating with the concentrated intentness of a hungry man. Now he paused. He looked up. His scarlet eyes gleamed.

"This desire to go to the planets," he said, "is the neurotic ambition of supreme escapist from life."

His daughter looked at Merritt, then said quickly, "That sounds odd, doesn't it, coming from a man who has made a fortune out of exploring the frontiers of science and who, moreover, has hung onto his money with the skill of a hard-headed businessman."

She added, addressing her father directly, "Don't forget, darling, you're committed to space travel. You're going to write a letter."

"I haven't written it yet," said Professor Hillier grimly. "And

I am toying with the idea of not writing it. The thought that a scientist in his cups might stop man from reaching the stars fascinates me."

The conversation had taken a turn that Merritt did not like. He recognized in the professor a man who had tossed aside his inhibitions late in life. Such people always overdid their freedom. And that was a danger.

"Don't you think, sir," Merritt said quietly, "that it would be more fascinating if—uh, a scientist in his cups were the key figure in reaching the planets. Fact is, that's the only way it would ever get into the history books. It isn't history if it doesn't happen."

Professor Hillier showed his teeth. "You're one of these bright young men with an answer for everything," he said. He made it sound offensive. "Your attitude toward life is too positive to suit me."

He put up a hand. "Wait," he thundered.

"Father, really."

The professor scowled at his daughter. "Don't give me any of that really stuff. Here's a young man who rather fancies himself. And I'm going to show him up. Imagine," he said viciously, "pretending that he's an expert on space travel."

He turned toward Merritt. He said in a silken voice, "You and I are going to play a little game. I'm going to be a sweet old lady and you be yourself. You're cornered, understand, but very gallant. My first question is—"

He changed his tone. He was not a very good actor, so his tone was a burlesque and not very funny. "But my dear Mr. Merritt," he said, "how will it fly? After all, there's no air out there for the explosions to push against."

Merritt told himself that he had to hold back his anger. He said, "Rocket tubes, Mrs. Smith, work on the principle that action and reaction are equal and opposite. When you fire a shotgun there is a kick against your shoulder.

"That kick would occur even if you were standing in a vacuum when you pulled the trigger. Actually, the presence of air slows a rocket ship. At the speeds a rocket can travel air

pressure rises to thousands of pounds per square inch. In free space, away from the pull of gravity, a rocket will travel at many miles per second."

"But," mimicked Professor Hillier, "wouldn't such speeds kill every living thing aboard?"

Merritt said, "Madam, you are confusing acceleration with speed. Speed never hurt anybody. At this moment you are traveling on a planet which is whirling on its axis at more than a thousand miles an hour.

"The planet itself is following an erratic course around the sun at a speed of nineteen and a fraction miles a second. Simultaneously the sun and all its planets are hurtling through space at a speed of twelve miles a second. So you see, if speed could affect you, it would have done so long ago.

"On the other hand you have probably been in a car on occasion when it started up very swiftly and you were pressed into the back of your seat. In short you were affected by the car's acceleration. Similarly, when a car is braked all of a sudden, everybody in it is flung forward. In other words it has *decelerated* too swiftly for comfort.

"The solution is a slow gathering of speed. Let us imagine that an automobile is traveling at a speed of ten miles an hour, a minute later at twenty miles an hour and so on, ten miles an hour faster each minute.

"The driver would scarcely notice the acceleration but, at the end of a hundred minutes, he would be moving along at a thousand miles per hour. And he would have attained that speed by an acceleration of ten miles an hour per minute.

"Actually, human beings have survived decelerations—(crash landings)—approximating fifteen gravities. But it is recognized that the average person will be pretty close to death at six gravities and very few could survive nine gravities of acceleration."

"What," said the scientist, "do you mean by gravities?"

"One gravity," Merritt began, "is the normal pull of earth upon an object at ground level. Two gravities would be twice—"

At that moment he happened to glance at Drusilla, and he

stopped short. She was white and Merritt realized that she thought he was following the wrong tack. He straightened.

He said, "Really, sir, don't you think this is a little silly?"

"So you've got it all down like a parrot," Professor Hillier sneered. "Simple answers for simple people. Now the morons are going to learn about space and the planets and you're going to be the starry-eyed teacher."

"The notion that everybody should automatically know all about your subject," Merritt said, "is a curious egotism in so great a man."

"Aha," said the professor, "the young man is warming up at last. I suppose," he said, "you're also one of those who believe that the dropping of the atomic bomb was justified."

Merritt hadn't intended to become angry but he was tired of the ranting of high and mighty moralists on the subject of the atomic bomb. And he was very tired indeed of the childishness of Professor Hillier.

"Well, sir," he said, "man lives partly with himself, partly with his fellows. Personally, I was an army pilot, and I'm assuming the dropping of the bomb saved my life. But in the meantime I have interested myself in the non-destructive aspects of atomic energy." He shrugged. "Materialistic. That's me."

He took it for granted that he had lost the letter. But even if he had thought otherwise he was too wound up now to stop.

"Professor," he said, "you're a fraud. I've had a good long look at you and I'm willing to bet that you're never quite as drunk as you pretend. That business of spending half your time hanging onto the grass so you won't fall off the Earth is so fishy that I wonder you have the nerve to look anybody in the eye.

"As for all this nonsense about you having been strongly affected by the dropping of the bomb, you know very well that that was merely an excuse for you to turn your ego loose and—"

The professor had been stiffening. Abruptly, he glared at his daughter.

"Drusilla, you little Roman puritan, where's that letter you typed out for me to sign?"

"I'll get it," she said hastily, rising.

"I'm going to sign it," the scientist said to Merritt, "and then I want you to get out of here before you ruin my reputation."

A few minutes later, as Lowery was getting the car out of the garage, Professor Hillier came to the door where Merritt was waiting.

"Good luck," he said, "and happy planets to you, Mr. Merritt."

The partial victory had a heady effect on Merritt. By the time he got back to Los Angeles he was convinced that a letter was all he could have hoped for. He had Pete Lowe make fifty photostats and the huge pile that resulted made him glow. He phoned up Grayson, president of the Rocket Club, and reported his success.

He finished: ". . . and I'm leaving for New York tonight."

"Oh, no, you're not," said Mike Grayson. "I was just going to call you and see if you were home."

"What's up?"

It was a potential new member. Annie the superjet would have to be flown for his benefit and only Merritt and John Errol could fly the fast plane. Errol was out of town, so—Grayson's voice lowered in awe as he gave the final, important fact:

"It's for Rod Peterson, Bob."

"The movie star?"

"None other."

"What do you expect from him?"

They expected a ten-thousand-dollar contribution. "You know our policy. Each man according to his income. And our set-up is such that he can put it down as a bad investment on his tax declaration. Need I say the idea appeals to him?"

"What about *our* income tax?"

Grayson was complacent. "We'll be on the moon before they discover that we're not paying any. Of course, in a kind of a way they recognize us as a non-profit organization but

they're getting more and more suspicious, the silly asses."

Merritt grinned. Contact with certain members of the Rocket Club always exhilarated him. The members in general moved through life as if they had wings in their hair, and a few of them imparted a special aura of the kind of intoxication that he himself had felt overseas.

Of all the millions of men who had built up an appetite for excitement they were the lucky ones who would be able to satisfy their desires. Without exception they had a conviction of high destiny.

Grayson finished, "If we get the ten grand we'll give you one of them for your job. So you'd better be around."

Ilsa merely sniffed when Merritt told her who would be at the barns. But later he found her dressing with minute care.

"It's time," she said, "that I took an interest in your work. And listen, you chump, when you climb out of the plane come over to me first. Then I'll be the starry-eyed wife hanging onto your arm when you're congratulated by Rod Peterson."

Merritt always considered the drive over Cahuenga Pass into the valley where the club barns were located as one of the scenic treats of Los Angeles. He sniffed the air appraisingly, and found it satisfactorily dry and warm.

"Annie's built for that. I'll be able to push her up to eighty percent of the speed of sound and stay pretty near the ground. We're going to turn on all her lights, you know, and make quite a night show."

There were preliminaries. Merritt, who had endless patience, spent the evening tuning Annie for her flight. He saw Peterson's arrival from a distance, but the details were reported to him from time to time.

The star arrived in three cars, two of which were filled with friends. The lead car contained Peterson and a female who was more dazzling than all the rest put together. It was she who delayed the tour by asking scores of questions. When they came to the unfinished frame of VB-2, she peered at length into the drive nozzles.

"You mean to tell me," she asked finally, "that you make a

rocket drive by having a narrow hole for the gases to escape through?"

"That's the general idea," Grayson explained, "though there's a design that's slightly different for each type of explosive."

"Well, damme," said the young woman, "if life isn't getting simpler all the time."

She fascinated the entire membership but it was half past nine before Merritt (or anyone else apparently) learned her name. She was Susan Gregory, a new star, just arrived from Broadway. Beside her Rod Peterson was a cold fish. At a quarter to ten her enthusiasm began to wane notably.

"What's next?" she asked, in a let's-go-home-now-Roddy-darling voice.

Annie was wheeled out—Annie the sleek, the gorgeous—Annie of the high tail. Susan Gregory stared with dulled eyes.

"I've seen one of those before," she said.

It was dismissal. The evening was over. Ennui had descended upon the spirit of Susan Gregory and, watching the descent, Rod Peterson showed his first real emotion.

"Tired, sweetheart?"

Her answer was a shrug which galvanized him. "Thank you very much," he said hastily to Grayson. "It's all been very interesting. Good-by."

They were gone before most of the members grasped what was happening.

On the way home, Ilsa was as tense as drawn wire. "The nerve of her," she raged. "Coming there like a goddess bearing gifts and then pulling that stunt." Bitterly. "You've heard the last of the ten thousand, I'll wager."

Merritt held his peace. He felt himself at the beginning, not the end of temporary setbacks. And he had no intention of being gloomy in advance. By the time they reached their apartment Ilsa was deep in mental depression.

"You made a mistake marrying me," she sobbed. "I'm too old for insecurity and ups and downs."

"At twenty-eight," Merritt scoffed. "Don't be a nut."

But when he boarded the plane the following night she

had still not snapped out of her mood. The memory flattened his ego. He arrived in New York in a drab state of mind. If Grayson hadn't suggested the Waldorf-Astoria he would have gone uptown to a cheaper place.

The first businessman he contacted, a nationally known railway executive, listened to him as to a child, patted him on the back and promised to get in touch with him.

A textile giant, physically small and plump, kept him waiting for two days, then threw him out of the office verbally—"Wasting my time with such nonsense!" An airline president offered him a job in his publicity department.

Merritt returned to his hotel room from the final failure, more affected than he cared to admit. He had expected variations of failure but here was a dead-level indifference. Here were men so wrapped up in their own day-to-day certainties that he had not even penetrated the outer crust of their personalities. At 6 o'clock that evening he phoned Grayson in Hollywood.

"Before you say anything," Grayson said, when he came on the line, "You may be interested to know that we have received \$10,000 from—guess who?"

Merritt refused to hazard a guess.

"Susan Gregory."

That startled Merritt. But his mood remained cynical. "Have you got a check or a promise?"

"A check. But with a string attached."

"Huhuh!"

"She wants VB-TWO named after her. And we thought—well, what the heck, ten G's is ten G's. You can't beat that kind of logic. One thousand of it is on its way to you by air. How does that sound?"

It was like a shot in the arm. With a fervor approaching animation, Merritt described his new plan of action. He had made a mistake in approaching the men cold. What was needed was an intermediary, either incident or human being, to bridge the gap.

Human beings lived in separate worlds. Business executives lurked behind special concrete-like barriers, where they hid

themselves from commercially minded people like themselves. The problem was to get to the human being inside. In every man there was a spark of wonderful imagination. There he kept his dreams, his castles in the air, his special self.

Grayson interrupted at that point, "That sounds beautiful theoretically. But what have you got in mind?"

Merritt hesitated but only for a moment. "I'll need the help of the local branch of the club."

"Oh!"

There was silence. Merritt waited patiently. No one knew why the New York branch of the U.S. Spaceship Society had never amounted to anything. It was one of those things. A synthesis of discordant personalities, a dividing into cliques tending to stultify and infuriate the brighter brains.

In history, when such divisive elements attained national power, civilization stood still for a generation or more. How to break artificially induced immobility or retrogression? Sometimes one man had been known to do it.

The trouble was that the Los Angeles branch was annoyed at New York and was not too eager to share the fruits of its efforts. Grayson's reluctant voice came on the wire.

"All right and I'll back you. Now what's your plan?"

"What I want," said Merritt, "is all the available information about these men. Then I'd like the use of an old jet plane. I'm going after Mantin first, since he actually kicked me out of his office, and this time I'm using imagination."

The fortification that was Textile's Mantin was stormed that weekend when a jet plane apparently crash-landed within a hundred yards of his hunting lodge. The pilot, discovering that it would require 24 hours to repair the machine, was invited to remain overnight.

Bayliss, the air corporation man, was bombarded with ceramic and metal miniatures of various rocket bombs, each one accompanied by a message stressing the pure motives of the club. An ardent collector, he recognized some of the items as rare and valuable.

In Washington Senator Tinker, that sardonic glutton, finding himself the surprised recipient of a daily shipment of im-

ported foods obtainable only in New York, grew curious and granted an interview to a persistent caller, named Robert Merritt.

And so it came to pass that a young man attended a certain very exclusive poker session, where the average age of the players was nearly forty years above draft requirements. Senator Tinker introduced him.

"Gentlemen, this is Robert Merritt."

There was a grunted response. Merritt sat down and watched the cards being dealt. He did not look immediately at General Craig. He received two cards, an ace down and an eight up. The ace in the hole decided him to stay, though it cost him five dollars before everybody had stopped raising. His third card was an ace. He himself raised thirty dollars before the belligerent colonel next to the general stopped backing a jack and a nine with raises of his own. His fourth card was a nine, his fifth another ace.

Three aces was not a bad hand for stud poker. In spite of one of the aces not showing no one bet against him. Merritt raked in the chips. He estimated just a bit shakily that he had won about \$275, and that these men played a game that was miles out of his class financially.

His first two cards in the next hand were the two of spades and the seven of hearts. He folded and for the first time took a good though cautious look at General Craig. The great man's publicized face was as rugged in real life as his pictures showed him.

The shaggy eyebrows were shifting as he studied the cards of his opponents. His gaze came to Merritt's cards, flashed up, then down again. It was as swift as a wink but Merritt retained an impression of having been studied by eyes as bright as diamonds.

As the hand ended, the general said casually, "So it's me you're here to contact, Merritt?"

Merritt was shocked but he caught himself. "General," he said, "you're a smart man."

The older man said thoughtfully, "Robert Merritt. Where have I heard that name before? *Hmmmmmm*, Robert Merritt,

Captain Air Force, nineteen Jap planes, Congressional Medal of Honor." He looked shrewdly at Merritt. "Am I getting warm?"

"Uncomfortably," said Merritt.

He was not altogether displeased but he was also impressed. He recognized that he was in the presence of a man with an amazing memory. He lost nearly six hundred dollars in the three hands that followed, most of it in the third hand when, in a sort of desperation, he tried to make two eights do the work of three.

When that hand was finished, General Craig said, "What are you doing now, Merritt?"

It was direct but welcome. "I'm secretary," Merritt answered, "of the Spaceship Society, L.A. branch."

"Oh!" The general's eyebrows went up. Then he looked at Senator Tinker. "You old Ssstinker you," he said. "Do you realize what you've done, bringing this young man up here?"

"Well, general," drawled the senator, "they tell me that your army boys have been putting the pressure on you from all directions about this spaceship business. I thought I'd slip somebody in the back door. What are you holding up the parade for anyway? Is the idea too big for you?"

The commander in chief growled, "That kind of stuff is all right for young men but an old artillery man like myself can't afford to come out into the open until the time is ripe."

"When will the time be ripe?"

"Let me think," said the general. "VA-TWO went four thousand miles an hour. VB-TWO is now under construction, and will be completed shortly. It is destined to carry the first human being ever to attempt to reach space itself.

"I would suggest you accept the secret offer made you by Lieutenant Turner. That young fellow's a physical whiz. If anybody can stand the extreme acceleration of your crude machine he can."

The senator's grin was broader. "General," he said, "you so and so. You're an old spacehound yourself. I repeat, when would you consider the time ripe?"

"When I'm called in. Under such circumstances I could pre-

pare a report and read it to the President. He's not interested in printed material. Bad eyes, I suppose."

"Then we've still got to convince the President?"

"Exactly. That's your problem. And now, Merritt, there's one question I want to ask you."

"Yes, sir?"

The general was scowling. "How in—can a ship fly in space where there's no air for the explosions to push against?"

Said Serkel, "Print is nothing but a painful sensation on the iris. Print convinces nobody of anything. If you want to influence nobody have your words published in memo, magazine or book form."

He was a bright-eyed, dried-up little old man and Merritt stared at him in fascination. He sent a quick look toward Senator Tinker, found no help in the big man's sardonic smile and so he faced the old fellow again.

"Don't you think, sir, it depends on whether or not your favorite critic recommends the book?"

"The critics," said Gorin Serkel, "are like mounds of shifting sand on top of which publishers pile books. If they acclaim a book one week you can be certain that they will give their accolade the following week to another book of diametrically opposite viewpoint. Undoubtedly the two books together will fail to influence more people than they failed to influence separately."

It seemed to Merritt that he had better produce his letter quickly. But he hesitated. They had found Serkel on the veranda of his country home and they were still standing halfway up the steps. Like salesmen, Merritt thought, with no prospect of being invited to sit down.

A little uncertain, Merritt took out the letter, and extended it. Serkel shrank back.

"Writing!" he said. He shrugged. "You might as well start unbuilding your ship right now."

"This letter," Merritt urged, "is from Professor Hillier."

"The President," said Serkel, "cannot even be influenced by

his own speeches once they are made and available only in printed form."

"But how does the country continue to run?" Merritt protested. "Surely, a mountain of documents crosses his desk every day."

"Details, yes," said Serkel. "Administrative necessities and acts of Congress—that he tolerates in the same fashion that he accepts the American dollar as good money. But nothing new."

He added with asperity, "The President expects of his friends that they will not embarrass him by peddling schemes which he will almost assuredly have to turn down."

He looked at Senator Tinker, then at Merritt. "The solution seems very simple to me. Professor Hillier is a world-famous scientist. His name will get you a hearing. His presence will safeguard you from a quick exit."

Merritt and Senator Tinker looked at each other. There was no question that Serkel was now giving them his most earnest counsel. The only thing they could do was to explain the impossibility of using Professor Hillier as a safeguard for anything.

It was a dangerous form of disillusionment because Serkel might avail himself of the opportunity to fade out of the picture finally and forever. Serkel was thoughtful when Merritt had finished describing the professor.

"So the publicized Hillier is a figment of the imagination, deadly to his own purposes when paraded in person and a flop at everything but adding and subtracting on a level approximating infinity."

He straightened. He said curtly, "Under the circumstances, gentlemen, I do not feel inclined to entertain your proposition. I—"

Merritt had watched it coming. As he stood looking at the former presidential adviser, a kaleidoscopic memory of the two months just passed flashed through his mind. Slowly the remembrance stiffened him.

He felt no sense of egotism but Serkel didn't seem to understand that the men who wanted his help were not just ordinary

human beings. They were men with a mission. They *couldn't* back down or withdraw permanently from any forward position. Merritt gathered himself.

"I think, sir," he said, "that I have not made clear the potentialities of a letter. Professor Hillier, clothed in his ivory-tower reputation, verbally produced by an experienced persuader, can accomplish more than any stranger named Professor Hillier meeting a stranger named President Graham.

"It is my belief, furthermore, that you have not clearly realized the possibilities of a final great achievement to climax your long and famous career. So that you might better understand the situation I invite you to attend two weeks from now the most exciting experimental flight ever attempted by men. I think you owe it to the future of human kind to ensure that you at least see the first man to fly into space."

Serkel's expression was suddenly more intent, thoughtful.

"One personality on the scene," Merritt pressed on, "funneling the convictions of many minds through his own voice, might conceivably capture the attention of the President for the necessary minute without requiring him to read a line."

He saw that he had an audience again. Serkel sat down. He looked even more thoughtful. At last he said, "You and your friend and the letter are invited to stay for the weekend." He raised his voice. "Mrs. Ess."

There were footsteps. A pleasant looking woman came out onto the porch. Serkel said, "Gentlemen, my wife. Mrs. Ess, tell Jane two extra dinners until further notice. Make yourselves at home, everybody."

He stood up and disappeared into the house, mumbling something to the effect that, "The economic aspects of the Keynes taxation theory do not merit the contempt they undoubtedly deserve. I must tell the president."

At least that was the way it sounded to Merritt.

Merritt's purely personal crisis came like an atomic bomb out of the blue on the day of the test. At twenty minutes to two, with the flight scheduled to begin at two, a pale Mike Grayson hurried out of the barns and approached Merritt.

He said, "Bad news! Lieutenant Turner just phoned. His

superior officer, not knowing General Craig privately gave him permission to fly VB-2, has refused him leave because of some miserable maneuvers they're beginning tomorrow. I phoned John Errol but his office says they can't locate him—he's out somewhere on business. You were always the only other choice, Bob, so—"

Merritt's first thought was of Ilsa. Ilsa who would not understand, who would think that he had once more lightly placed her future in jeopardy.

"We could postpone it," said Grayson, anxiously.

Merritt knew better. There were men waiting in the observation hut who had come to this test for a variety of reasons. It was almost a miracle that they were present at all. No one was so aware as he that that miracle would not be easily repeated.

"No," he said quietly. "Naturally, I'll do it. But first I want to call my wife."

His call went unanswered. He let the phone ring for several minutes, then hung up, disturbed. Ilsa had decided not to come to the test.

"Somebody's going to get killed," she had said, "and I don't want to be around when they bring in the body."

It was an unfortunate remark.

The four-jet carrier plane, which was to take the rocket on the first leg of its journey, took off without incident. It climbed like a shooting star but it was only about halfway up when the pilot's voice sounded from the earphones which were embedded in the cushions beside Merritt's head:

"Grayson wants to talk to you, Bob."

Grayson was exultant. "Bob, Serkel just phoned from Washington. As you know, he decided not to come to the test because he doesn't believe in melodramatic shows. Well, he had lunch with the President today. And he's done it, Bob. He's done it."

The other man's enthusiasm seemed remote to Merritt. He listened to the details with half his mind, agreed finally that it was more important than ever now that the test be successful, and then put the matter out of his mind.

The pilot's voice said, "Ready, Bob?"

"Ready," said Merritt.

The ship turned downward into a power dive. All four of its jet engines thundering, gathering speed, it went down to twenty-five thousand feet, then twisted and zoomed upward at more than five hundred miles an hour.

"Now," said the pilot tensely.

Merritt didn't see the door in the rear of the plane opening. But he felt the movement as the rocket slid backward through the opening. Then he was in bright sunlight. Through the treated, tinted Plexiglas of the tiny cabin he had a glimpse of the dark sky above.

For two seconds the long shiny tube continued to fall. It was not really falling. Its upward speed was about three hundred miles an hour. It was falling, however, with respect to the carrier ship and the time gap was designed to let the big machine get out of the way.

The process was electronically timed. Tick, tock, tick, tock—WHAM! He had tensed for it and that was bad. It was like being hit in every bone and muscle and organ, that first titanic blow of the rockets.

Merritt crumpled into the cushions and the springs below and around him. He had a dizzy glimpse of the big converted bomber falling away into the distance. In one jump it retreated from giant hood to a tiny dot barely visible in the haze of sky below. It vanished.

WHAAAAMM! The second blow was more sustained. His head started to ache violently. His eyes stung. His body felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds. *It did*. The second set of explosions was designed to exert peak acceleration. But the speed of the rocket was probably still under 2,000 miles an hour.

"Bob!" Grayson's voice. On the radio.

"Yeah!" The word came hard.

"Shall we go on?"

It hadn't struck him that they might abandon the flight if he didn't react well. Curiously that brought fury.

"Blast you," he shouted. "Get going."

The explosions were radio-controlled and the third was a duplicate of the second. His body took it hard, harder than anything he had ever imagined.

He found himself puzzling blurrily about what had happened to the cushions and the springs. He seemed to be standing on a slab of metal with steel-hard metal braces pressing onto his arms and legs. Was that what happened to cushions under pressure?

It was tremendously dark outside. His vision was not clear but he could see dots of stars and, over to one side, a fiery blob. It took a moment to realize that it was the sun. He waited, cringing, for the fourth and last series of explosions.

He thought, "Oh, Lord, I can't take it! *I can't!*"

But he did. And, strangely, the blow seemed less severe as if in some marvelous fashion his being had adjusted to its environment of violence. The series of blows pulsed rhythmically through his bones and attuned to his nerves.

"Bob!"

He was so intent on his own thoughts and feelings that it didn't strike him right away that he was being addressed.

"Bob"—earnestly—"are you all right?"

"Bob," he thought. Bob? Why, that's me. Impatience came.

"Why, of course I'm all right."

"*Thank goodness!*" The words were a whisper. And in the background, behind Grayson's voice, there was a murmur of other voices. "... Good man!" ... "Oh, wonderful ..."  
Then once more, Grayson:

"Bob."

"Yes?"

"According to the duplicate instruments down here, you're now six hundred miles up, and going higher at the rate of seventy miles a minute. How do you feel?"

He began to feel fine. There was no sense of movement now. His stomach felt kind of hollow but that was the only sensation. He floated in emptiness, in silence and darkness.

The stars were pinpoints of intense brightness that did not twinkle or glitter. The sun, far to his left, was only super-

ficially round. Streamers of flame and fire mist made it appear lopsided and unnatural.

As Merritt blinked at it the sun came past him and turned away to the right. He watched it amazed, then realized what was happening. The rocket had reached its limit. Held by Earth's gravity, it was turning slowly, twisting gradually, falling back toward Earth.

Merritt said quickly, "How high am I?"

"Eight hundred and four miles."

It was not bad. He had topped the farthest limits of the atmosphere by more than three hundred miles. He had looked out at empty space—through protected Plexiglas to be sure—but looked. Soon he would have to start thinking of getting clear of the tube, which was destined to fall into the ocean.

At forty thousand feet above sea level he set off the explosion that knocked the cabin free of the main tube. At fifteen thousand feet he bailed out of the cabin. His parachute opened at five thousand feet. He came down in an orange grove and walked to a filling station. The attendant charged him fifty cents for using the phone to call Grayson.

He was back on Earth all right.

The physical check-up at the field was extremely thorough and it took a long time. When it was over there were toasts and congratulations. It was nearly seven when Merritt reached the apartment.

He came in, carrying a bag of groceries, but it was evident that Ilsa had been shopping too. The pleasant odor of roast beef came from the kitchen.

A paper with screamer headlines about the flight lay on a French chair. The sight relieved Merritt. She knew.

Ilsa came out of the kitchen. She was smiling. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"I've been pronounced one hundred percent."

She clung tightly to him as she kissed him but that was her only show of emotion. "I'll have dinner ready in a minute," she said.

While they were eating Merritt told her, with more excitement than he had originally felt, about Serkel's success.

"The President," he said, "has assigned six thousand dollars for the development of an atomic drive for spaceships."

"Six thousand dollars!" said Ilsa.

The color went out of her cheeks. "Is that *all* he got? Six thousand dollars!" she exclaimed. "Why, in Congress, members each session vote hundreds of thousands of dollars for each other's pet schemes without even knowing what they are.

"And you people are getting a wretched six thousand dollars to build a spaceship, a tribute no doubt"—furiously—"to the fame of Professor Hillier. That's about the smallest amount the government has ever used for the brush-off."

Merritt protested, amazed, "But you don't understand."

"I understand only too well. It's the same story all over again—no money." She was so agitated she couldn't go on. Tears started to her eyes. She shook her head in frustration and hurried out of the room.

Merritt thought, "Well, I'll be a—"

He went on under his breath, "But you *don't* understand, Ilsa. According to Serkel, the President was aware that it was an historic occasion. So he symbolized it. He assigned exactly the same amount of money that the atomic energy project had first received. It was like saying unlimited funds would be available."

Merritt sat, eyes closed, tremendously disturbed. If he told her now it would be a case of buying back her love. He remembered suddenly that she had divorced her first husband just before the man struck it rich. He had a vision of her doing it again—and knew that he couldn't let it happen.

Footsteps sounded. Ilsa came back into the room, straight over to him. She buried her face against his knees.

"Bob, I couldn't help it. When I thought of you taking that terrible risk for nothing—"

She climbed to her feet and sat down on his lap. "This will sound melodramatic," she said, "but this afternoon I swore to myself I would never again mention money to you."

Merritt hugged her. "That," he said, "is silly. There's something wrong about a woman who doesn't drive her husband."

"You're a wretch," Ilsa said cosily. "But I still love you."

"Good," Merritt said.

He kissed her neck to hide his broadening smile.

Later, he would tell her that men would soon fly in atom-powered spaceships, first to the planets, then to the far stars.

## WHY I SELECTED

### SPACE STATION NO. 1

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*When I wrote this story in 1938, I did myself the luxury of feeling that I had scored a minor point in the science fiction game I was playing.*

*Most of the hundred or so stories of the future I have written fit into an overall imagined picture of what life might be like in the thirtieth century. Without making them sequels, yet I give them a setting that is constant—the same cities on various planets, the same peoples and governments and customs on Mars, Venus, Earth and the Jovian moons, the same principles governing fashions, tools, transportation and morals of a thousand years hence. It was a special kind of fun to fit various stories into the pattern, like jigsaw pieces, and it impelled me to consider numberless aspects of that possible life of our remote descendants.*

*Such life wouldn't always glitter or delight. I thought a great deal about the commonplaces and drudgeries, and several times I wrote about them. SPACE STATION NO. 1, I thought then and still think, came out fairly well in the drab colors of an undesirable job in a corner of space's nowhere.*

*The brief adventure at the utilitarian artificial planetoid is simple and small, compared to what adventure could be in the thirtieth century, but it deals rather decisively with the fates of several persons; and not the least of them is a Martian of the Martians I have written about so often that I have almost*

*convinced myself and a number of readers that they are what Martians truly are. This time, more than ever before or since, my Martian surprised and deceived everyone, including me, his chronicler. He is the real central character in SPACE STATION NO. 1.*

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

# MANLY WADE WELLMAN

## SPACE STATION NO. 1

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### Zeoui Writes a New Chapter in the Story of Martian Conquest.

**I**N ITS time Space Station No. 1 was unique in the solar system and probably the universe, for, of all the worlds that swung around the sun, it alone was a creation of mortal engineers and mechanics, built of materials artificially prepared, shaped and joined, for civilized purposes and profit.

Without it the Martio-Terrestrial League's Jovian colonies might well have failed at the start. Jupiter's moons abounded in valuable minerals, offered broad lands for development and settlement by emigrants, but they were almost too far away. Only once in two years were Mars and Jupiter in conjunction, close enough for liners and freighters to ply between. A few days thus, then the planets drifted apart on their orbits, the gap widening to an impossible distance for two years more.

Wherefore the League's experts planned and built Space Station No. 1, to circle the sun along Mars' orbit, but on the far side of the sun from Mars. Old Sol's gravity carried the synthetic planetoid in approximate position, as the current of a whirlpool carries a chip of wood in an endless circle. Occasional rocket blasts kept the station exactly where it should be. Thus, when the planet was in opposition and at its farthest from Jupiter, the station was at its closest, a half-way house for the refueling of Jupiter-bound ships from Earth and Mars. Supplies and other relief could reach the colonists once each year instead of once each two years.

Viewed from afar against the star-dusted black of space, the station looked like an exaggerated mimicry of ringed

Saturn. The spherical center was an outmoded and awkward space-hulk two hundred meters in diameter. Construction ships had towed it into position, then clamped great girders all around its equator to extend like spokes from a hub. These in turn were braced with smaller crosswise girders and cables and the whole decked over with metal plates to make a circular plane a mile across, extending collar-like from and around the ball-shaped center. This deck was the landing port. The hulk in the middle did duty as administration building, storehouse, and living quarters.

For men lived there. And though the League and the colonies found Space Station No. 1 practical and valuable, its attendants found it all but unendurable.

There were two of them, standing just now on the outer rim of the deck, clad in space-overalls of insulated fabric, magnetized boots that held them to the almost gravityless plating, and bell-like glass helmets, slightly clouded against the sun's unimpeded glare. The taller was Lane Everitt, a tough-bodied young Terrestrial, who was glaring as fiercely as the sun itself. He had had enough of Space Station No. 1, this cramped corner where he must live in dingy cabins, corridors and holds, and swaddle himself in glass and fabric whenever he ventured out for exercise.

A full year of this prison-like boredom, and why? Because he, a simple navigator of Spaceways, Inc., had loved and been loved by Fortuna Sidney, daughter of the corporation's director-general. Now he was out here, doomed to the most deadly routine job in the universe, while she was shut up in the strictest schools with instructions to forget him.

"Rats!" he growled aloud, and his own voice, echoing inside the helmet, startled him. He must stop mumbling to himself—yes, and lying awake, and cheating at solitaire—or he'd go crazy, like that chap Ropakihn he had relieved out here. And if he went crazy, he, too, would be clapped in an asylum. No job, no freedom. No Fortuna. He gazed down from the deck's verge into the endlessness of space, found no comfort there, then turned his head inside the transparent helmet to glance back along the level expanse of deck. He felt like a very small

fly on the rim of a very big tray, with the hulk for an apple in its center. And Earth and the solar system valued him at less than a fly.

"Did you mention rats, Ev? You require rodents for some purpose?"

It was the mechanically expressionless voice of Zeoui, his Martian associate, who stood beside him. Zeoui's chrysanthemum-like face—if face it really was—tilted toward him questioningly.

Zeoui was one of those Martians destined from birth and before to live and work with Terrestrials. Eugenic breeding and medical alteration had brought his shape to approximate that of an Earth man. His soft, bladder-like body had been elongated, stiffened with artificial spine, and raised erect upon two slender limbs. Its upper corners were even shaped into shoulders, and bore in lieu of arms two tentacles with sensitive tips, just now concealed in his space-mittens. At the top, under the helmet, was his large and fragile braincase, shaggy all over with the petal-like fronds and tags of tissue housing his Martian awareness of conditions that approximated the five Terrestrial senses. Thus developed and equipped, Zeoui could walk and work with Earth's mankind, could talk—he favored ultra-pedantic and exact polysyllables—by stirring air through an artificial larynx. He was more at home among Terrestrials than among the jelly-like bodies and feeler-appendages of his fellow-Martians.

He spoke again: "A rocket vessel, swift and small, approaches."

"Coming here? Already?" Everitt glanced up. "They aren't due, not for hours yet."

The thought of ships depressed him. For five days they would be passing him, heading for Jupiter, and in a few weeks the craft from the colonies would be stopping off on the inner trail—worse than no company at all. He and Zeoui would mix liquid oxygen and other ingredients into fuel and operate the pumps, but there would be no chatting or fraternizing. Skip-pers might transmit formal orders, receive reports, no more. No word from home or friends, no mail. . . .

"Observe. It is approaching rapidly." Zeoui pointed a tentacle. In the blackness far above circled a tiny gray dart of a space-craft, cutting speed, and preparing to land. Everitt scowled in perplexity, lifting a hand to his helmet as if to rumple his bright hair inside.

"That's not a Spaceways job," he said in mystified tones. "It looks like a war craft. What—"

The lead-colored cigar burst into a dazzling flare at the nose, and the gush of the forward rockets braked it sharply. As the two watchers stood at gaze, it fell to a swaying crawl directly overhead. Then it curved in, around, and down to the deck not a hundred yards away.

Almost before its rocket blasts had subsided a panel sprang open in its side and a helmeted head popped out.

"Someone disembarks," commented Zeoui's maddeningly dry voice. "Yes, and makes significant motions of the hand."

The first figure to reach the deck was small and slight, even in space-overall.

"Ev!" came a soft, trembling cry to Everitt's earphones, and his heart stirred. He had never expected to hear that voice again.

"Ev, dear!" The little figure was running toward him, and he found his own voice.

"Fortuna!" he cried back, and sped to meet her. A moment later he had clutched the newcomer in his arms, was pressing her close to him and gazing at a dear white face through two thicknesses of clouded glass. Her big, storm-dark eyes swam with tears of mingled joy and concern, her full lips trembled.

Then more motion from the direction of the ship caught Everitt's eye. A towering form in full space-armor stepped into view. Then another, then four more in a group. They bore arms in their hands or belts—the big leader an electro-automatic rifle, his stunted neighbor a lantern-like rust-ray, the others pistols. Everitt stiffened in startled wonder.

"It's all right, they're my men," came Fortuna's voice to his ears. "Let's go somewhere and talk, Ev. It's important."

"Right, Fortuna," he agreed, making his voice steady. To

Zeoui he spoke crisply. "Stay on deck, will you? I'm taking her inside."

Zeoui's face-petals stirred and curled against his helmet-glass, as if in worried fidgets. "These individuals," he ventured. "Is it to be understood that—"

"Steady, old man," cautioned Everitt quickly. "You aren't supposed to speak to visitors."

"The same restriction applies to yourself," reminded Zeoui.

"But I must speak," Everitt said flatly. "I'll handle this situation alone, though. No need for you to be involved."

It was half a warning, half a snub, and Zeoui fell silent. Taking Fortuna's arm, Everitt led her toward the hulk. Their eyes were ever upon each other, and their emotion was too deep for smiles. Behind them came the armed half dozen companions of the girl.

The lock-panel in the hulk slid back at Everitt's touch and first he and Fortuna, then the others, stepped into the little airlock chamber. A moment later they had passed the inner panel. Inside the old control room that, stripped of instruments and fitted with a desk, chairs and cabinets, served as an office, they felt the comforting pull of the artificial gravity that the outer deck lacked.

All began to unship their helmets. Everitt and Fortuna freed their faces first and at once kissed with hungry violence. Everitt thought that the biggest of Fortuna's companions chuckled derisively under his half-doffed headpiece, but was too happy to resent it.

"And now," Fortuna murmured, freeing her lips, "I'll tell you how we are working your escape."

"Escape?" repeated Everitt sharply. "You don't mean—"

"I tried to get you relieved," the girl said, with a serious wag of her dark, curly head, "but Daddy turned obdurate. Said he'd keep you here until you rotted. And so, in desperation, I went at it another way." Half turning in Everitt's embrace, she nodded to the big man. "Tell him, Ropakihn."

"Ropakihn?" said Everitt. "Are you—?" He paused.

The giant's head was out of the helmet now. It showed huge, heavy-jowled, with bright, piggy eyes, a mighty blade

of a nose and a crimson complexion. The coarse, well-combed thatch of hair was a good six feet six above the office floor, and the armored body was heavy, even for that height. A loose smile crossed the big, red countenance as a raspy voice answered Everitt's half-voiced question.

"Yes, I'm Ropakihn, the man who played—well, eccentric—to get away from here." The lips grew looser, writhing a bit. "They shut me up in a comfortable but boresome asylum, until Miss Fortuna here came to visit me. She arranged for a leave of absence for me and these other inmates. You see," and his rasp grew smug, "I knew about the new type of warcraft and their MS-ray. Knew it from a retired officer—also eccentric enough to be shut up. He babbled out the location of a hangar where an ultra-fast experimental ship was kept."

Everitt puzzled over this information. "MS-ray—metal-solvent? I heard it was being developed, an advance on the rust-ray principle."

"Since you were exiled it became a reality," Ropakihn informed him. "There's one on that super-speed ship out there—the one we took a few nights ago from its hangar."

He paused, grinning in a self-congratulatory manner, while Fortuna took up the tale. "I guessed," she said, "that Ropakihn wasn't as afflicted as they thought. I also guessed that he would be miffed enough at the people who had exiled and imprisoned him to be an ally. He was good enough to listen and to pick these other friends."

For the first time Everitt looked at Ropakihn's five companions, almost helmetless by now. And he was genuinely shocked.

Not one of them was normal. The man with the rust-ray was a hunched and twisted dwarf with the face of a cunning weasel. Two of the others were well set up, but they wore expressions of brutal stupidity. The remaining two were patently imbecilic, fidgety and grimacing. No wonder both Fortuna and Ropakihn had avoided saying "crazy"—had employed such words as "eccentric" and "afflicted." The other expression would have been too pointed to use in this company.

Ropakihn continued, amusedly:

"In any case, Everitt, Miss Fortuna got us out. Now she wants us to try to get you out."

"Exactly," added Fortuna in happy triumph. "What with our extra speed, we have a start of hours on the rest of the ships. Have you any baggage? We'll head back to Earth at once."

"I can't go," said Everitt.

There was silence for a moment, and they all looked at him—Fortuna uncomprehending, Ropakihn somewhat scornful, the others foolishly querulous. Then Fortuna began to argue.

"You don't understand, darling. It isn't as though they were out patrolling the space-lanes for you. Why, they won't even know you've deserted until we're safely landed and lost, in Africa or Brazil or—"

"I can't go," said Everitt again.

Ropakihn chuckled, as he had when Fortuna and Everitt had kissed each other.

"Do I read you rightly?" he inquired with the hint of a sneer. "Do you feel that your duty lies here?"

"Duty!" snapped Fortuna heatedly. "This routine job? Why, Ev, darling, a child could do it, mixing fuel and filling tanks."

"Without me the Jovian route will be broken in two," he reminded her. "Zeoui couldn't handle things alone."

Fortuna clenched her little fists in despair. "Don't you want me? Don't I love you, and didn't Spaceways do you a shabby trick? Your every instinct—"

"There are many instincts," he interrupted gently. "One is for love, and heaven knows that it's strong in me. But another's for honor and loyalty. That keeps me at my post."

Another silence, with all eyes on Everitt. Finally Fortuna shrugged, though not in complete resignation.

"Maybe you're right," she said slowly.

"I know I am," Everitt rejoined. "You can go home, dear, and wait for the thing to work out properly."

"That," growled Ropakihn in a new, grim voice, "is where you are wrong."

He took a step forward. The five grouped behind him sud-

denly brought their weapons to the ready. Ropakihn himself shifted his right hand to the trigger-switch of his rifle.

"Corby," he said crisply to the twisted man with the rust-ray, "go out on deck and bring that Martian in here."

"Yop." The man called Corby made a sloppy gesture of salute and turned to enter the air-lock, putting on his helmet as he did so.

Everitt tightened his muscles as if to spring, but Ropakihn lifted his weapon warningly. "Steady," said the giant. "You're my prisoners."

"Ropakihn!" called Fortuna. "I'm giving orders here."

"Not now." The heavy, red face crinkled in a broader grin. "You think I'll go back to that asylum? Think again, lady. We're going to go to Jupiter instead."

Everitt had not shrunk back from the menace of the guns. "You're outlaws, then?" he demanded accusingly. "You mean to defy Earth and Mars together?"

"Outlaws—for today," agreed Ropakihn in high good humor. "But in a few weeks we'll be conquerors. That MS-ray will blow the defenses loose from the whole Jovian colonial setup. They'll have to surrender to us. Instead of outlaws—rulers!" He grew exultant. "And Earth and Mars will have to treat with us."

Then he grew blustery. "Get ready to mix us some fuel, Everitt. Enough for the jump to Jupiter."

Everitt shook his head. "I serve no ship without a voucher from the Interplanetary Commerce Commission," he said flatly.

"Here's my voucher," and Ropakihn twiddled his rifle. "It's electric-powered, but bored for lead-and-powder cartridges—fifty—just like the guns of the ancients. A novelty piece." His grin grew cruel. "No merciful death by shock, Everitt. How would you like me to start shooting your toes off, one at a time?"

Everitt was disdainfully silent.

"Or Miss Fortuna's toes, perhaps? Does that intrigue you?"

Everitt felt a chill creep along his spine. Fortuna tortured! . . .

"There's no fuel mixed as yet," he announced. "We didn't expect a ship so soon."

"No? Then we'll start the machinery going. And when we've fueled ourselves, we'll try out our MS-ray—wash this station clear out of the universe."

One or two of Ropakihn's followers giggled inanely at the thought, and Fortuna shivered. The sense of her danger and his own helplessness infuriated Everitt. "You'll destroy the station!" he cried.

"Of course," Ropakihn's face turned harsh. "It doesn't fill me with affectionate memories. And with it gone, police craft can't refuel and follow."

"Next year Mars will be in the halfway station spot," Everitt reminded him. "There'll be plenty of trouble flying out to Jupiter after you."

"When we're holding all the colonies as hostage?" laughed Ropakihn. "Don't be absurd. They'll be glad to meet whatever terms we make. Freedom, money, recognition as governors even."

Everitt said nothing. The scheme was as practicable as it was daring. Such a weapon as the MS-ray, unknown as yet on the Jovian moons, would spell victory for this handful of insane adventurers. What fantastic rulers for the unlucky settlers!

The air-lock opened and two figures entered—Zeoui and Corby, taking off their helmets. The Martian's chrysanthemum face turned toward Ropakihn.

"Your lieutenant has been explaining to me your stratagem for the invasion and conquest of Jupiter's satellites," he volunteered in his precise manner. "Have you accommodations in your ship for a recruit?"

Everitt gasped. Was Zeoui, the pedant, inflamed by dreams of piracy? Ropakihn grinned welcome.

"Certainly we have room, for several recruits. But how about the fuel? You, Martian—what's your name?"

"Zeoui," was the reply. "You want fuel? Expediently? Give me two men to help."

Ropakihn waved forward the two brutal-faced outlaws.

Zeoui led them through the inner door of the office and down the passage toward the fuel-mixing chamber. Everitt watched with rage-darkened face, much to Ropakihn's amusement.

"Your partner seems to be reasonable," he commented. "How about you two?"

Everitt shook his head. "You want somebody normal to leaven your crazy crew." He exulted at the flinch that the word "crazy" wrung from his captors, and went on. "Nothing doing, Ropakihn. If you're destroying the space station, destroy me with it. You won't have long to enjoy the sensation."

Ropakihn turned toward Fortuna, but she shook her head. "It's unnecessary to ask me," she said.

The big man chuckled, his gaze feasting on her trim lines which the collapsed space-overall could not disguise. "I'm not asking," he replied. "You're coming along—to help shorten the journey . . ." His greedy eyes never left her. "You'll be queen of my new Jovian empire. . . ."

Everitt could stand no more. He made a lunge at his towering foe. But the magnetism in his shoes, augmented by the floor's artificial gravity, slowed his charge for a second. In that second Ropakihn was on guard, fending him off with the rifle barrel across his chest, while Corby and the two others had fallen upon him.

For full half a minute Everitt battled, his angry strength almost a match for his three assailants, but then they forced him down and began to bind his limbs with a belt from his own overall. Fortuna, seeing his defeat, made a dash as if to help him. Ropakihn, laughing, clutched at her, and she swerved away, then ran for the door that led to the hulk's interior.

A form popped into view on the threshold, barring her retreat. It was Zeoui. A quick clutch with a tentacle-tip, and he had her by the wrist. "Was she endeavoring to depart?" he enunciated dryly.

"She tried to fight," growled Ropakihn. "I'll take the fight out of her before we've been aboard a quarter of an hour. How's the fuel job?"

"Going expeditiously," retorted the Martian. "The assistants

you placed at my disposal are supervising the mixing-pumps. May I be assigned others to aid in extending the feed conduits to your vessel?"

"Right." Ropakihn turned his eyes to his three remaining henchmen. "Corby, stay here to keep an eye on Everitt. You others, on with your helmets and go with Zeoui."

Zeoui still held Fortuna, who had quieted, but still glared angrily. "It would be well," he suggested, "to confine this person likewise."

He himself assisted in tying her arms and ankles. Then he bustled about, helping his two new companions to put on their helmets. Finally he led them out upon the deck.

Time passed. Everitt and Fortuna, helpless in their bonds, lay propped against a bulkhead under Corby's guard. Ropakihn, lolling on the deck, talked. He throve on his own boasting, telling enthusiastically of his enterprise in planning the theft of the speed-craft with its new ray equipment, his courage and resource in executing that theft, of his daring in conceiving the idea of conquering Jupiter's moons.

Half an hour was gone before he wearied at the sound of his voice. Breaking his stream of self-praise then, he moved to a port and looked out.

"Where's Zeoui?" he demanded, half aloud. "I don't see him or the others. They must be in the cruiser itself."

Again he studied the deck outside. "They've got the pipe drawn out to the ship," he continued after a moment, "but it's limp—there can't be a very big stream of fuel. Probably none at all."

Swinging around, he glared at the prisoners and at Corby. "Say," he blustered at the universe in general, "are those lazy limpets soldiering on their mixing jobs? I'll show them how!" He started to tramp across the floor, but the loud clang of his magnetized boots halted him. Lifting one foot, then the other, he pulled the metal footgear away. "No need for them to know I'm coming," he commented. "Corby, you're in charge until I get back."

He was gone into the inner passage. Corby, his slow mind groping after the reason for his chief's ire, took a step as if to

follow, then stared stupidly in Ropakihn's wake. For the moment he was not watching Everitt or Fortuna.

Everitt felt a tug at his bonds. A hand was freeing him—Fortuna's hand. She had won loose! He wasted no time in pondering now, but as his own arms felt the strap draw away, sprang to his feet.

Corby heard the motion and turned, but before he lifted his ray-tube Everitt's hard fist connected with the loose-hung jaw. The hunchback went hurtling backward, his skull ringing on the floor before his weapon fell with a shattering sound. He lay still.

Everitt caught up the ray-tube, saw that it was jammed, and dropped it with an exclamation of impatience. From the desk he seized his helmet.

"What are you going to do?" he asked Fortuna breathlessly, sitting up to untie her ankles.

"Stay where you are," he cautioned her hastily. "Leave your feet tied and your hands behind you. Then Ropakihn and his men will think you're still helpless, and leave you alone for a minute." He poised the helmet above his head. "I'm making a dash for the ship outside. Zeoui and his playmates may not recognize me at once. If I get in among them and smash them, I'll have the MS-ray. Give me a moment to learn how to work it, and it'll be our saving."

Clamping his helmet in place, he stepped to the inner lock-panel. Behind him rose the panicky roar of Ropakihn, hurrying back from his inspection. The bellowed words penetrated even the helmet-glass.

"Corby!" the giant was shouting. "Look alive! The fuel-mixer went wrong somehow—liquid oxygen escaped, and both the boys are frozen stiff as boards!"

He came into view, and saw Everitt.

"You loose?" he bawled, but his erstwhile captive was into the air-lock, then through it and upon the deck.

No motion, no life met Everitt's eyes outside. The outlaw ship was where it had been, half the radius of the deck away, and to it extended the jointed metal pipe that carried fuel.

Ropakihn was right, no liquid was coursing through that

flaccid conduit. Everitt started at a half-run for the cruiser.

But a savage voice rang in his earphones: "Stand still, or I'll plug you!"

Everitt whirled around. Ropakihn had come out, helmet hastily donned and rifle poised. His huge body almost fell at the outer threshold of the lock, and only a clutch at a port-rim saved it.

The outlaw, in his haste to pursue, had left off his magnetic boots. Outside the hulk he had only the tiny gravity-pull of the deck to govern him, and his huge body weighed but a few ounces. An unconsidered touch of toe-pressure was enough to unbalance him, even hurl him clear of the deck.

"Take off your shoes and throw them to me!" he yelled at Everitt.

The smaller man stood still, making no motion to obey.

Ropakihn's beaked face darkened with rage. "Off with them, or—"

Steadying himself with his left hand on the port-rim, Ropakihn pointed his rifle with the other. Everitt ducked out of the line of fire, himself slipping to one knee. At once Ropakihn floundered forward and upon him, clutching one foot and fairly ripping the shoe from it. "I'll do the walking, you do the stumbling," he taunted.

Everitt lay still beneath the outlaw, but not in submission. He was analyzing the situation—so logical, though he had never thought of it before. Inside the hulk you had weight and never stopped to realize that out here you needed magnets to hold you down lest—

Ropakihn had tucked his rifle under an elbow and was pulling off the other shoe. That vast mass of flesh, sprawling upon Everitt, was no heavier than a silk handkerchief. Even as the second shoe fell to the deck, Everitt summoned his strength and surged upward, thrusting his enemy along and traveling with him. Next instant they floundered in emptiness, the deck dropping from beneath them as if snatched by the hand of a prank-playing Titan.

They wrestled wildly in space, weightless as swimmers and clumsy as dreamers. It was like a dream at that, a horrible

nightmare in which one strikes or grapples but encounters no resistance. Arms around Ropakihn's body, Everitt stared over the crag of the giant's shoulder at Space Station No. 1—dwindling, falling down and away, shrinking to a lump-centered shield on a starry curtain of black. The very heave of Everitt's body had been enough to send them both flying like stones from a sling, unfettered by gravity, unimpeded by air, hundreds of yards, a mile.

They wrenched and tore at each other's throats for a time, baffled by the folds of fabric. Then Ropakihn, letting go, struck Everitt clumsily on the breast-bone. The buffet dashed them violently apart.

Everitt saw the jetty sky and its stars whirl, saw the disk that was the station whip from underfoot to overhead, then back out of sight to appear underfoot again. He was somersaulting in space. Ropakihn, too, was flying backward, head over heels over head, shrinking to the apparent size of a squirming doll.

Everitt gave vent to a hysterical laugh over their ridiculous plight. Strong as lions but light as feathers they were losing themselves in nothingness by their own undirectible exertions. Even now they had no power to come together or to return to the deck after they had left. He had a mental picture of himself falling to an orbit, circling the man-made planetoid like a satellite. Ropakihn, caught in another orbit, might make the same circuit at a slower or faster pace. Drawing into conjunction, perhaps they would be close enough to resume hostilities.

Everitt laughed again more wildly.

A shout assailed his earphones. Ropakihn, far away, was doing something with the rifle. Yes, firing it, not at Everitt, but into space behind himself. Flash after flash of detonation and Ropakihn seemed to grow in size.

Oh, that was it. The weapon carried explosive charges and its recoil, though barely enough to stir a proper weight, could propel the few ounces that its operator scaled just now. The rocket was definitely approaching. He grew bigger, bigger, like a rubber figure swelling with gas.

Now he was aiming the gun at Everitt, firing once. The bullet missed, and the recoil slowed Ropakihn. Again they collided and grappled.

The smaller, more agile Everitt managed to seize and clamp his enemy's massive rifle arm. Ropakihn tried to shove him loose, but Everitt wrung the wrist he held with desperate vigor. He heard the giant's involuntary grunt of pain, saw the huge, mittened hand sag open. The weapon swam slowly out of it.

Darting out his own hand, Everitt clutched the receding barrel. He had no time to find trigger or grip, but struck as with a club.

The shock of the blow, falling on Ropakihn's shoulder, almost drove them apart again, but they clung somehow as the giant tried to snatch back his rifle. Everitt threw his legs up and forward, clamping them around his foe's great waist as around a wild horse. He took a rib-buckling punch over the heart, but next moment had struck once more with the rifle-butt, this time full on the front of Ropakihn's helmet.

The clouded glass splintered, and suddenly the outlaw's red visage showed plain and monstrous in the unfiltered sunlight. A breath's space, then the red turned blue, the great mouth gaped after the fleeting air. Bulging eyes fixed Everitt with dire hate and abruptly fell blank and dull as pebbles. The blueness deserted the face in turn, and went tallow-pale. The heaving cask-like body between Everitt's clamping knees gave a final convulsive shudder and relaxed.

Everitt had won.

He did not feel elated, only weary. Kicking loose from the senseless, dying Ropakihn, he stared frantically around to locate the station. It was behind his shoulder. Pointing the rifle into space before him, he fired it again and again. The recoil made itself felt. Again and again he fired.

A full minute elapsed before he approached the deck of the little island in space. His sense of direction changed—the station was no longer before or behind, but beneath. He glanced upward once. Afar he saw the silhouette of Ropakihn, quite motionless and limp in the sky. Then he drifted

down like a leaf from a tree. An overalled figure dashed across the deck-plates to meet him.

"An outstanding exhibition of valor and physical prowess, Evl!"

No mistaking that affected voice. It was the traitor Zeoui. Did he think to mock and sneer? Everitt clutched his rifle to fire. But the Martian stood still beneath him, holding up something. A weapon? Everitt's magnetic shoes!

Zeoui was trying to help him then! Puzzled, unable to comprehend the Martian's sudden change of front, still Everitt held his fire as he floated slowly down.

A moment later the Terrestrial had landed, and Zeoui was steadying him with a careful tentacle.

"Once more assume your metal footgear," came the dry accents of advice. "As I have already observed, it was a splendid and satisfactory encounter, not lacking in scientific interest. I dared hope that, when I left Miss Fortuna's encircling cords somewhat loose, she would find opportunity to set you at liberty."

Everitt was beginning to realize. "The other outlaws—" he began.

"They have been dealt with decisively," Zeoui reassured him. "I profited by the patent stupidity of the first contingent in the mixing-shop. Catching them off guard, I released upon them a flood of liquid oxygen. The sudden drop in temperature accomplished their demise.

"The others, who accompanied me out here, suffocated for want of air. I, affecting to assist them in donning their helmets, fastened only half the clamps. The air gradually but completely departed."

"And Corby?" asked Everitt. "The man I knocked out?"

"The charming and capable young object of your admiration, Miss Fortuna Sidney, has locked him up."

Once more in the office together, Zeoui, Everitt and Fortuna seated themselves around the desk. From the ventilator of the locker-closet where the madman Corby was imprisoned came the occasional grumpy pleas for freedom.

"And in that manner," the Martian finished his story, "I

found it extremely simple. So simple, in truth, that Ropakihn, who considered himself the only astute person in the situation, was disposed to trust me. My pretense at helping to capture Miss Fortuna clinched it. Thereafter he thought nothing of counter-treachery on my part, but allowed me to conduct his unfortunate lunatic associates to their destruction."

Everitt made a rueful grimace. "You had me fooled, too," he confessed humbly.

Again Corby pleaded from his prison: "Who shut me up here? What happened?"

"He seems dazed by Ev's blow," explained Fortuna. "Claims not to remember coming here, or anything about Ropakihn's attempt."

Zeoui nodded sagely. "Such mental derangements frequently follow head injuries," he said weightily. "Perhaps he is only feigning amnesia, to obtain mercy. In that case, however, he would not dare amend my report to the police ship."

"Police ship?" gasped Everitt. "Is one coming?"

"I took opportunity to broadcast an emergency message with the radio in the war-craft. Immediately thereafter I was in receipt of a reply from a patrol ship. At the request of Director-General Sidney himself—he was aboard—I told the story."

"He must have been furious at me," cried Fortuna.

"Let me amend my statement," went on Zeoui. "I told only a portion of the story. I led them to believe that the theft and flight were Ropakihn's idea exclusively, and that the outlaws kidnaped Miss Fortuna from her school on Earth. The director-general expressed great satisfaction in your activities, Ev, and intimated that he would release you from exile. He will also cease his objections to your marriage—"

"Zeoui, you flower-faced sap!" exploded Everitt. "You've given me all the credit."

Again Zeoui nodded gravely.

"But what about you?" Fortuna demanded.

"Yes, you're screwier than Ropakihn's whole mob put together," Everitt chimed in. "If you take no credit, they'll keep you on duty here."

The Martian nodded.

"That is eminently correct." Both Everitt and Fortuna could have sworn that the petals of Zeoui's weird visage were wreathed into something like a grin of satisfaction. "To be sure I shall remain on duty here. I enjoy it."

## WHY I SELECTED

## STAR BRIGHT

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*Mr. Jason Peabody is a harmless man of good will, caught in a common trap. Facing problems too complex to solve by any ordinary means, he escapes to the temporary freedom of Bannister Hill and utters his desperate wish to the star—as most of us have sometimes done.*

*For hard reality makes an uncomfortable fit for human desires. The resulting conflict of wish and fact is the mainspring of life and hence the material of most fiction. The vigorous hero of the optimistic or popular school of literature is usually busy attempting to improve his environment, while the less fortunate people of the pessimistic or literary school are generally pictured in the dire process of being crushed by realities they are too weak to change.*

*I don't recall just how I came to write the story of Mr. Peabody, but the internal evidence suggests an effort to translate the premise of H. G. Wells' story and motion picture, "THE MAN WHO COULD WORK MIRACLES," into the less fantastic terms of science fiction.*

*The dream of altering circumstances by merely wishing things so is doubtless born again with every human being, however, and the folly of that dream is one of the first things he must learn—as is attested by all the folk tales of people who are granted three wishes and fail to get any good from them.*

*Men since Babylon have found strange things in the sky. Even now, when the wonders astronomers seek are abstractions fully understood only by other astronomers, their chil-*

*dren still make wishes to the stars. So do such desperate men as Mr. Peabody. Few such wishes—fortunately for all of us—are answered by the prompt arrival of a radioactive object to stimulate the psychophysical capacities of the brain. Such accidents don't happen often.*

*But just suppose . . .*

JACK WILLIAMSON

JACK WILLIAMSON

STAR BRIGHT

---

Have a Miracle; Have a Lot of Miracles. And When You're Tired of Materializing Diamond Necklaces, Making and Unmaking Goldfish, You'll Still Remember Jason Peabody—the Most Charming Gentleman Ever Hit by a Comet.

MR. JASON PEABODY got off the street car. Taking a great, relieved breath of the open air, he started walking up Bannister Hill. His worried eyes saw the first pale star come out of the dusk ahead.

It made him grope back wistfully into the mists of childhood, for the magic words he once had known. He whispered the chant of power:

*Star light, star bright,  
First star I've seen tonight,  
I wish I may, I wish I might,  
Have the wish I wish tonight.*

Mr. Peabody was a brown, bald little wisp of a man. Now defiantly erect, his thin shoulders still betrayed the stoop they

had got from twenty years of bending over adding machines and ledgers. His usually meek face now had a hurt and desperate look.

"I wish—"

With his hopeful eyes on the star, Mr. Peabody hesitated. His harried mind went back to the painful domestic scene from which he had just escaped. A wry little smile came to his troubled face.

"I wish," he told the star, "that I could work miracles!"

The star faded to a pale malevolent red.

"You've got to work miracles," added Mr. Peabody, "to bring up a family on a bookkeeper's pay. A family, that is, like mine."

The star winked green with promise.

Mr. Peabody still owed three thousand dollars on the little stucco house, two blocks off the Locust Avenue car line: the payments were as easy as rent, and in fourteen years it would be his own. Ella met him at the door, this afternoon, with a moist kiss.

Ella was Mrs. Peabody. She was a statuesque blond, an inch taller than himself, with a remarkable voice. Her clinging kiss made him uneasy. He knew instantly, from twenty-two years of experience, that it meant she wanted something.

"It's good to be home, dear." He tried to start a counter-campaign. "Things were tough at the office today." His tired sigh was real enough. "Old Berg has fired until we're all doing two men's work. I don't know who will be next."

"I'm sorry, darling." She kissed him moistly again, and her voice was tenderly sympathetic. "Now get washed. I want to have dinner early, because tonight is Delphian League."

Her voice was too sweet. Mr. Peabody wondered what she wanted. It always took her a good while to work up to the point. When she arrived there, however, she was likely to be invincible. He made another feeble effort.

"I don't know what things are coming to." He made a weary shrug. "Berg is threatening to cut our pay. With the insurance, and the house payments, and the children, I don't see how we'd live."

Ella Peabody came back to him, and put her soft arm around him. She smelled faintly of the perfume she had used on the evening before, faintly of kitchen odors.

"We'll manage, dear," she said bravely.

She began to talk brightly of the small events of the day. Her duties in the kitchen caused no interruption. Her remarkable voice reached him clearly, even through the closed bathroom door.

With an exaggerated show of fatigue, Mr. Peabody settled himself into an easy chair. He found the morning paper—which he never had time to read in the morning—opened it, and then dropped it across his knees as if too tired to read. Feebly attempting another diversion, he asked:

"Where are the children?"

"William is out to see the man about his car."

Mr. Peabody forgot his fatigue.

"I told William he couldn't have a car," he said, with some heat. "I told him he's too young and irresponsible. If he insists on buying some pile of junk, he'll have to pay for it himself. Don't ask me how."

"And Beth," Mrs. Peabody's voice continued, "is down at the beauty shop." She came to the kitchen door. "But I have the most thrilling news for you, darling!"

The lilt in her voice told Mr. Peabody to expect the worst. The dreaded moment had come. Desperately he lifted the paper from his knees, became absorbed in it.

"Yes, dear," he said. "Here—I see the champ is going to take on this Australian palooka, if—"

"Darling, did you hear me?" Ella Peabody's penetrating voice could not be ignored. "At the Delphian League tonight, I'm going to read a paper on the Transcendental Renaissance. Isn't that a perfectly gorgeous opportunity?"

Mr. Peabody dropped the paper. He was puzzled. The liquid sparkle in her voice was proof enough that her moment of victory was at hand. Yet her purpose was still unrevealed.

"Ella, dear," he inquired meekly, "what do you know about the Transcendental Renaissance?"

"Don't worry about that, darling. The young man at the

library did the research and typed the paper for me, for only ten dollars. But it's so sweet of you to want to help me, and there's one thing that you can do."

Mr. Peabody squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. The trap was closing, and he could see no escape.

"I knew you'd understand, darling." Her voice had a little tender throb. "And you know I didn't have a decent rag to wear. Darling, I'm getting that blue jersey that was in the window of the Famous. It was marked sixty-nine eighty, but the manager let me have it for only forty-nine ninety-five."

"I'm awfully sorry, dear," Mr. Peabody said slowly. "But I'm afraid we simply can't manage it. I'm afraid you had better send it back."

Ella's blue eyes widened, and began to glitter.

"Darling!" Her throbbing voice broke. "Darling—you must understand. I can't read my paper in those disgraceful old rags. Besides, it has already been altered."

"But, dear—we just haven't got the money."

Mr. Peabody picked up his paper again, upside down. After twenty-two years, he knew what was to come. There would be tearful appeals to his love and his pride and his duty. There would be an agony of emotion, maintained until he surrendered.

And he couldn't surrender: that was the trouble. In twenty-two years, his affection had never swerved seriously from his wife and his children. He would have given her the money, gladly; but the bills had to be paid tomorrow.

He sighed with momentary relief when an unfamiliar motor horn honked outside the drive. William Peabody slouched, in ungraceful indolence, through the side door.

William was a lank, pimpled sallow-faced youth, with unkempt yellow hair and prominent buck teeth. Remarkably, in spite of the fact that he was continually demanding money for clothing, he always wore the same dingy leather jacket and the same baggy pants.

Efforts to send him to the university, to a television school, and to a barber college, had all collapsed for want of William's cooperation.

"Hi, Gov." He was filling a black college-man pipe. "Hi, Mom. Dinner up?"

"Don't call me Gov," requested Mr. Peabody, mildly. "William!" He had risen and walked to the window, and his voice was sharper. "Whose red roadster is that in the drive?"

William dropped himself into the easy chair which Mr. Peabody had just vacated.

"Oh, the can?" He exhaled blue smoke. "Why, didn't Mom tell you, Gov? I just picked it up."

Mr. Peabody's slight body stiffened.

"So you bought a car? Who's going to pay for it?"

William waved the pipe, carelessly.

"Only twenty a month," he drawled. "And it's a real buy, Gov. Only eighty thousand miles, and it's got a radio. Mom said you could manage it. It will be for my birthday, Gov."

"Your birthday is six months off."

Silver, soothing, Mrs. Peabody's voice floated from the kitchen:

"But you'll still be paying for it when his birthday comes, Jason. So I told Bill it would be all right. A boy is so left out, these days, if he hasn't a car. Now, if you will just give me the suit money—"

Mr. Peabody began a sputtering reply. He stopped suddenly, when his daughter Beth came in the front door. Beth was the bright spot in his life. She was a tall slim girl, with soft sympathetic brown eyes. Her honey-colored hair was freshly set in exquisite waves.

Perhaps it was natural for father to favor daughter. But Mr. Peabody couldn't help contrasting her cheerful industry to William's idleness. She was taking a business course, so that she would be able to keep books for Dr. Rex Brant, after they were married.

"Hello, Dad." She came to him and put her smooth arms around him and gave him an affectionate little squeeze. "How do you like my new permanent? I got it because I have a date with Rex tonight. I didn't have enough money, so I said I would leave the other three dollars at Mrs. Larkin's before seven. Have you got three dollars, Dad?"

"Your hair looks very pretty, dear."

Mr. Peabody patted his daughter's shoulder, and dug cheerfully into his pocket. He never minded giving money to Beth—when he had it. Often he regretted that he had not been able to do more for her.

"Thanks, Dad." Kissing his temple, she whispered, "You dear!"

Tapping out his black pipe, William looked at his mother.

"It just goes to show," he drawled. "If it was Sis that wanted a car—"

"I told you, son," Mr. Peabody declared positively, "I'm not going to pay for that automobile. We simply haven't the money."

William got languidly to his feet.

"I say, Gov. You wouldn't want to lose your fishing tackle."

Mr. Peabody's face stiffened with anxiety.

"My fishing tackle?"

In twenty-two years, Mr. Peabody had actually found the time and money to make no more than three fishing trips. He still considered himself, however, an ardent angler. Sometimes he had gone without his lunches, for weeks, to save for some rod or reel or special fly. He often spent an hour in the back yard, casting at a mark on the ground.

Trying to glare at William, he demanded hoarsely:

"What about my fishing tackle?"

"Now, Jason," interrupted the soothing voice of Mrs. Peabody, "don't get yourself all wrought up. You know you haven't used your old fishing tackle in the last ten years."

Stiffly erect, Mr. Peabody strode toward his taller son.

"William, what have you done with it?"

William was filling his pipe again.

"Keep your shirt on, Gov," he advised. "Mom said it would be all right. And I had to have the dough to make the first payment on the bus. Now don't bust an artery. I'll give you the pawn tickets."

"Bill!" Beth's voice was sharp with reproof. "You *didn't*—"

Mr. Peabody, himself, made a gasping incoherent sound. He started blindly toward the front door.

"Now, Jason!" Ella's voice was silver with a sweet and unendurable reason. "Control yourself, Jason. You haven't had your dinner—"

He slammed the door violently behind him.

This was not the first time in twenty-two years that Mr. Peabody had fled to the windy freedom of Bannister Hill. It was not even the first time he had spoken a wish to a star. While he had no serious faith in that superstition of his childhood, he still felt that it was a very pleasant idea.

An instant after the words were uttered, he saw the shooting star. A tiny point of light, drifting a little upward through the purple dusk. It was not white, like most falling stars, but palely green.

It recalled another old belief, akin to the first. If you saw a falling star, and if you could make a wish before the star went out, the wish would come true. Eagerly, he caught his breath.

"I wish," he repeated, "I could do miracles!"

He finished the words in time. The star was still shining. Suddenly, in fact, he noticed that its greenish radiance was growing brighter.

Far brighter! And exploding!

Abruptly, then, Mr. Peabody's vague and wistful satisfaction changed to stark panic. He realized that one fragment of the green meteor, like some celestial bullet, was coming straight at him! He made a frantic effort to duck, to shield his face with his hand—

Mr. Peabody woke, lying on his back on the grassy hill. He groaned and lifted his head. The waning moon had risen. Its slanting rays shimmered from the dew on the grass.

Mr. Peabody felt stiff and chilled. His clothing was wet with the dew. And something was wrong with his head. Deep at the base of his brain, there was a queer dull ache. It was not intense, but it had a slow, unpleasant pulsation.

His forehead felt oddly stiff and drawn. His fingers found a streak of dried blood, and then the ragged, painful edge of a small wound.

"Golly!"

With that little gasping cry, he clapped his hand to the back of his head. But there was no blood in his hair. That small leaden ache seemed close beneath his hand, but there was no other surface wound.

"Great golly!" whispered Mr. Peabody. "It has lodged in my brain!"

The evidence was clear enough. He had seen the meteor hurtling straight at him. There was a tiny hole in his forehead, where it must have entered. There was none where it could have emerged.

Why hadn't it already killed him? Perhaps because the heat of it had cauterized the wound. He remembered reading a believe-it-or-not about a man who had lived for years with a bullet in his brain.

A meteor lodged in his brain! The idea set him to shuddering. He and Ella had met their little ups and downs, but his life had been pretty uneventful. He could imagine being shot by a bandit or run over by a taxi. But this—

"Better go to Beth's Dr. Brant," he whispered.

He touched his bleeding forehead, and hoped the wound would heal safely. When he tried to rise, a faintness seized him. A sudden thirst parched his throat.

"Water!" he breathed.

As he sank giddily back on his elbow, that thirst set in his mind the image of a sparkling glass of water. It sat on a flat rock, glittering in the moonlight. It looked so substantial that he reached out and picked it up.

Without surprise, he drank. A few swallows relieved his thirst, and his mind cleared again. Then the sudden realization of the incredible set him to quivering with reasonless panic.

The glass dropped out of his fingers, and shattered on the rock. The fragments glittered mockingly under the moon. Mr. Peabody blinked at them.

"It was real!" he whispered. "I made it real—out of nothing. A miracle—I worked a miracle!"

The word was queerly comforting. Actually, he knew no more about what had happened than before he had found a

word for it. Yet much of its disquieting unfamiliarity was dispelled.

He remembered a movie that the Englishman, H. G. Wells, had written. It dealt with a man who was able to perform the most surprising and sometimes appalling miracles. He had finished, Mr. Peabody recalled, by destroying the world.

"I want nothing like that," he whispered in some alarm, and then set out to test his gift. First he tried mentally to lift the small flat rock upon which the miraculous glass had stood.

"Up," he commanded sharply. "Up!"

The rock, however, refused to move. He tried to form a mental picture of it, rising. Suddenly, where he had tried to picture it, there was another and apparently identical rock.

The miraculous stone crashed instantly down upon its twin, and shattered. Flying fragments stung Mr. Peabody's face. He realized that his gift, whatever its nature, held potentialities of danger.

"Whatever I've got," he told himself, "it's different from what the man had in the movie. I can make things—small things, anyhow. But I can't move them." He sat up on the wet grass. "Can I—unmake them?"

He fixed his eyes upon the fragments of the broken glass.

"Go!" he ordered. "Go away—vanish!"

They shimmered unchanged in the moonlight.

"No," concluded Mr. Peabody, "I can't unmake things."

That was, in a way, too bad.

He made another mental note of caution. Large animals and dangerous creations of all kinds had better be avoided. He realized suddenly that he was shivering in his dew-soaked clothing. He slapped his stiff hands against his sides, and wished he had a cup of coffee.

"Well—why not?" He tried to steady his voice against a haunting apprehension. "Here—a cup of coffee!"

Nothing appeared.

"Come!" he shouted. "Coffee!"

Still there was nothing. And doubt returned to Mr. Peabody. Probably he had just been dazed by the meteor. But

the hallucinations had looked so queerly real. That glass of water, glittering in the moonlight on the rock—

And there it was again!

Or another, just like it. He touched the glass uncertainly, sipped at the ice-cold water. It was as real as you please. Mr. Peabody shook his bald aching head, baffled.

"Water's easy," he muttered. "But how do you get coffee?"

He let his mind picture a heavy white cup, sitting in its saucer on the rock, steaming fragrantly. The image of it shimmered oddly, half-real.

He made a kind of groping effort. There was a strange brief roaring in his head, beyond that slow painful throb. And suddenly the cup was real.

With awed and trembling fingers, he lifted it. The scalding coffee tasted like the cheaper kind that Ella bought when she was having trouble with the budget. But it was coffee.

Now he knew how to get the cream and sugar. He simply pictured the little creamer and the three white cubes, and made that special grasping effort—and there they were. And he was weak with a momentary unfamiliar fatigue.

He made a spoon and stirred the coffee. He was learning about the gift. It made no difference what he said. He had only the power to *realize* the things he pictured in his mind. It required a peculiar kind of effort, and the act was accompanied by that mighty, far-off roaring in his ears.

The miraculous objects, moreover, had all the imperfections of his mental images. There was an irregular gap in the heavy saucer, behind the cup—where he had failed to complete his picture of it.

Mr. Peabody, however, did not linger long upon the mechanistic details of his gift. Perhaps Dr. Brant would be able to explain it: he was really a very clever young surgeon. Mr. Peabody turned to more immediate concerns.

He was shivering with cold. He decided against building a miraculous fire, and set out to make himself an overcoat. This turned out to be more difficult than he had anticipated. It was necessary to picture clearly the fibers of the wool, the details

of buttons and buckle, the shape of every piece of material, the very thread in the seams.

In some way, moreover, the process of materializing was very trying. He was soon quivering with a strange fatigue. The dull little ache at the base of his brain throbbed faster. Again he sensed that roaring beyond, like some Niagara of supernal power.

At last, however, the garment was finished. Attempting to put it on, Mr. Peabody discovered that it was a very poor fit. The shoulders were grotesquely loose. What was worse, he had somehow got the sleeves sewed up at the cuffs.

Wearily, his bright dreams dashed a little, he drew it about his shoulders like a cloak. With a little care and practice, he was sure, he could do better. He ought to be able to make anything he wanted.

Feeling a tired contentment, Mr. Peabody started back down Bannister Hill. Now he could go home to a triumphant peace. His cold body anticipated the comforts of his house and his bed. He dwelt pleasantly upon the happiness of Ella and William and Beth, when they should learn about his gift.

He pushed the ungainly overcoat into a trash container, and swung aboard the car. Fumbling for change to pay the six-cent fare, he found one lone nickel. A miraculous twin solved the problem. He pocketed the four pennies, and relaxed on the seat with a sigh of quiet satisfaction.

His son William, as it happened, was the first person to whom Mr. Peabody attempted to reveal his unusual gift. William was sprawled in the easiest chair, his sallow face decorated with scraps of court plaster. He woke with a start. His eyes rolled glassily. Seeing Mr. Peabody, he grinned with relief.

"Hi, Gov," he drawled. "Got over your tantrum, huh?"

Consciousness of the gift lent Mr. Peabody a new authority.

"Don't call me Gov." His voice was louder than usual. "I wasn't having a tantrum." He felt a sudden apprehension. "What has happened to you, William?"

William fumbled lazily for his pipe.

"Guy crocked me," he drawled. "Some fool in a new Buick.

Claims I was on his side of the road. He called the cops, and had a wrecker tow off the bus.

"Guess you'll have a little damage suit on your hands, Gov. Unless you want to settle for cash. The wrecker man said the bill would be about two hundred. . . . Got any tobacco, Gov?"

The old helpless fury boiled up in Mr. Peabody. He began to tremble, and his fists clenched. After a moment, however, the awareness of his new power allowed him to smile. Things were going to be different, now.

"William," he said gravely, "I would like to see a little more respect in your manner in the future." He was building up to the dramatic revelation of his gift. "It was your car and your wreck. You can settle it as you like."

William gestured carelessly with his pipe.

"Wrong as usual, Gov. You see, they wouldn't sell *me* the can. I had to get Mom to sign the papers. So you can't slip out of it that easy, Gov. You're the one that's liable. Got any tobacco?"

A second wave of fury set Mr. Peabody to dancing up and down. Once more, however, consciousness of the gift came to his rescue. He decided upon a double miracle. That ought to put William in his place.

"There's your tobacco." He gestured toward the bare center of the library table. "Look!" He concentrated upon a mental image of the red tin container. "Prestol"

William's mild curiosity changed to a quickly concealed surprise. Lazily he reached for the tin box, drawling:

"Fair enough, Gov. But that magician at the Palace last year pulled the same trick a lot slicker and quicker—" He looked up from the open can, with a triumphant reproof. "Empty, Gov. I call that a pretty flat trick."

"I forgot." Mr. Peabody bit his lip. "You'll find half a can on my dresser."

As William ambled out of the room, he applied himself to a graver project. In his discomfiture and general excitement, he failed to consider a certain limitation upon acts of creation, miraculous or otherwise, existing through Federal law.

His flat pocketbook yielded what was left of the week's pay. He selected a crisp new ten-dollar bill, and concentrated on it. His first copy proved to be blank on the reverse. The second was blurred on both sides. After that, however, he seemed to get the knack of it.

By the time William came swaggering back, lighting up his pipe, there was a neat little stack of miraculous money on the table. Mr. Peabody leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. That pulsing ache diminished again, and the roar of power receded.

"Here, William," he said in a voice of weary triumph. "You said you needed two hundred to settle for your wreck."

He counted off twenty of the bills, while William stared at him, mouth open and buck teeth gleaming.

"Whatsis, Gov?" he gasped. A note of alarm entered his voice. "Where you been tonight, Gov? Old Berg didn't leave the safe open?"

"If you want the money, take it," Mr. Peabody said sharply. "And watch your language, son."

William picked up the bills. He stared at them incredulously for a moment, and then stuffed them into his pocket and ran out of the house.

His mind hazy with fatigue, Mr. Peabody relaxed in the big chair. A deep satisfaction filled him. This was one use of the gift which hadn't gone wrong. There was enough of the miraculous money left so that he could give Ella the fifty dollars she wanted. And he could make more, without limit.

A fly came buzzing into the lamplight. Watching it settle upon a candy box on the table, and crawl across the picture of a cherry, Mr. Peabody was moved to another experiment. A mere instant of effort created another fly.

Only one thing was wrong with the miraculous insect. It looked, so far as he could see, exactly like the original. But, when he reached his hand toward it, it didn't move. It wasn't alive.

Why? Mr. Peabody was vaguely bewildered. Did he merely lack some special knack that was necessary for the creation of

life? Or was that completely beyond his new power, mysteriously forbidden?

He applied himself to experiment. The problem was still unsolved, although the table was scattered with lifeless flies and the inert forms of a cockroach, a frog, and a sparrow, when he heard the front door.

Mrs. Peabody came in. She was wearing the new blue suit. The trim lines of it seemed to give a new youth to her ample figure, and Mr. Peabody thought that she looked almost beautiful.

She was still angry. She returned his greeting with a stiff little nod, and started regally past him toward the stair. Mr. Peabody followed her anxiously.

"That's your new suit, Ella? You look very pretty in it."

With a queen's dignity, she turned. The lamplight shimmered on her blond indignant head.

"Thank you, Jason." Her voice was cool. "I had no money to pay the boy. It was most embarrassing. He finally left it, when I promised to take the money to the store in the morning."

Mr. Peabody counted off ten of the miraculous bills.

"Here it is, dear," he said. "And fifty more."

Ella was staring, her jaw hanging.

Mr. Peabody smiled at her.

"From now on, dear," he promised her, "things are going to be different. Now I'll be able to give you everything that you've always deserved."

Puzzled alarm tensed Ella Peabody's face, and she came swiftly toward him.

"What's this you say, Jason?"

She saw the lifeless flies that he had made, and then started back with a little muffled cry from the cockroach, the frog, and the sparrow.

"What are these things?" Her voice was shrill. "What are you up to?"

A pang of fear struck into Mr. Peabody's heart. He perceived that it was going to be difficult for other people to

understand his gift. The best plan was probably a candid demonstration of it.

"Watch, Ella. I'll show you."

He shuffled through the magazines on the end of the table. He had learned that it was difficult to materialize anything accurately from memory alone. He needed a model.

"Here." He had found an advertisement that showed a platinum bracelet set with diamonds. "Would you like this, my dear?"

Mrs. Peabody retreated from him, growing pale.

"Jason, are you crazy?" Her voice was quick and apprehensive. "You know you can't pay for the few things I simply must have. Now—this money—diamonds—I don't understand you!"

Mr. Peabody dropped the magazine on his knees. Trying to close his ears to Ella's penetrating voice, he began to concentrate on the jewel. This was more difficult than the paper money had been. His head rang with that throbbing pain. But he completed that peculiar final effort, and the thing was done.

"Well—do you like it, my dear?"

He held it toward her. The gleaming white platinum had a satisfying weight. The diamonds glittered with a genuine fire. But she made no move to take it.

Her bewildered face went paler. A hard accusing stare came into her eyes. Suddenly she advanced upon him, demanding:

"Jason, where did you get that bracelet?"

"I—I made it." His voice was thin and husky. "It's—miraculous."

Her determined expression made that statement sound very thin, even to Mr. Peabody.

"Miraculous lie!" She sniffed the air. "Jason, I believe you are drunk!" She advanced on him again. "Now I want to know the truth. What have you done? Have you been—stealing?"

She snatched the bracelet from his fingers, shook it threateningly in front of him.

"Now where did you get it?"

Looking uneasily about, Mr. Peabody saw the kitchen door opening slowly. William peered cautiously through. He was pale, and his trembling hand clutched a long bread knife.

"Mom!" His whisper was hoarse. "Mom, you had better watch out! The Gov is acting plenty weird. He was trying to pull some crummy magic stunts. And then he gave me a couple of centuries of queer."

His slightly bulging eyes caught the glitter of the dangling bracelet, and he started.

"Hot ice, huh?" His voice grew hard with an incredible moral indignation. "Gov, cantcher remember you got a decent respectable family? Hot jools, and pushing the queer! Gov, how could you?"

"Queer?" The word croaked faintly from Mr. Peabody's dry throat. "What do you mean—queer?"

"The innocence gag, huh?" William sniffed. "Well, let me tell you, Gov. Queer is counterfeit. I thought that dough looked funny. So I took it down to a guy at the pool hall that used to shove it. A mess, he says. A blind man could spot it. It ain't worth a nickel on the dollar. It's a sure ticket, he says, for fifteen years!"

This was a turn of affairs for which Mr. Peabody had not prepared himself. An instant's reflection told him that, failing in his confusion to distinguish the token of value from the value itself, he had indeed been guilty.

*"Counterfeit—"*

He stared dazedly at the tense suspicious faces of his wife and son. A chill of ultimate frustration was creeping into him. He collected himself to fight it.

"I didn't—didn't think," he stammered. "We'll have to burn the money that I gave you, too, Ella."

He mopped at his wet forehead, and caught his breath.

"But look." His voice was louder. "I've still got the gift. I can make anything I want—out of nothing at all. I'll show you. I'll make—I'll make you a brick of gold."

His wife retreated, her face white and stiff with dread. Wil-

William made an ominous flourish with the bread knife, and peered watchfully.

"All right, Gov. Strut your stuff."

There couldn't be any crime about making real gold. But the project proved more difficult than Mr. Peabody had expected. The first dim outlines of the brick began to waver, and he felt sick and dizzy.

That steady beat of pain filled all his head, stronger than it had ever been. The rush of unseen power became a mighty hurricane, blowing away his consciousness. Desperately, he clutched at the back of a chair.

The massive yellow ingot at last shimmered real, under the lamp. Mopping weakly at the sweat on his face, Mr. Peabody made a gesture of weary triumph and sat down.

"What's the matter, darling?" his wife said anxiously. "You look so tired and white. Are you ill?"

William's hands were already clutching at the yellow block. He lifted one end of it, with an effort, and let it fall. It made a dull solid thud.

"Gosh, Gov!" William whispered. "It is gold!" His eyes popped again, and narrowed grimly. "Better quit trying to string us, Gov. You cracked a safe tonight."

"But I made it." Mr. Peabody rose in anxious protest. "You saw me."

Ella caught his arm, steadied him.

"We know, Jason," she said soothingly. "But now you look so tired. You had better come up to bed. You'll feel better in the morning."

Digging into the gold brick with his pocket knife, William cried out excitedly:

"Hey, Mom! Lookit—"

With a finger on her lips and a significant nod, Mrs. Peabody silenced her son. She helped Mr. Peabody up the stairs, to the door of their bedroom, and then hurried back to William.

Mr. Peabody undressed wearily and put on his pajamas. With a tired little sigh, he snuggled down under the sheets and closed his eyes.

Naturally he had made little mistakes at first, but now everything was sure to be all right. With just a little more practice, he would be able to give his wife and children all the good things they deserved.

"Daddy?"

Mr. Peabody opened his eyes, and saw Beth standing beside the bed. Her brown eyes looked wide and strange, and her voice was anxious.

"Daddy, what dreadful thing has happened to you?"

Mr. Peabody reached from beneath the sheet, and took her hand. It felt tense and cold.

"A very wonderful thing, Bee, dear," he said. "Not dreadful at all. I simply have a miraculous gift. I can create things. I want to make something for you. What would you like, Bee? A pearl necklace, maybe?"

"Dad—darling!"

Her voice was choked with concern. She sat down on the side of the bed, and looked anxiously into his face. Her cold hand quivered in his.

"Dad, you aren't—insane?"

Mr. Peabody felt a tremor of ungovernable apprehension.

"Of course not, daughter. Why?"

"Mother and Bill have been telling me the most horrid things," she whispered, staring at him. "They said you were playing with dead flies and a cockroach, and saying you could work miracles, and giving them counterfeit money and stolen jewelry and a fake gold brick—"

"Fake?" He gulped. "No; it was real gold."

Beth shook her troubled head.

"Bill showed me," she whispered. "It looks like gold on the outside. But, when you scratch it, it's only lead."

Mr. Peabody felt sick. He couldn't keep tears of frustration from welling into his eyes.

"I tried," he sobbed. "I don't know why everything goes wrong." He caught a determined breath, and sat up in bed. "But I *can* make gold—real gold. I'll show you."

"Dad!" Her voice was low and dry and breathless. "Dad, you *are* going insane." Quivering hands covered her face.

"Mother and Bill were right," she sobbed faintly. "But the police—oh, I can't stand it!"

"Police?" Mr. Peabody leaped out of bed. "What about the police?"

The girl moved slowly back, watching him with dark, frightened eyes.

"Mother and Bill phoned them, before I came in. They think you're insane, and mixed up in some horrid crime besides. They're afraid of you."

Twisting his hands together, Mr. Peabody padded fearfully to the window. He had an instinctive dread of the law, and his wide reading of detective stories had given him a horror of the third degree.

"They mustn't catch me!" he whispered hoarsely. "They wouldn't believe, about my gift. Nobody does. They'd grill me about the counterfeit and the gold brick and the bracelet. Grill me!" He shuddered convulsively. "Bee, I've got to get away."

"Dad, you mustn't." She caught his arm, protestingly. "They'll catch you, in the end. Running away will only make you seem guilty."

He pushed away her hand.

"I've got to get away, I tell you. I don't know where. If there were only someone who would understand—"

"Dad, listen!" Beth clapped her hands together, making a sound from which he started violently. "You must go to Rex. He can help you. Will you, Dad?"

After a moment, Mr. Peabody nodded.

"He's a doctor. He might understand."

"I'll phone him to expect you. And you get dressed."

He was tying his shoes, when she ran back into the room. "Two policemen, downstairs," she whispered. "Rex said he would wait up for you. But now you can't get out—"

Her voice dropped with amazement, as a coil of rope appeared magically upon the carpet. Mr. Peabody hastily knotted one end of it to the bedstead, and tossed the other out the window.

"Goodby, Bee," he gasped. "Dr. Rex will let you know."

She hastily thumb-bolted the door, as an authoritative hammering began on the other side. Mrs. Peabody's remarkable voice came unimpeded through the panels:

"Jason! Open the door, this instant. Ja-a-a-son!"

Mr. Peabody was still several feet from the ground when the miraculous rope parted unexpectedly. He pulled himself out of a shattered trellis, glimpsed the black police sedan parked in front of the house, and started down the alley.

Trembling from the peril and exertion of his flight across the town, he found the door of Dr. Brant's modest two-room apartment unlocked. He let himself in quietly. The young doctor laid aside a book and stood up, smiling, to greet him.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Peabody. Won't you sit down and tell me about yourself?"

Breathless, Mr. Peabody leaned against the closed door. He thought that Brant was at once too warm and too watchful. It came to him that he must yet step very cautiously, to keep out of a worse predicament than he had just escaped.

"Beth probably phoned you to expect a lunatic," he began. "But I'm not insane, doctor. Not yet. I have simply happened to acquire a unique gift. People won't believe that it exists. They misunderstand me, suspect me."

Despite his effort for a calm, convincing restraint, his voice shook with bitterness.

"Now my own family has set the police on me!"

"Yes, Mr. Peabody." Dr. Brant's voice was very soothing. "Now just sit down. Make yourself comfortable. And tell me all about it."

After snapping the latch on the door, Mr. Peabody permitted himself to sink wearily into Brant's easy chair. He met the probing gray eyes of the doctor.

"I didn't mean to do wrong." His voice was still protesting, ragged. "I'm not guilty of any deliberate crime. I was only trying to help the ones I loved."

"I know," the doctor soothed him.

A sharp alarm stiffened Mr. Peabody. He realized that Brant's soothing professional manner was intended to calm a dangerous madman. Words would avail him nothing.

"Beth must have told you what they think," he said desperately. "They won't believe it, but I can create. Let me show you."

Brant smiled at him, gently and without visible skepticism.

"Very well. Go on."

"I shall make you a goldfish bowl."

He looked at a little stand, that was cluttered with the doctor's pipes and medical journals, and concentrated upon that peculiar, painful effort. The pain and the rushing passed, and the bowl was real. He looked inquiringly at Brant's suave face.

"Very good, Mr. Peabody." The doctor's voice sounded hushed and slow. "Now can you put the fish in it?"

"No." Mr. Peabody pressed his hands against his dully aching head. "It seems that I can't make anything alive. That is one of the limitations that I have discovered."

"Eh?"

Brant's eyes widened a little. He walked slowly to the small glass bowl, touched it gingerly, and put a testing finger into the water it contained. His jaw slackened.

"Well." He repeated the word, with increasing emphasis. "Well, well, *well*!"

His staring gray eyes came back to Mr. Peabody. "You are being honest with me? You'll give me your word there's no trickery? You materialized this object by mental effort alone?"

Mr. Peabody nodded.

It was Brant's turn to be excited. While Mr. Peabody sat quietly recovering his breath, the lean young doctor paced up and down the room. He lit his pipe and let it go out, and asked a barrage of tense-voiced questions.

Wearily, Mr. Peabody tried to answer the questions. He made new demonstrations of his gift, materializing a nail, a match, a cube of sugar, and a cuff link that was meant to be silver. Commenting upon the leaden color of the latter, he recalled his misadventures with the gold brick.

"A minor difficulty, I should think—always assuming that this is a fact."

Brant took off his rimless glasses, and polished them nerv-

ously. "Possibly due merely to a lack of familiarity with atomic structure. . . . But—my word!"

He began walking the floor again.

All but dead with fatigue, Mr. Peabody was mutely grateful at last to be permitted to crawl into the doctor's bed. Despite that small dull throbbing in his brain, he slept soundly.

And up in the heavens a bright star winked, greenly.

Brant, if he slept at all, did so in the chair. The next morning, wrinkled, hollow-eyed, dark-chinned, he woke Mr. Peabody; refreshed his bewildered memory with a glimpse of a nail, a match, a cube of sugar, and a lead cuff link; and inquired frantically whether he still possessed the gift.

Mr. Peabody felt dull and heavy. The ache at the back of his head was worse, and he felt reluctant to attempt any miracles. He remained able, however, to provide himself with a cup of inexplicable coffee.

"Well!" exclaimed Brant. "Well, well, well! All through the night I kept doubting even my own senses. My word—it's incredible. But what an opportunity for medical science!"

"Eh?" Mr. Peabody started apprehensively. "What do you mean?"

"Don't alarm yourself," Brant said soothingly. "Of course we must keep your case secret, at least until we have data enough to support an announcement. But, for your sake as well as for science, you must allow me to study your new power."

Nervously, he was polishing his glasses.

"You are my uncle," he declared abruptly. "Your name is Homer Brown. Your home is in Pottsville, upstate. You are staying with me for a few days, while you undergo an examination at the hospital."

"Hospital?"

Mr. Peabody began a feeble protest. Ever since Beth was born, he had felt a horror of hospitals. Even the odor, he insisted, was enough to make him ill.

In the midst of his objections, however, he found himself bundled into a taxi.

Brant whisked him into the huge gray building, past nurses

and internes. There was an endless series of examinations; from remote alert politeness that surrounded him, he guessed that he was supposed to be insane. At last Brant called him into a tiny consultation room, and locked the door.

His manner was suddenly respectful—and oddly grave.

"Mr. Peabody, I must apologize for all my doubts," he said. "The X-ray proves the incredible. Here, you may see it for yourself."

He made Mr. Peabody sit before two mirrors, that each reflected a rather gruesome-looking skull. The two images merged into one. At the base of the skull, beyond the staring eye sockets, Brant pointed out a little ragged black object.

"That's it."

"You mean the meteor?"

"It is a foreign body. Naturally, we can't determine its true nature, without recourse to brain surgery. But the X-ray shows the scars of its passage through brain tissue and frontal bone—miraculously healed. It is doubtless the object which struck you."

Mr. Peabody had staggered to his feet, gasping voicelessly.

"Brain surgery!" he whispered hoarsely. "You aren't—"

Very slowly, Brant shook his head.

"I wish we could," he said gravely. "But the operation is impossible. It would involve a section of the cerebrum itself. No surgeon I know would dare attempt it."

Gently, he took Mr. Peabody's arm. His voice fell.

"It would be unfair to conceal from you the fact that your case is extremely serious."

Mr. Peabody's knees were shaking.

"Doctor, what do you mean?"

Brant pointed solemnly at the X-ray films.

"That foreign body is radioactive," he said deliberately. "I noticed that the film tended to fog, and I find that an electroscope near your head is soon discharged." The doctor's face was tense and white.

"You understand that it can't be removed," he said. "And the destructive effect of its radiations upon the brain tissue will inevitably be fatal, within a few weeks."

He shook his head, while Mr. Peabody stared uncomprehendingly.

Brant's smile was tight, bitter.

"Your life, it seems, is the price you must pay for your gift."

Mr. Peabody let Brant take him back to the little apartment. The throbbing in his head was an incessant reminder that the rays of the stone were destroying his brain. Despair numbed him, and he felt sick with pain.

"Now that I know I'm going to die," he told the doctor, "there is just one thing I've got to do. I must use the gift to make money enough so that my family will be cared for."

"You'll be able to do that, I'm sure," Brant agreed. Filling a pipe, he came to Mr. Peabody's chair. "I don't want to excite your hopes unduly," he said slowly. "But I want to suggest one possibility."

"Eh?" Mr. Peabody half rose. "You mean the stone might be removed?"

Brant was shaking his head.

"It can't be, by any ordinary surgical technique," he said. "But I was just thinking: your extraordinary power healed the wound it made in traversing the brain. If you can acquire control over the creation and manipulation of living matter, we might safely attempt the operation—depending on your gift to heal the section."

"There's no use to it." Mr. Peabody sank wearily back into Brant's easy chair. "I've tried, and I can't make anything alive. The power was simply not granted me."

"Nonsense," Brant told him. "The difficulty, probably, is just that you don't know enough biology. A little instruction in bio-chemistry, anatomy, and physiology ought to fix you up."

"I'll try," Mr. Peabody agreed. "But first my family must be provided for."

After the doctor had given him a lesson on the latest discoveries about atomic and molecular structure, he found himself able to create objects of the precious metals, with none of them turning out like the gold brick.

For two days he drove himself to exhaustion, making gold and platinum. He shaped the metal into watch cases, old-

fashioned jewelry, dental work, and medals, so that it could be disposed of without arousing suspicion.

Brant took a handful of the trinkets to a dealer in old gold. He returned with five hundred dollars, and the assurance that the entire lot, gradually marketed, would net several thousand.

Mr. Peabody felt ill with the pain and fatigue of his creative efforts, and he was still distressed with a fear of the law. He learned from the newspapers that the police were watching his house, and he dared not even telephone his daughter Beth.

"They all think I'm insane, even Beth does," he told Brant. "Probably I'll never see any of them again. I want you to keep the money, and give it to them after I am gone."

"Nonsense," the young doctor said. "When you get a little more control over your gift, you will be able to fix everything up."

But even Brant had to admit that Mr. Peabody's increasing illness threatened to cut off the research before they had reached success.

Unkempt and hollow-eyed, muttering about "energy-conversion" and "entropy-reverse," and "telurgic psi capacity," Brant sat up night after night while Mr. Peabody slept, plowing through heavy tomes on relativity and atomic physics and parapsychology trying to discover a sane explanation of the gift.

"I believe that roaring you say you hear," he told Mr. Peabody, "is nothing less than a sense of the free radiant energy of cosmic space. The radioactive stone has somehow enabled your brain—perhaps by stimulation of the psychophysical faculty that is rudimentary in all of us—has enabled you to concentrate and convert that diffuse energy into material atoms."

Mr. Peabody shook his fevered, throbbing head.

"What good is your theory to me?" Despair moved him to a bitter recital of his case.

"I can work miracles, but what good has the power done me? It has driven me from my family. It has made me a fugitive from justice. It has turned me into a sort of guinea pig,

for your experiments. It is nothing but a headache—a real one, I mean. And it's going to kill me, in the end."

"Not," Brant assured him, "if you can learn to create living matter."

Not very hopefully, for the pain and weakness that accompanied his miraculous efforts were increasing day by day. Mr. Peabody followed Brant's lectures in anatomy and physiology. He materialized blobs of protoplasm and simple cells and bits of tissue.

The doctor evidently had grandiose ideas of a miraculous human being. He set Mr. Peabody to studying and creating human limbs and organs. After a few days, the bathtub was filled with a strange lot of miraculous debris, swimming in a preservative solution.

Then Mr. Peabody rebelled.

"I'm getting too weak, doctor," he insisted faintly. "My power is somehow—going. Sometimes it seems that things are going to flicker out again, instead of getting real. I know I can't make anything as large as a human being."

"Well, make something small," Brant told him. "Remember, if you give up, you are giving up your life."

And presently, with a manual of marine biology on his knees, Mr. Peabody was forming small miraculous goldfish in the bowl he had made on the night of his arrival. They were gleaming, perfect—except that they always floated to the top of the water, dead.

Brant had gone out. Mr. Peabody was alone, before the bowl, when Beth slipped silently into the apartment. She looked pale and distressed.

"Dad!" she cried anxiously. "How are you?" She came to him, and took his trembling hands. "Rex warned me on the phone not to come: he was afraid the police would follow me. But I don't think they saw me. And I had to come, Dad. I was so worried. But how are you?"

"I think I'll be all right," Mr. Peabody lied stoutly, and tried to conceal the tremor in his voice. "I'm glad to see you, dear. Tell me about your mother and Bill."

"They're all right. But Dad, you look so ill!"

"Here, I've something for you." Mr. Peabody took the five hundred dollars out of his wallet, and put it in her hands. "There will be more, after—later."

"But, Dad—"

"Don't worry, dear, it isn't counterfeit."

"It isn't that." Her voice was distressed. "Rex has tried to tell me about these miracles. I don't understand them, Dad; I don't know what to believe. But I do know we don't want the money you make with them. None of us."

Mr. Peabody tried to cover his hurt.

"But my dear," he asked, "how are you going to live?"

"I'm going to work, next week," she said. "I'm going to be a reception clerk for a dentist—until Rex has an office of his own. And Mom is going to take two boarders, in the spare room."

"But," said Mr. Peabody, "there is William."

"Bill already has a job," Beth informed him. "You know the fellow he ran into? Well, the man has a garage. He let Bill go to work for him. Bill gets fifteen a week, and pays back six for the accident. Bill's doing all right."

The way she looked when she said it made it clear to Mr. Peabody that there had been a guiding spirit in his family's remarkable reformation—and that Beth had had a lot to do with it. Mr. Peabody smiled at her gratefully to show that he understood, but he said nothing.

She refused to watch him demonstrate his gift.

"No, Dad." She moved back almost in horror from the little bowl with the lifeless goldfish floating in it. "I don't like magic, and I don't believe in something for nothing. There is always a catch to it."

She came and took his hand again, earnestly.

"Dad," she begged softly, "why don't you give up this gift? Whatever it is. Why don't you explain everything to the police and your boss, and try to get your old job back?"

Mr. Peabody shook his head, with a wry little smile.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be so easy, explaining," he said. "But I'm ready to give up the gift—whenever I can."

"I don't understand you, Dad." Her face was trembling.

"Now I must go. I hope the police didn't see me. I'll come back, whenever I can."

She departed, and Mr. Peabody wearily returned to his miraculous goldfish.

Five minutes later the door was flung unceremoniously open. Mr. Peabody looked up, startled. And the gleaming ghost of a tiny fish, half-materialized, shimmered and vanished.

Mr. Peabody had expected to see Brant, returning. But four policemen, two in plain clothes, trooped into the room. They triumphantly informed him that he was under arrest, and began searching the apartment.

"Hey, Sergeant!" came an excited shout from the bathroom. "Looks like this Doc Brant is in the ring, too. And it ain't only jewel-robbery and fraud and counterfeiting. It's murder—with mutilation!"

The startled officers converged watchfully upon Mr. Peabody, and handcuffs jingled. Mr. Peabody, however, was looking curiously elated for a man just arrested under charge of the gravest of crimes. The haunting shadow of pain cleared from his face, and he smiled happily.

"Hey, they're gone!" It was the patrolman in the bathroom. His horror-tinged excitement had changed to bewildered consternation. "I saw 'em, a minute ago. I swear it. But now there ain't nothing in the tub but water."

The sergeant stared suspiciously at Mr. Peabody, who looked bland but exhausted. Then he made a few stinging remarks to the bluecoat standing baffled in the doorway. Finally he swore with much feeling.

Mr. Peabody's hollow eyes had closed. The smile on his face softened into weary relaxation. The detective sergeant caught him, as he swayed and fell. He had gone to sleep.

He woke next morning in a hospital room. Dr. Brant was standing beside the bed. In answer to Mr. Peabody's first alarmed question, he grinned reassuringly.

"You are my patient," he explained. "You have been under my care for an unusual case of amnesia. Very convenient disorder, amnesia. And you are doing very well."

"The police?"

Brant gestured largely.

"You've nothing to fear. There's no evidence that you were guilty of any criminal act. Naturally they wonder how you came into possession of the counterfeit; but certainly they can't prove you made it. I have already told them that, as a victim of amnesia, you will not be able to tell them anything."

Mr. Peabody sighed and stretched himself under the sheets, gratefully.

"Now, I've got a couple of questions," Brant said. "What was it that happened so fortunately to the debris in the bathtub? And to the stone in your head? For the X-ray shows that it is gone."

"I just undid them," Mr. Peabody said.

Brant caught his breath, and nodded very slowly.

"I see," he said at last. "I suppose the inevitable counterpart of creation must be annihilation. But how did you do it?"

"It came to me, just as the police broke in," Mr. Peabody said. "I was creating another one of those damned goldfish, and I was too tired to finish it. When I heard the door, I made a little effort to—well, somehow let it go, push it away."

He sighed again, happily.

"That's the way it happened. The goldfish flickered out of existence; it made an explosion in my head, like a bomb. That gave me the feel of unmaking. Annihilation, you call it. Much easier than creating, once you get the knack of it. I took care of the things in the bathroom, and the stone in my brain."

"I see." Brant took a restless turn across the room, and came back to ask a question. "Now that the stone is gone," he said, "I suppose your remarkable gift is—lost?"

It was several seconds before Mr. Peabody replied. Then he said softly:

"It was lost."

That statement, however, was a lie. Mr. Peabody had learned a certain lesson. The annihilation of the meteoric stone had ended his pain. But, as he had just assured himself

by the creation and instant obliteration of a small goldfish under the sheets, his power was intact.

Still a bookkeeper, Mr. Peabody is still outwardly very much the same man as he was that desperate night when he walked upon Bannister Hill. Yet there is now a certain subtle difference in him.

A new confidence in his bearing has caused Mr. Berg to increase his responsibilities and his pay. The yet unsolved mysteries surrounding his attack of amnesia cause his family and his neighbors to regard him with a certain awe. William now only very rarely calls him "Gov."

Mr. Peabody remains very discreet in the practice of his gift. Sometimes, when he is quite alone, he ventures to provide himself with a miraculous cigarette. Once, in the middle of the night, a mosquito which had tormented him beyond endurance simply vanished.

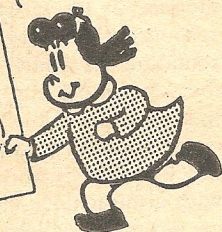
And he has come, somehow, into possession of a fishing outfit which is the envy of his friends—and which he now finds time to use.

Chiefly, however, his gift is reserved for performing inexplicable tricks for the delight of his two grandchildren, and the creation of tiny and miraculous toys.

All of which, he strictly enjoins them, must be kept secret from their parents, Beth and Dr. Brant.



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