

THE FLOATING LORDS—by Chester Geier

FEBRUARY

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# AMAZING

ANC

## STORIES



Maddened by the lure of her lovely body, he became the...

### OUTLAW IN THE SKY, by Guy Archette



# MEN BEHIND AMAZING STORIES



**WALT CRAIN**

**M**Y FIRST story saved the life of a hooky-playing fellow seventh-grader. It consisted of a dramatically detailed excuse note written in spurious Spencerian and purporting to be the work of his mother. The teacher fell for it and overnight I turned professional. For a small consideration—anything from a skate-key to a fraction of the miscreant's allowance—

I would describe any given indisposition in the name of any given unwitting parent. I never told the same story twice.

Obviously I was cut out to be a ghost writer. So that's how I put myself through a B.A. in math and an M.S. in physics. I worked part time for one of those outfits that turns out

*(Continued on page 159)*



# THE OBSERVATORY

by the Editor

WE moved our office a few doors down the hall last week. As a result of this, a lot of long-buried records bounced to the surface. Lined up on my desk are several bound volumes of AMAZING STORIES. Here, for instance, is January-June, 1942. Six issues. Let's look them over.

The January 1942 issue runs 244 pages. Oh, for the dear dead days! Ray Palmer was very proud of it according to the editorial.

Who wrote the stories? Anybody I know? Sure. Here's William P. McGivern. Now, whatever happened to him? Let's see—Bill married Maureen Daly. He wrote nine books—so far. He roamed all over Europe. He sold a serial to the *Saturday Evening Post*. In the near future he will head for Italy to do a series of TV scripts.

Poor Bill. Just another failure.

ALSO, in this big fat issue I see a story by a chap named Alfred Bester. And what happened to him? Nothing much—except his *Demolished Man* recently turned the stf field upside down. Al has kept the wolf from the door by doing radio and TV scripts for just about every show in existence.

AND Robert Moore Williams. He wrote *Planet Of Doomed Men* for this long-gone 1942 issue. Now, a few million words later, Bob is still rolling it out. Better yarns than ever.

THIS 1942 volume is only ten years old. Let's go back a little. Here is one stamped: Oct. 1928—March 1929. That was before a lot of you were born. And what do we find in the way of stories and writers?

Well, there is a little piece called *Sky-lark of Space*, by Edward Elmer Smith and Lee Hawkins Garby. We still get letters about that one. Strangely enough, there's an inquiry on my desk that came in this morning. Who, pray tell me, have longer memories than stf fans?

Here's a story called *The Metal Man* by a writer named Jack Williamson. As you well know, Jack is still very much around. Another by Alfred Fritchey. Wonder if he was any relation to Barbara?

A man named H. G. Wells had a story in the Feb. 1929 issue. H. G. Wells—hmmmm. The name sounds vaguely familiar. Could that be—? No; guess not. I must be thinking of somebody else.

WE'LL try another book, 1939. And we have Eando Binder, Ed Earl Rep, and Edmond Hamilton. Didn't Edmond do a little classic called *The Star Kings*? Ha! Little? Who am I trying to kid?

And who do we find here but our friend Robert Bloch. Gosh, Bob. I didn't know you were that old. Do you remember a yarn you wrote called, *The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton*? No. You've probably forgotten.

Here's one I almost missed. Isaac Asimov. Poor Isaac. I knew him well. He lost his touch after writing *Marooned on Vesta* for this 1939 issue, and never sold another line. Finally strangled himself with an old typewriter ribbon—or so I was told.

DECEMBER, 1935—a story called *The Symphony Of Death* by one Raymond A. Palmer. I remember him. When I took my first story into the Chicago office of Ziff-Davis back in 1946, I tried to hand it to a character in the editorial office. But this character wouldn't take it. He said he was the office boy and had no authority to take scripts. Thus was my first contact with Ray Palmer. Two weeks later I found out who he was. Only the editor.

(Confidential to Palmer: You dog!)

Bound volumes—names—stories—the building bricks of a proud heritage; the heritage of *The Old Aristocrat*, of which there is none finer.

AND now AMAZING reaches another milestone in its glamorous career. Howard Browne will tell you about it next month....PWF

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## Soaring Cities

By June Lurie

THE SOARING, graceful facades of so many fictional cities of the future may be cold reality sooner than we think. The suggestion of them is already here. All over the country you see unusually graceful bridges, buildings which look as though they've been poured, and structures of all kinds looking as if they'd been delicately chiseled from solid rock. This has been possible because of a new building material and in spite of the fact that less and less steel goes into buildings. "Pre-stressed concrete" is the name of the miraculous substance and it definitely is the structural material of the future.

Concrete, the familiar mixture of stone, sand and cement, has been used for decades in every conceivable application, but invariably things made from it have had a low, squatty appearance, testifying to its ponderous massiveness. The reason for concrete's solid effect of bulkiness is, of course, the fact that it has tremendous strength in compression and little strength in tension. You can pile any weight you want on concrete structures, but you can't stress them in tension or the concrete tears apart—steel-reinforced or not! Consequently you can't erect light, airy, graceful buildings in concrete—that is, you couldn't until now.

"Pre-stressed concrete" is an ingenious combination of tiny amounts of steel with large amounts of concrete, possessing the best qualities of both and the weaknesses of neither. The method of preparing pre-stressed concrete immediately clarifies its source of strength. Concrete beams are cast with steel wires running inside them. Then, as the concrete hardens, the wires are put under tension with screws, and the result is a pillar or beam of concrete as strong in tension as it is in compression.

This deceptively simple construction has provided science with a cheap, durable building material in inexhaustible quantities. In addition, such as the nature of pre-stressed concrete that the forming advantages of a poured material can be exploited while, at the same time, all the strength qualities of steel may be utilized. Such a blend of powers has long been needed.

A building or bridge made of pre-stressed concrete possesses at once massiveness and airiness; strength is there, but so is lightness. Thin shells of concrete laced with tensed wires serve at once as cover and frame. Europe being short of steel, and long on labor and concrete, pioneered the method. It's spread over here until, now, many such structures have been erected. It is truly a building material of the future!

## ROCKETRY STRIDES AHEAD

By John Booth

ALTHOUGH it is not generally realized outside the field, science-fiction writers in no small way have had a stake in the realization of the rocket as we know it today. Rocketry today is big business, and the groundwork is being laid for interplanetary flight. The basic problems are well on their way toward solution and the role of the science-fiction writer in the actual technology is no longer existent. It has been handed over to the scientists and the engineers. But it was not always that way.

Go back to the late twenties and the early thirties. What was being done in the world at that time in rocketry? From a professional standpoint, nothing at all was being accomplished—in fact, scientists and technicians tended to scoff at anything that smacked of rockets and interplanetary flight. "Those fantastic dreamers," the engineers would say. "Come on let's get back to work on our motors." They'd sneer ever so politely and the matter would be dropped.

But the science-fiction writers of the time were not content to write about their dreams. They also experimented. In basements and cellars and fields, their little toy-like rocket motors roared and throbbed and blew up and the writers and amateur scientists came back for more. They joined and formed rocket societies, the most famous here being the American Rocket Society. Then rumors began coming out of the pre-Hitler Germany of successful rocket experimentation. G. Edward Pendray, amateur scientist and science-fiction writer, visited Germany and met Willy Ley, another writer and amateur who, as a member of the Verein fuer Raumschiffahrt (Society for Spaceship-Travel) was publicizing and working on surprisingly effective motors. The enthusiasm generated by these successes and these organizations carried itself everywhere that believers in the Dream—space-travel—lived. Science fiction writers did their share to interest professionals.

We all know the results. Everywhere the efforts of rocketeers were greeted apathetically, except by Dr. Goddard, the American experimenter, and of course, by the rising Nazi war-machine which took over the German society. The V-2 resulted from this latter seizure. Goddard's work was resurrected in the experiments at White Sands.



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- ☐ ☐ Are you too lazy to plan ahead? You've got to manage your life, plan for success and stick to it.
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# OUTLAW



, The man vanished in a puff of smoke



# IN THE SKY

By Guy Archette

**The grim and terrible pioneer days on Mars formed a lush field for the ruthless ones. Greed and murder were the accepted methods**

**T**HE HALF-TRACK train had spent an entire day crossing the Marsport River, and now that day was over and the train was camped in an area of red grassland on the westward side.

It was a large train and its population ran the gamut from wealth to poverty. There were the great durium-steel atom-powers filled with the fine

things treasured by genteel women. There were the smaller gas-durium jobs, battered and dented. In these rode the people whose only possessions of value were their dreams of what lay beyond the swelling Martian hills. There were even the primitive carts drawn by the sloe-eyed Martian *goffs*, and gorged with the pitiful possessions of those who wore tattered clothing





but who also had the dreams—and the will to travel a thousand miles over red plains and barren hills to make the dreams in their hearts come true. They had the grimmest faces and the hungriest eyes of all.

There were the unattached gentry—the scouts in the tight purple clothing of their trade, whose eyes were eternally narrowed against the sun and the wind. They were already a part of this new planet. It was an old planet to them and their competence was clearly apparent in every move they made. There were the gamblers and they were also self-sufficient and competent, but in a different way.

And there were others.

This train was not a train but a moving community. It could take root on any spot, at any time and become a town overnight with all the good and evil that goes into the making of a town.

The good women and the bad women—the liquor for men and the milk for children—the people who filled churches and the people who filled the drinking halls—those who dreamed and worked and those who plotted and schemed.

All this was here—even now—in this traveling city, moving out from Marsport to the fertile plains of the planet.

The boy's name was Cory Balleau. He was eleven and he was a part of the rag-tag and the bob-tail of the train. The wheezing, gas-driven truck with the broken tread-links belonged to his uncle—John Balleau. The thin-faced woman who rode on the front seat of the truck with the look of fever on her brow was his mother, Faith Balleau.

There was breeding and background in every line of the woman's body. There was the right kind of pride in

her bearing, that showed even brighter than the fever that boiled up from the hot *marsplague* eating at her lungs.

And her mark was on the boy; her delicate features were also his—the soft, long lashed eyes—the pure beauty of feature—the face that served as a mirror for the sensitive mind.

The train had come to rest in two sections, each half strung out to form the side of a street. All activity was in the space between. Plastitents sprang up on the red meadow; tents for living—for gambling—for drinking. Atom-charged food cookers were charged and there was sound and color and action and all these things thrilled the boy.

He had been riding all day and there was pent-up energy in his body. He dawdled for a time around the truck. Then, with a quick look at his bearded, sober uncle, he took three soft steps and was off, flying down the long street, driven by sheer animal exuberance.

Some twenty-five trucks down, the patter of his bare feet lessened and he went slowly past a fine big GM land-cruiser. There was a yellow-haired girl in this truck. He had seen her, fleetingly, on several occasions and once he had spoken to her. But in the train, as in a town, the lines of discrimination had been drawn. There was already cat-town and shanty-town and snob-town. Cory Balleau, in his short run had crossed over and was in alien territory. These big double-traction cruisers were as inviolate as mansions on a hill.

The girl was there—leaning out through the window in the back of the truck. The boy dawdled with studied care under the gaze of her bright interested eyes.

The girl said: "Hello. I've seen you."



The boy said: "I've seen you too. My name's Cory Balleau." He drew a design in the dust with his foot.

"Mine's Catherine Bates, but they call me Kay."

There were legs moving in long strides on the other side of the wagon. The legs were clad in boots of fine leather—expensive boots.

The legs came around the rear of the truck and there was a scowl on the face of the man who wore the boots. The man said: "Get on out of here! No chance to steal anything. Get on with you!"

**E**ACH WORD could have been the lash of a whip laid across the boy's back. The liquid eyes widened. He paled and took one faltering step backwards. He stared at the man.

Immediately there was the sound of movement up in the big truck and a woman appeared beside the yellow haired girl. The woman had plump, cheerful beauty and she was not past her early twenties—about the same age as the man.

The woman said, "Frank! Stop it!" That was all and the man stood with a sullen look, eyeing the boy.

The woman turned to the boy. A gentle smile was there, nestling in the soft curve of her mouth. "Don't be afraid, boy. It's all right."

He stood mute, writhing under this embarrassment. The woman's smile got even softer and she said, "Are you hungry, lad?"

The yellow-haired girl brightened "Mama—can he have my dessert tonight? Can he?"

Something burst inside Cory Balleau—something wild and agonizing. Tears flooded out and his words were shrill and high: "I'm not hungry, you—you *snobs!* We've got food! We've

got more food than anybody! We don't take charity from snobs!"

He whirled away and was gone—blindly down the street. He smashed head on into something covered with soft purple leather, though hard as steel underneath. But there was scarcely any shock because the steel yielded like a spring, turned on a pivot, and the boy was lifted and swung back on balance and put down again.

A deep voice said, "Easy there, son."

Cory opened his eyes. The face above his was deeply tanned. There were fine lines cobwebbing into the outer corners of the dark eyes.

This fleeting glimpse and the boy was free and again rocketing down the street. When his breathing had become a sobbing battle for air, his gait faltered and he found himself at the far rear of the train.

Here was a magically changed atmosphere—a distinct and different segment of the colorful whole. Rough *cheekawood* counters had already been set up, and the men who crowded around the bottles thereon were of definite mark. The process of the train's stopping was a little like that of water whirling in a pot. As the water slowed, the dregs swiftly and surely settled to the bottom.

The boy looked around, a trifle bewildered. He had never before come this far down the train. But the bewilderment was secondary in his mind. The sting and shame of his encounter with the yellow-haired girl was still paramount. More than anything, he wanted solitude.

He found a certain degree of it beneath the tracks of a supply truck across from one of the crowded liquor counters. Here he stretched full



length and pressed his face against the dust and the coarse crimson grass of the prairie.

He wept with an intensity of one who has a pain deep inside—a pain that will not come to the surface but must be burned away, bit by bit, with scalding tears.

It was not the weeping of childhood, but when it was done the sleep that followed was the sleep of the young.

The boy was awakened by a pounding upon the earth. He opened his eyes and—without turning his head—he was looking out at a myriad of legs. The legs were of all shapes and sizes, Martian legs and Terran legs, and were clad in various ways. Before his eyes there were shoes and boots and purple moccasins formed into a hollow circle. But there were no sounds. This seemed strange. His mind questioned the incongruity of so many men crowded into a circle and, at the same time, such a vast silence.

**T**HE SLEEP faded from his eyes and he saw the two men inside the circle—a Terran and a green-skinned Martian. He raised his head.

They bore a similarity—the two men—great burly Terran with the hair on his face covering everything but cheek-bones and eyes, the cruel-eyed Martian, thewed like a gladiator. Their beards were thick with dirt. Each was in a crouching position; each had his arms bowed outward with hand spread and hooked and waiting like the talons of preying birds. They faced each other and moved in a circle within a circle. They moved cat-like, silent, deadly, and now the boy could see the hatred in their eyes and hear the jerky gusts of their breathing. He sensed the tightness in the air and his mind cringed from it.

The circling ceased, as though by common consent, and the two crashed together and a roar went up from the straining circle. The boy felt the thud of the contact in his own body. He tried to turn his gaze away from the two men, but they were a magnet, holding him.

The two stood locked together, swaying for a long moment, then they broke apart and the fists of the Terran gained an advantage. The fists lashed out like anvils at the end of pistons and there was the soggy sound of flesh being smashed and ground to green pulp against bone. Sticky life-fluid welled over the face of the Martian. He staggered back, shook his head and bellowed like a wounded bull. The Terran dropped back one step and the crouch was gone from his body. He straightened and brought up one leg in a long arcing kick. His boot, with two hundred pounds of force behind it, drove squarely into the other's groin. The Martian doubled over as though ripped in the middle by a battering ram.

His foe leaped forward, locked his fists together and brought them down against the back of the Martian's neck. The effect was that of a sledge hammer arced over in a full swing.

The Martian took the blow and went straight to the ground, landing squarely upon his face. He groveled, and spewed out a green sheen through a nose smashed flat and filled with dirt and flesh.

But it was not over yet. In a frenzy of triumph, the Terran screamed an odd, gargled scream and went into the air. He came down accurately, both boots crashing into the small of the Martian's back.

The Martian's agony squalled out through his lips in a wave of ear-tearing sound.



The boy, cowering beneath the truck, was also in agony. Never before had he known anything more violent than a reprimand from his mother. He lay stiff and terrorized staring at the spots of life-fluid that had splashed under the truck and were drying on the back of his hand. He rubbed the palm of his other hand across the spots and they became green streaks on his brown skin.

The boy raised his head as the fallen man bellowed anew. The fallen man stayed prone and rolled across the ground, closer to the wagon. The circle was breaking into savage sound and now the Martian lay on his back not two feet from the boy.

The Terran was still not content. The viciousness within him still demanded. He crossed the circle and was upon his foe, astride him, with knees on his chest. The boy saw two rigid thumbs poked downward. He saw the look of horror on the Martian's face. He heard the scream and then managed to close his own eyes. But it was too late. The earth pitched and rolled beneath him and he knew they were helping the Martian up and taking him away.

And he knew also, that they were leading a blind man.

He fainted—

**T**HERE WERE arms lifting Cory Balleau and he opened his eyes. There was the face tanned dark and the fine cobweb lines, and he could feel the soft purple leather and the steel underneath.

Cradled in two arms, he could look up at the man and hear him say: "Where do you belong, son? Your folks'll be wondering won't they?"

The boy was wondering too, but about something far different. There was a new feeling in his mind and in

his body. His mind could not define the difference but it could note the outward signs of change.

Before, he would have smiled at this stranger and said hello and when I get big I'm going to have a shirt like that. But now he lay stiff in the stranger's arms and did not smile. He said, "I'm Cory Balleau. Up at the other end of the train. Put me down."

"My name's Nate Goodrow," the stranger said. He put Cory on his feet. "I'll walk along a piece with you."

"You're a scout," Cory said.

"That's right—one of them. We sort of keep an eye out. I saw you kiting down the trucks and I'm going that way. So when I see you snoozing under that wagon I took notice."

The other Cory Balleau would have been thrilled at walking past the trucks with a scout. They were fabulous creatures from whom one was grateful for a nod or a word.

The other Cory Balleau would have been thrilled.

"Who were those men?" the new Cory asked.

"Oh, you saw that, did you? Thought maybe you'd slept through it. A couple of maintainers." He glanced sharply down at the boy. "Those things—happen," he said.

Cory could see the home truck now. Uncle John had an atom cooker going in front of it and was standing by the cooker looking anxiously up and down the thoroughfare. Then Cory saw Uncle John step back into the shadows and kneel down beside what looked like a deeper shadow.

There was panic in Cory's heart and he was running.

The deeper shadow was a mattress stretched on the meadow ground and Faith Balleau lay on the mattress with John Balleau bending over her, wiping



blood from her lips. He looked up;  
"Your mother had a hemorrhage—  
a bad one."

Cory dropped to his knees beside  
the mattress.

"Mom—. Mom!"

Her eyes opened as though by great  
effort. She smiled and raised a slim  
white hand and passed it over her  
son's tousled curls. "You went away.  
I was worried."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

John Balleau had moved back and  
Cory saw that he was talking in low  
tones to Nate Goodrow, the scout.  
They talked for some minutes and  
then Nate Goodrow turned and hur-  
ried away. John Balleau came back  
and knelt by the side of his sister-in-  
law.

After a while there were footsteps  
and another man came to the truck.  
He carried a medical kit and he  
seemed tired but his voice was not  
unkind when he said: "You go with  
your uncle, son. You take a little  
walk with your uncle."

CORY WENT out back of the  
trucks with his Uncle John and  
they walked back and forth in the  
darkness.

"Is Mom going to die?" Cory asked,  
and in his mind it seemed a strange  
thing for him to say.

"Of course not. Don't talk like  
that."

"She looked—bad. So white."

"That's because she lost blood. She's  
got to have rest."

The doctor called them and they  
started back toward the train. He  
came to meet them. His manner was  
petulant.

"That woman has got to have  
shelter! You've got to get her up off  
the ground—into one of the atom-  
drives."

Cory looked at their own sorry  
truck with the warped floor. A cold  
shudder swept him.

"Nate Goodrow went to see," John  
Balleau said. "He's talking to some  
of the people. He'll be back soon."

Cory Balleau went back and sat  
down on the ground beside his mother.  
He took her hand and held it in his  
own. It was cold and he rubbed it  
gently, warming it. His mother lay  
with her eyes closed, her face pointed  
straight upward toward the stars.

Cory sat there for a long time while  
the stars burned and from up and  
down the street came the sounds of  
people moving and laughing and talk-  
ing and living.

He sat there for a long time and  
then he knew that his mother was  
dead.

He got stiffly to his feet and walked  
a little way down the street. He  
stopped and put out his hand and  
leaned against a truck.

There was a voice he could hear  
and he looked up and saw Nate Good-  
row walking by in the gloom, going  
toward the Balleau truck. Another  
man was with him.

Nate Goodrow said: "I shouldn't  
have told them it was *marsplague*, I  
guess. They're touchy about havin'  
their trucks—"

The voice trailed off and was gone,  
but Cory knew. No trucks for his  
mother to die in. In this ghastly new  
world where men fought like animals  
and gouged out each other's eyes,  
there was no one who cared to give a  
woman the comfort of a dry warm  
death bed.

Cory Balleau, aged eleven, stood on  
the Martian prairie and sampled the  
taste of hatred.

When he returned to the truck a  
woman was there—a plump, pretty  
woman with a shawl over her head.



She was scolding Nate Goodrow: "Why didn't you talk to me? Why didn't you tell me?"

Nate said: "I talked to your husband, ma'am."

The mother of the golden-haired girl bit her lip as she turned and saw Cory. She went to him and put her arms around him. "You poor boy! Poor lad!" Her sympathy was deep and genuine and the old Cory would have known and responded. The new Cory understood, but he could not respond. He said:

"Take your hands off of me!"

Startled, she looked into his eyes and saw the blaze of hatred. One so young—

"I said take your hands off me!"

He turned from her and her arms dropped to her sides. She stared after him as he walked away.

"What an odd child. What a very odd child!"

**J**OHAN BALLEAU had an eye for the soil and a love of growing things. In the years before the Third Atomic War, he had owned Willowrood, jointly with his brother, Robert Balleau, in the State of Mississippi. On Willowrood, the buildings were trim and neat; the family mansion gleamed white behind its massive pillars; the crops were the largest, by far, of any for miles around.

John and Robert Balleau were an ideal team. The fiery Robert maintained the social standard. He dashed about in fine racing cars, swept his wide-brimmed hat off to smiling ladies, and practiced the old arts of sword and pistol so full of ceremony and elegance. He married the most beautiful girl in all Mississippi as he was indeed expected to do and brought her home to Willowrood in a sleek jet from a European honeymoon. He

sired one child, a son he named Cory, and was visibly disappointed when the boy, even at an early age, showed a bent toward the gentler, more dreamy nature of his mother.

John, on the other hand, stayed in the background, and was quite content to give the stage to his brother. John preferred to live with the land. He was far more interested in the strength of a green stalk than in the burnish and temper of a sword blade. Over the sprained leg of a horse he was sure and gentle but bending over the hand of a woman he acquired a clumsiness and redness of skin that ill became a gentleman.

As the war lumbered toward its outbreak, Robert Balleau was in the forefront of the flaming west-hemisphere vocalists. He flung defiance around the globe with fine gestures while John surveyed the fields in glum silence. The declaration of war found Robert at the head of a parajet regiment. He faced the future as a great adventure from which nothing but great reward could come. John accepted his captaincy without flourish and rode away wondering if the steel-dust mare could foal safely in his absence.

The Battle of Greenland, and elation swept the west. It would soon be over. But the east hurled its legions into the air and the war went on. One year. Robert died at the annihilation of the Second Lunar Platform. Two years. Sky raiders appeared and Faith Balleau stood in silence with Cory in her arms and watched the mansion flash into nothing. There was hunger and deep silent grief and time passing. The hordes of Gardis moving west unchecked, Surrender at Portland, and John Balleau came limping home. He stopped on the rise overlooking the broad acres and more of him died



than had died in the war because now his one last hope had fled.

Willowrood was done. The Balleaus were penniless.

John Balleau put his hands to tools and worked a small strip of the land for vegetables, for immediate food, and a tiny spark of hope was revived. It would be a bad time stretching on ahead, but there *was* reconciliation. John Balleau had read the New Code. He had memorized passages from the Second Inspirational Address and he decided the wounds would be healed.

But with the New York Massacres the spark of hope in the breast of John Balleau.

**H**E DROPPED his tools and turned his eyes skyward. As always, he thought in terms of the land, the soil. There were acres on Mars to be had for the homesteading. He broached the subject to his sister-in-law, Faith. She shrugged. It made little difference. Mississippi, Luna, Venus, Mars. In truth, she had died with Robert Balleau.

They left Willowrood without a backward glance. They bought passage on a slow space-freighter at Panama and found—upon reaching Marsport—that others also had had the dream. They bought a delapidated truck for three times its value and joined a guarded train for the southward trails.

After the crossing of the River—where Faith Balleau surrendered almost gratefully to the flame in her lungs—John dug a grave, after which he put the boy Cory on the seat of the truck and resumed what—to him—had become a sort of pilgrimage.

Day followed day and now it had become commonplace for a single truck or a small group of them to veer suddenly off at a tangent from the main train. A wave of a hand and these hardy seekers would fade into

the vastness of the red prairie.

They've come home—each one of them knows that they've come home at last, Robert Balleau would say to himself upon these occasions, and as the crimson hills loomed in front of the train only to vanish rearward, he studied the landscape with a new intensity.

One day he called to a scout who was riding train-side; a young Terran named Nate Goodrow. "Where are we?"

Goodrow pulled in close, his eyes on the boy Cory, who rode on the seat beside his uncle; a boy who, upon the crossing of the river, seemed to have changed from an eleven year-old child to an eleven-year-old man. Cory had lost his childhood in a brief span of hours and no longer ran and played, nor did he allow his face to be the mirror of his emotions. He had acquired a dignity that his years denied and there was about him a gravity of bearing.

"Western edge of the Seven Canals," Nate Goodrow said. "Fine country. Rich land around here. How are you, Cory?"

The boy turned his head. "I'm fine, Mr. Goodrow."

"As one scout to another—why don't you call me Nate?"

Cory smiled briefly, and his reaction appeared to be one of mild amusement. "Thank you—Nate."

"Figuring on pulling off hereabouts, Mr. Balleau?"

"I like the look of it."

"I'll tell you something. There's a town up the line a piece. About ten miles. Peaceful natives. I've got a hunch there'll be quite a chunk of this train cut off there. I've heard some talk."

"Thank you—thank you very much."



With that John Balleau leaned on his wheel and swung out of line. A shout went up along the train. Hands were waved as John Balleau struck a fortyfive-degree angle and pulled away.

"I'll be hunting you up one of these days," Goodrow called.

The farewells were loud and cheerful and the hands and hats were waved with gusto. John Balleau turned and smiled and waved back.

But the boy Cory made no motions of acknowledgement. He stared straight ahead across the prairie. So far as his actions were concerned, the truck train did not exist.

John Balleau's instincts were unerring. They led him across the country straight to a spot where an eight-foot creek meandered into a swale and became a pond. There was lush grass here and cool yellow trees. The land sloped southward—gently rolling prairie—land that would respond to the love and care of a man like John Balleau.

He hit the brake and stopped beside the pond, got off the truck and picked up a handful of dirt. He let it dribble through his fingers. He said:

"This is it, Cory boy. We're here."

Cory Balleau got down from the truck and took off his shoes. He stripped down and ran straight into the pond until it caught him around his lean hips. Then he pitched forward and sank to the soft bottom. The water felt good against his hot skin.

**T**HE ANCIENT settlement of Ngania expanded a hundredfold over night. As the truck train wound in off the prairie, the thin sprinkling of natives blinked in wonder. A place with no ambitions and little energy, it found itself suddenly engulfed in

the drive and action of a super-charged Terran horde.

Frank Bates was an excellent example of this new blood. He scanned the situation swiftly and what he saw was good. This country was rich and ripe and ready for the plow. In the not too distant future a freighter station would be established at Ngania and a flood of grain would pour into the space liners. The crying need would be for money, and Frank Bates had money. Money would be needed to build the country and the town. Lumber, farm implements, crop loans. The land was for the taking but that was only the beginning. The great common denominator was money.

The first important building to rise in Ngania was the imposing home of Frank Bates. The next building housed his Ngania Bank. The lumber was carted down from the polar forests in trucks and then there were more people who wanted homes and Frank Bates made arrangements with Terran banking connections and the money was forthcoming.

But there was a gross error in this picture and Frank Bates was comfortably aware of that error. It lay in the timing of the hopeful project.

The timing was wrong. Wheat and corn did not—like cattle—have legs. It could not be driven over the trails to the freighter station. The station must, of necessity, be at the back door of the grain fields in order to move the grain to market.

There was optimistic talk of course. The settlers were riding on a wave of enthusiasm and rumors flew thick and fast; rumors, but very few facts.

Frank Bates dreamed and planned, but he kept his dreams and plans to himself. He walked the streets of Ngania and had a smile and a handshake for all comers. And anyone who



wished to discuss a loan against his land was cordially invited into the office.

At the end of two years, Frank Bates had quietly, and in the natural course of business, acquired four sections of land southwest of Ngania. In the drawer of his desk he had a map. When he was quite alone, with no chance of interruption, he would spread this map on his desk and study it with deep intent. The map was of a remarkably wide area of the surrounding country and, as time went on, Frank Bates blacked out more and more squares on the map. Black was his color of conquest. The blacked-out squares belonged to him and as he sat in his office, pencil in hand, he dreamed cocky little dreams of empire.

ONE DAY his eyes roved northeast on the map and he pursed his lips thoughtfully. He had been thinking of a place away from town—a spot upon which to build a country estate which would reflect his fast growing importance in the community. An ideal location for this would be on the land of John Balleau, a Terran who had come in with the first movement. On this land a meandering creek widened into a pond of pleasant proportions. There were trees there—a grove of yellow thorngas. And trees were not too plentiful in this prairie.

However, this John Balleau had not borrowed any money from the Ngania Bank. He was a wary customer, this Terran. With the tools he brought, he had pushed his cultivation out gradually from the small house he'd built with his own wood. He refused to get over-extended, shunned obligation, and ignored rumors of the coming station. He preferred to wait until he saw the ships on the horizon.

The months and the seasons passed and the years became four. The freighters did not come, and Frank Bates continued blacking out sections of his map. Settlers continued to pack up their trucks and move onward off land no longer theirs.

Strangely enough, they did not blame Frank Bates. The man had a way of ingratiating himself. He had a knack of appearing to be an effect rather than a cause. He shunted the curses off on the Terran capitalists and even sped travelers on their way with a few cash credits to get them comfortably on the move.

He was still the genial greeter on the streets of Ngania, but fewer and fewer settlers were received in his private office.

And he was content with his land, his dreams and his plans. If he was growing a trifle harder, a little more rapacious, somewhat more openly arrogant, no one noticed it.

His wife, Myra, a plump, pleasant woman with no great ambitions, served as an excellent front. She was a sincere and gracious hostess, a figure in the social life of the town. Also, she was not a difficult woman for her husband to handle.

His daughter was a golden-haired beauty of whom he was very proud. With the passing of four more years, she had turned eighteen and, to her father's satisfaction, had remained emotionally unentangled. With her, Frank Bates had been more direct and open in his relations. She was important to him. She was not going to be wasted upon any cow-eyed local youth. She would eventually meet and marry New York class—Terran breeding—limitless money.

In his own way he gave her to understand this and he was satisfied with the docility with which she accepted



her destiny. He would have liked her to be a bit more of a snob. He regretted that she had the common touch so apparent in her mother, but he was aware of the fire lying close under her calm exterior and attributed that to his own blood running through her veins.

There were times when he thought he sensed a cunning in her; an essence of the inner fire that disquieted him. At times, he had a feeling that, behind her clear blue eyes, she was laughing at him. But this, he knew of course, was only his imagination.

Kay Bates was the greatest satisfaction of his life.

KAY BATES had a petite three-horned *goff* and she spent a great deal of time in the saddle. She had expensive Terran riding clothes—jodhpurs clinging to her slim legs to bulge out at the thigh; black boots and vivid shirtwaists and trim jackets. The clothes gave her complete freedom and she wore them as she wore her lush body—with unassuming grace.

Upon this day—as upon other days—she rode directly north from Ngania until she came to Bland Creek. Then, well out of sight of the town, she veered eastward, following the bends of the creek, skirting the thronga patches, until she was upon the land of John Balleau.

As she traveled, a definite transformation came over her. Her eyes brightened and the breathing movement of her bosom became deeper and more hurried. She leaned forward on the *goff* and was impatient with any inclination of the animal to dally by the way. Her cheeks were brightly flushed and, at times, her smooth brown hands almost trembled.

At one turn in the creek, sheltered by a thick growth of thronga, the *goff* snorted, ears turned sharply forward.

The animal tossed its alert head and Kay saw the rump and switching tail of another *goff* cropping red grass in the swale beyond. Then the sounds of splashing water and Kay was off the sorrel and creeping swiftly through the willows. She ran toward the creek and the feeling within her was warm and delicious. She pushed head and shoulders out of concealment into a grassed-over glade.

Here the creek—at one of its many bends—went to twice its normal width and swirled in a pocket of respectable depth. The splashing sounds had been coming from there.

Kay stepped into full view and looked down at the slim brown body that was rolling and twisting and disporting in the water. A turning motion, and the entire left side of this body was visible for a moment above the water line. Then a quick turn to its back to do a complete forward flip, slide into the depths and leave only the heels in sight. Now the head came up—thick brown curls flinging water like a seal—a brown face and blue eyes opening.

Kay's laugh was clear and happy. "Cory!"

Cory Balleau was nineteen now and he had received the physical heritage of his father. The slim perfection of body, from the shoulders down, was that of Robert Balleau. The shoulders themselves were broader and stronger, but despite hard work, they would never bulge with muscle. The classic line was almost intact.

The face, now flushed deep red, was also of the sensitive, classic mold.

"How long have you been there?" he gasped.

Her lie was tossed back gaily. "A long time. I was in the willows, peeking. I'm a shameless hussy."



"That's the truth! You turn around and get yourself away from here."

She made motions against the buttons of her blouse. "I'm coming in."

"You're not! I'll—I'll drown you. Get back in the throngas!"

"I'm tired of peeking. I want to swim."

She teased him with every fibre of her mind and body—with her eyes and her lips and the tilt of her breast and the slant of her hips and legs. Something inside her was wildly exultant at his embarrassment.

"Love me?"

"No! You dance-hall trollop!"

IT IS SAID that there is always one man before whom each woman is shame'ess. This may or may not be true, but Kay Bates, who was the despair of every swain in Ngania, whose lips, so far as they were concerned, were used only for laughing, listened to this hurled insult and grinned, gamin-like.

"Shall I dance for you?"

"You can get away from here for me!"

"Come on out."

"I won't come out."

She dropped cross-legged to the ground. "I can wait. You stay there and pretty soon the sun will go away. Then you'll get blue and your teeth will chatter. Hadn't you better come out now while it's warm?"

"All right. If that's how you want it." He started grimly toward the bank. But it was only a bluff and he was never to find out whether it would have scared her away. He had a feeling that it wouldn't and he stopped belly deep in the water.

"Please!"

Her gayety dropped from her and there was something in her eyes; something of a wordless question, as

though her eyes were saying: Can't you *understand* this?

She said, "Cory—! and there was a pleading in her voice. Then, "All right. Hurry and get dressed."

She turned and stepped over his clothing, snatched up his shirt and disappeared through the throngas.

Soon he followed, to find her stretched full length in the grass of the swale where the *goffs* were cropping through their bits. She had folded his shirt into a pillow that was almost covered by her golden hair.

"Give it here," Cory demanded.

She looked at his upper body, tanned to a deep flawless brown, up into his eyes. She was strangely quiet.

He dropped, cross-legged beside her. A twist and her head was in the pocket formed by his knees, her face turned upward to his.

His hand moved over and his fingers clenched and kneaded in the strands of her hair. "Why are you—?"

"Why am I what?"

"Well—like you are?"

A shadow of the gamin grin but a wistfulness underneath; "Don't you like me this way?"

"I—don't know."

"Can't you find out?"

"This is no good. Sneaking around like this."

"I'm not sneaking. I just ride out. I don't try to stop anyone from following me."

She knew that this was not true; that she was very careful to avoid pursuit. And she knew why. This was, of course, against her father's will, and he would terminate it swiftly if he knew. It is doubtful that she would have deceived him concerning any other phase of her life. Aside from this passionate attachment, she was an open book to him or anyone else



because it was not her nature to be otherwise. However, she was a girl who had found the one male who could stir the woman-fires within her. Beside Cory Balleau, all the youths she had ever met seemed shallow, ungainly lumps of clay. She was possessed of a passion that could be set off only by something this youth possessed.

**T**HE FEELING he engendered within her had a fierce quality about it that—so far as she was concerned—went deeper than any code of honesty. The rules whereby she had been taught to live had nothing to do with her love for Cory Balleau.

Thus her deceit in defending this love was complete and crafty. And, in keeping it under cover, she did not reveal any weakness or any craven tinge of spirit, but rather a sure knowledge that her father was stronger than she was. In any battle over this passion of hers, her father would win. This she knew.

"Isn't it pretty odd that no one ever has followed you?"

She reached up and caught his hands and drew them down to her breast. Her eyes were closed.

"Let's not talk."

"We've got to talk."

"Why?"

"Because—because we've got to come to an understanding. You've got to stay away from here."

"I'm not going to stay away."

She sighed with contentment and snuggled her head deeper into his lap. His words did not upset her. She knew her weaknesses and she knew her strength. She was well aware of the fact that she had not stirred this youth as he stirred her. But also, she knew that, eventually, she would.

And, in the meantime, he would not

drive her away. It was only in connection with this sure knowledge that she ever gave any thought to her body. It was holding him, whether he knew it or not, and she was fiercely thankful that she had a beautiful body, slim legs and smooth hips and a strong sex lure. In these moments she sometimes thought: Suppose I were ugly and lumpy and had nothing to attract him—nothing to hold him until I can make him feel the love I feel. I think I'd die.

If the time ever comes when I can't see him and feel him and look forward to someday having him completely—I know I'll die—

I know that—

**C**ORY BALLEAU'S feelings, relative to Kay Bates, were vague, blurred of outline and somewhat troublesome to the youth. He felt an attraction to the lips and the body that were wantonly held out to him, but there was a barrier within him that stood between; a barrier he could not surmount.

Nor did he entirely understand what this block was—a dozen generations of genteel breeding coupled with a nature that was a trifle cold—that did not inflame easily. The sex-pull of Kay Bates was apparent to Cory Balleau; it was an attraction but not an all-powerful magnet. There was need for more in a woman, so far as Cory was concerned. A deeper response had to be engendered within himself and that response was not there.

In truth, the boy was afraid of life. He seldom left the homestead across his uncle had acquired northeast of Ngania. He worked the land and swam in the creek and took the seasons as they came and was content if not happy.

He was sure that he wanted no more



than this. In the town itself, when he went there with his uncle, he was distinctly ill at ease. Back in his sensitive mind were old images—old and hazed over by time, but none-the-less potent in his subconscious mind. He felt that the world was a grim conscienceless hodgepodge of brutal beings without feeling for each other. Greed and cruelty lay within the hearts of everyone. Any indication to the contrary was mere insincerity that lay as a thin coating over their true natures. He had seen stark evidence of this cruelty, and, except in his now-dead mother, in his uncle, and in Kay Bates, he never seen any sign of the goodness of man.

As a matter of fact, he sensed a streak of cruelty in Kay herself, and he felt that, possibly, her efforts to get what she wanted—if crossed—would border on cruelty.

Riding slowly homeward, Cory Balleau wondered uneasily about Kay Bates. What held him back from the girl? He had the feeling that, through stubbornness or sheer stupidity, he was eschewing something of great delight. The rich manhood in his body, held in check behind the deeply bred obstructions, was sullen and complaining.

Then, as the house and outbuildings came in sight, Cory heeled his horse and forgot about Kay Bates. There was a big black *goff* in the yard and the boy was suddenly happy.

He hurtled across the back field, yelling at the top of his lungs:

"Nate! Nate Goodrow! You old son-of-a-son-of-a-son-of-a-son! Nate!"

A gangling form appeared from the back door of the house as Cory cleared the back fence, skidded from his *goff* and pelted across the footbridge at the narrow end of the pond.

Nate Goodrow had changed little in

eight years. And, to the youth, he had changed none at all because his periodic visits were frequent enough to make any aging imperceptible. He was still steel under purple leather, and the hand he wrapped around that of Cory Balleau had the grip of a vise.

"Ambling back down south," he drawled. "Stopped off of course. Wanted to see if you still fit your pants."

"You're staying a while, aren't you? Sure you are! You've got to tell me about your trip. How far did you get into the north forest country?"

JOHN BALLEAU followed the visitor from the house. "Take it easy, Cory. He just got here. And by the way, where have you been? We're waiting supper."

"I was swimming," Cory replied, his eyes still on Nate Goodrow.

His uncle smiled. He enjoyed seeing the sparkle in Cory's eyes and the vitality bubbling to the surface. The boy was too quiet. He existed too much within himself. He seemed to brood a lot and that worried John Balleau.

The lack of a mother had a great deal to do with it, of course. John Balleau had done his best, but no man could take the place of a boy's mother.

It had been a terrific shock to Cory, back there on the Marsport River when his mother had died. He'd never been away from his mother for a single day up to that time.

At the river, he had stiffened over night and jumped the years of childhood in a matter of hours. To John Balleau, his shyness and tendency to seek solitude appeared to stem from that time. He didn't care to visit Ngania alone or in company with the elder Balleau. Cory should know oth-



ers of his own age, his uncle believed. He should have contact with young women. It bothered John Balleau that Cory was not on speaking terms with a single young Terran woman in Ngania or the surrounding country.

"The weather hit us up in the forest country," Nate Goodrow was saying. "The train holed up south of the fringe and I meandered back. Came down through the Sweet Water. Guess I got a hankering for the south. Got me a piece of land near the Red Canal and I'm going to settle down."

John Balleau smiled as he pushed his chair back from the table and lit his pipe. "How long do you think you'll be able to sit tight? You weren't made for sitting. I figure you'll be coming north again soon and that maybe you'll take Cory on your next trip."

"Say, now that wouldn't be a bad idea. How about it, son?"

Cory smiled briefly. "Uncle Frank couldn't get along without me here. He'd bog down in a week."

"How do things look for you?"

"Good—good," Balleau said. "The air-freight's coming at last. This country will boom now. It looks as though we've been able to wait it out."

Goodrow sobered. "That's fine. Too bad a lot of those other first settlers couldn't hang on."

Later, stretched on the lawn John Balleau had built down to a pleasant curve in the pond, Nate Goodrow was taking his ease. He watched Cory skidding flat stones across the water;

"You've never had any itch to see the country at all, have you, son?"

Cory dropped to the soft sod beside his friend; "I guess not. I don't know. It's pretty nice here. I guess I don't care much how anybody else lives."

"From what I hear, you don't take

after your daddy. He cut himself quite a swath back on Terra."

"I guess he did all right."

CORY HAD only fleeting memories of his father. A kind, mercurial man who was never in one spot for any great length of time. He always thought of the past in terms of his mother, and the bittersweet memories invariably left him depressed.

"I doubt if I'll be coming north again, son. Getting kind of old and stiff in the bones. I want you to remember the name, Candalla. Nice little town. Nice country. Want you to remember that name and swing down to see me sometime. You'll want to move around before long. It isn't natural for a boy to cling to one spot all his life."

Cory rolled over and looked at the sky; "How many men have you killed, Nate?"

"Eh?"

"I said—how many men have you killed in your time?"

The scout was a trifle surprised at the abruptness of the query; "Counting Martians you mean?"

"I suppose so. Counting all of them." Cory reached over and drew the Gort knife from its sheath on Nate's thigh. The shining blade threw back the rays of the lowering sun and was thus tinged with a red hue. There was a worn line around Nate Goodrow's waist, spilling down to a large shiny spot on his right thigh. The pellet belt and the black pyro-gun, were in on the living room table.

"Don't rightly know now, son. It's pretty hard to stay peacable and tramp over the country like I do in these times."

Cory ran the tip of his finger along the edge of the knife.

"I keep it right sharp," Nate said.



"Use it to shave with quite a little."

Cory held out the knife. "Hit something—the way you used to when I was a kid."

Nate took the knife by its blade-tip, held it between the first sections of his right thumb and first finger. His wrist flopped limply as he looked around seeking a target.

"That fly," Cory said.

The fly was on a post some twenty feet away. Nate raised his arm and there was a movement of blurred leather. The knife became a glimmering arc in the air.

"Missed," Nate said.

The knife quivered and was still, its blade buried an inch in the post. The fly was not in sight. Nate got to his feet and stretched his long arms. "Who owns all the land that was homesteaded by the pilgrims in the first train—the ones that couldn't hold out?"

"The bank I guess—most of it. A man named Bates owns the bank so I guess he owns most of the land."

"It'll pay off right handsome now the ships are coming through."

FRANK BATES' dream of Martian empire was growing apace. As his holdings increased so did his sense of sureness and his confidence in himself. Also, his attitude toward right and wrong took on a new and darker hue in his sense of justice became covered over with the tarnish of avarice.

After all, it was purely a matter of the survival of the fittest. Any feeling of brotherhood he had ever had for pilgrims struggling and blundering toward independence, had turned to pity and then, as his land holdings expanded—had become impersonal contempt. The land should not be sliced up into little garden patches, he opined. He subscribed to the economic principle

of monopoly as a convenient way of justifying himself as the core of that monopoly.

Seated at his desk, with his map before him, he smiled in satisfaction at the tremendous black area southwest of Ngania. He had plans for that land, and upon this day, one of those plans had been consummated. There was a *goff* waiting outside the bank. The man quitted his office, mounted the animal, and rode southwest.

The cattle had been there since dawn; scrawny bone-bags, the scum of a dozen Terran herds assembled. Three hundred wrecks. A man, idling by the herd, turned his *goff* and came to meet Bates as the latter approached.

The man was a great shaggy hulk of bone and muscle. He dwarfed the *goff* he rode and had a belligerent tilt to his head and shoulders. Red dust was thick on his luxuriant whiskers.

"Hello, Frake," Bates said.

"All safe," the man returned. "Only ten died on the freighter."

"Your man was in town early this morning. I got out as soon as I could."

Frake had no comment. He swung his great head left and right—eyes squinting. "I'm quite a cattle man."

"How did the trip go?"

"We came slow—cost less on the slow freighters—and it wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be. It was the start that stuck in my craw."

"How so?"

Frake scowled. "Did you ever walk up to a Terran cattle man and say: 'Got any half-dead vulture bait for sale, mister? I'm looking for any old bags of bones that can stand without being propped up. I'm going to ship them to Mars!' Did you ever walk up to a cattle man and say that?"

Bates smiled faintly. "No I never did."



"They're laughing all over West America. They'll spend the next ten years wondering what I wanted of this worm-eaten mess."

"Let them wonder," Bates said. "They were cheap and they'll serve the purpose much better than valuable stock."

"I hold title—is that it?" Frake asked.

"Of course. That's the most important angle. I'm renting your grazing land."

"We didn't go into the details about men," Frake said.

"You'll need them, of course."

"By the way, mister," Frake said. "What's the law around here?"

"In a word—I am. We have a town marshal, man named Dalton. You'll deal with him through me if the need for dealing should ever arise."

"I want to keep two of the boys with me. The other three are heading back to Terra. With Mel Dorken and Tip Snead I think I can get along for a while."

Bates extended a canvas bag. "A thousand credits a month for you and three hundred for your men. When the job's finished we'll discuss a bonus."

Frake took the bag and Bates said, "That's gold. Any money transactions will always be in cash. Nothing on paper. No receipts."

"When do we start operating?" Frake asked.

**B**ATES SWUNG suddenly from his saddle, bent backwards and stood rubbing the small of his back. "I'll let you know. I'll tell you the time and the place and exactly what to do." He glanced sharply at Frake. "It's understood without question that I'm boss. You do as I say, when I say."

Bates would have been surprised to

know how little men of Frake's ilk cared about bosses. Frake grinned and raised his hand and tipped it in what might have been a mock salute.

"Right—boss."

"This wouldn't have been necessary if they'd held the freighter station off another year. I'd have gotten what I wanted through ordinary legal procedure then. But it's coming and so my hand is being forced. You'll get orders very soon."

Frake said nothing, and Bates went on:

"These men Dorken and Snead—are they trustworthy?"

Frake grinned now. "That's a hell of a word to use in the kind of business you're going into."

Bates flushed. "All right. I'll leave the men to you. But let me know before you take on any more."

Frake tossed the money bag into the air. He caught it in a palm into which it disappeared completely. "Where do we bunk?"

"You'd better make your headquarters at the old Croft place, about six miles due east of here. It's been abandoned for some time but the building is in fair condition."

He remounted and looked out toward the herd. His lips twisted in amusement. "I hope they'll live long enough to serve our purpose," he said.

Frake grinned back.

Bates glanced back at Frake, raised his hand and put heels to his mount.

As he moved off across the prairie, the grin slid from Frake's face. He sat staring thoughtfully after the retreating figure. He was even now wondering how this affair would terminate. There was always an ending. These things could never be plotted through in advance. They always took unexpected turns. Frake's talent lay in his ability to take good care of himself under any and all circumstances.



"That's the way it sits," he was telling two men over the fire that evening. "I only know part of what Bates has got up his sleeve. Maybe it's good and maybe it isn't but if things start flying to pieces, there's no reason why we shouldn't stick around with a basket."

Tip Snead shrugged. "Why not?" There was a great deal of a snake about this man. He had the look of a snake in the flatness of his face; the expression of a snake in the cold opaqueness of his eyes; and the treachery of a snake in the way he could slide a knife from his sleeve and hurl it into a back. "Why not? What have we got to lose?"

The third man was of Frake's cut—a mountain with a beard. He was nothing much more than a skinful of cruelty walking around on two legs. There were no acts of viciousness, sadism, or lust in the whole gamut, that Mel Dorken had not committed. There was a trick with cats. You tied the tails of two Toms together and threw them over a clothesline. A no more primitive nor vicious combat could be arranged; one to sicken the stomachs of even hardened men. Mel Dorken liked to find two trusting cats. There were things that could be done, with fire, to dogs. Dorken knew of these things.

With women—

Mel Dorken lived only to satisfy his senses. The physical appetites were paramount. Nothing beyond them mattered.

"Count me in," he said, lazily. "You ride herd tonight, Tip. I'm tired."

"Let them drift," Frake said. "We'll all sleep."

"Couldn't let the land stand idle," Frank Bates told an inquirer in Ngania, "so I rented it out as grazing land. Just temporary of course."

"I was wondering," the inquirer replied. "Seemed odd to bring in cattle at this stage of the game—with the road coming through the farmer's fight is won."

"It's going to be a great country," Bates said. "If any of the boys want to sell out, tell them to see me. I'll back this country with my last credit."

"I guess most of them will hang on now. In fact there'll probably be some buyers nosing around—"

"Yes sir! I believe in this country." Frank Bates gave the man a hearty handshake and went into his bank.

**I**N LATE afternoon of the following Saturday, John Balleau pulled up in front of the largest general store in Ngania—Galpin's Complete Supply. He jumped from the light truck and glanced back to where Cory still remained on the seat.

"I've got some business at the bank and I'll have to hurry to catch Frank Bates."

"How long will you be?"

"Not more than an hour. Meet me in the Golden King and we'll have a drink before we go home."

Cory didn't care much for liquor, but it made little difference where he killed the time. He nodded and got down from the wagon.

John Balleau hurried down the street toward the most imposing building in Ngania. He went inside; a shirt-sleeved clerk looked out from behind a grill.

"Is Mr. Bates in?" Balleau asked.

The clerk turned away without answering and went through a door to the left. He hesitated in the doorway.

"Tell him John Balleau is calling."

The words carried and Frank Bates appeared immediately at the door. His smile was cordial. "Come in. Come



in. A pleasure to see you, Sir."

He stepped back and John Balleau went into the small office. The clerk went back to his glass.

Bates indicated a chair beside his desk, sat down, and leaned back expansively in his plastic-back swivel.

"I dropped in to talk about the railroad," Balleau said. "I thought you might have some late information."

Frank Bates laughed. "I haven't got any more than anyone else, but the line's coming through. It will be a two-station mile spur northwest from the Second Canal System. The first freighter will pull into Ngania in less than three Marsmonths."

Balleau nodded. "It will be a great thing for the section. Looks as though a man could borrow crop credits now with a fair degree of safety."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Bates returned, heartily. "You showed rare judgment in holding off. Too bad others didn't follow your example."

"Some of them probably acted upon bad advice."

Bates shrugged. "No doubt. We run a bank, though, and you can't refuse people loans if they have the security."

"What would you say my place would stand in the way of a loan?"

"There won't be any trouble on that score. You've got the best set of buildings for miles around. You've got a well located place and good land. How much do you have in mind?"

"I thought I'd buy a cultivator-unit and a seeder. We'll really need them now. And throw up a couple of granaries, so we'll be ready. About two thousand?"

"With pleasure!" Bates came erect and started for the door. "I'll get the papers ready for you. Won't be a minute. We may as well finish it up now."

He opened the outer door and turned back. "Shall we make it twelve

Marsmonths? Does that suit you?"

John Balleau hesitated. "I'd like to play entirely safe— How about eighteen?"

"Of course. We're here to serve. Eighteen it is."

**H**E WENT into the bank proper and John Balleau leaned back in his chair. He wasn't as confident as he would have liked to be but it seemed that he had no choice. The money was needed in order to raise a crop. The time had come to extend himself. Nonetheless, he shrank from the prospect.

Bates returned with a sheaf of papers. He laid them on the desk and stood over John Balleau.

"Here it is," he said. "A regular eighteen-month form—there in the print." He reached over and picked up a pen from the desk. "Six percent straight. You sign in three places."

He checked off the signature lines and then straightened up, still holding the pen. "By the way—do you want any cash now—today?"

"A couple of hundred would be convenient."

"Fine—fine. I wonder if you'd just step out to the grill and sign for it? Fred will give it to you right away. It's closing time and he likes to get out."

John Balleau went into the banking room and returned, a few minutes later, with a handful of green credits. He folded it carefully and put it into his pocket.

"Your John Henry three times and we're all set," Bates smiled.

Balleau sat down and affixed the necessary signatures. He leaned back with a sigh as Bates called: "Henry, come here and witness this, will you? It won't take a second."

The clerk, a pale little oldster, came



into the office. He signed mutely in the proper spaces, and scuttled out.

Bates picked up one of the sheets and folded it three times. "Your copy," he said, "and it's been a pleasure."

John Balleau got up from his chair, folded the sheet again and put it in with the money. "You're very accommodating. I appreciate it."

"Any time," Frank Bates said, and he slapped John Balleau's shoulder cordially as he let him out the front door.

Cory Balleau wandered aimlessly up the street after he had finished his business at Carter's. He stood for some time in front of Sam Helger's—Gunsmith, surveying the stock in the small window. There were three pyro-guns—hand weapons—heavy and competent; a para-rifle which he knew nothing about, and an atom cutter—a slim-looking weapon with a long barrel.

At home there were two pyro-guns and a para-rifle. The rifle had never been out of his uncle's room so far as the youth knew. Cory had little interest in guns. A sprinkling of men went armed in the town, but few of the farmers ever wore guns.

Cory wandered on and walked in under the swinging wooden sign of the Golden King. It was dim and cool in there and a pleasant smell hit his nostrils. He stepped up to the bar and ordered tanza. It came in an immense cup and as he lifted it to his lips, the barkeep wiped the bar in front of him.

A card game was going on at a round table rearward of the long room. There were five men—three Terrans and two Martians—participating. Cory picked up his cup and wandered back. Only one of the players bore any resemblance to a gambler. He was a pale-faced man with a pair of expression-

less eyes and a cold cigarette hanging loosely from his lips. He looked up and said: "Sit in, son? Open game—anybody can win."

Cory shook his head and the gambler accepted the deck from his right, shuffled with a few lightning movements, and pushed the deck back for a cut.

The door up front swung open and the dealer looked up, continuing to deal. Three men strode into the drinking room. Immediately the dealer looked less bored.

The three men stopped at the bar and were given a bottle from which each had several drinks. Then, wiping the backs of hairy hands across their mouths, they moved back toward the poker table.

The dealer smiled. "Glad to see you back, Mr. Frake."

The man addressed as Frake sat down at the table. His chair creaked under him. "Meet a couple of friends o' mine. Boys with credits and an itch in their fingers. Tip Snead, and Mel Dorken. I want you to treat 'em right when they come in here."

The dealer's smile was like a sheet of thin tissue paper over his face. "We always aim to do that, Mr. Frake. It's five-card stud."

Corry Balleau was in the grip of a cold chill. He turned from the table and walked back to the bar with slow, careful steps. He set his cup down, half-full and stared into the wavy mirror behind the bar. He saw a pale face staring back at him. Then the door opened and John Balleau was standing beside him.

The older man glanced at Cory and turned to face the mirror. But he turned back suddenly; "What's the matter, Cory? Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

"Never saw you that pale before."



What are you drinking?"

"Just tanza."

CORY GRIPPED his schooner, trying to analyze and quell the cold shock within his body.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

John Balleau had a shot glass full of whisky raised to his lips. He tossed off the liquor and set the glass down. "Of course."

Out in the street, walking toward the wagon, Cory felt better. "Those three men—they came in just before you did. There at the poker table. Did you see them?"

"I saw them go in. I understand they rented some grazing land from Frank Bates. Why?"

"I was just wondering."

"Did they set you off some way?"

"No."

The two climbed into the truck and started home. John Balleau made no further inquiries. They rode in silence.

But there was a question in the mind of Cory Balleau: Why did I feel like that? And how did I know him—that man they called Mel Dorken? Just one look at his face and it was as if I'd seen him only yesterday. Nothing but eyes and nose and a beard—yet I knew him and I'd know him fifty years from now.

The way he held his thumbs out stiff on the table.

He held them the same way after that fight back there on the Marsport River.

When he sat on that man and gouged his eyes out.

It was difficult to stir desire in Mel Dorken. The black cesspool of his mind had been satiated to the point that women had become more of a habit to him than an urge. He had practiced all the forms of debasement that the mind of man could imagine

and there were none to ignite the smouldering ashes within him.

All the things that the mind of man could invent—Mel Dorken had done, and now a woman had to generate a terrific natural voltage in order to stir him.

But, riding one afternoon, north of Ngania, Mel Dorken felt the old, dimly remembered eruptions surging through his veins.

The girl was young—not more than twenty—and slimly arrogant in her carriage and in the freshness of her youth. Yellow hair cascaded down her shoulders.

Dorken had been riding at an angle with her course of travel, gradually narrowing the gap between them. As he came closer the surging within him increased until he felt his heart pounding inside him with a thunder that beat in his ears.

The girl was riding a spirited *goff* and she rode with uncertainty but she did not change her course. At the point of the angle formed by their trails, Mel Dorken came to a dead halt and stared in utter silence. The girl kept moving. She passed a point some ten yards ahead of Dorken and her eyes were on him, wide and unblinking, until she was well beyond the intersection. Then she straightened around and cut the *goff* with her quirt. The animal leaped forward as though fired from a gun, and girl and mount disappeared over a swell to the north.

Dorken did not move for five minutes. He stared after the girl and the light in his eyes was as unholy as a fiend saying Black Mass in the depths of some pit.

Kay Bates lay on the soft grass, her head on Cory Balleau's shoulder. She was unusually quiet, her blue eyes troubled.



Cory Balleau said: "Something bothering you?"

"I'm not sure—whether it ought to bother me or not."

"Tell me."

"As I was coming north, I crossed trails with a man—a stranger. I'd never seen him before."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing."

"Did he say something?"

"No—but—"

He tilted her face into line with his own. "But what? I never saw you short of words before."

"It was the way he looked at me. He was an immense, bushy brute and he looked at me as though he was—well—*undressing* me. I sort of burned clear down to my heels. It scared me."

He surveyed her face with mock criticism and then grinned. "Like this?" and he opened his eyes wide and ran the tip of his tongue along his lips.

"No, silly—it was—"

"There's no law against men looking at girls. I'd think you'd be used to it by now."

She shuddered slightly. "I'd never get used to that kind of a look—" she turned in a quarter-roll and put her face close to his—"unless it was from you. Why don't you look at me that way?"

He lay back and looked up into the sky and laughed.

MEL DORKEN made his meandering way back to his headquarters. He took down the corral bars, lifted the saddle from his mount, and slipped its bridle. The *goff* kicked its heels and danced away, running in a tight circle before it went down into the dust and rubbed its hide against the ground.

Dorken threw his saddle over the

corral rack and walked slowly toward the house. Inside Tip Snead was cooking supper. Frake was lounging at the kitchen table cleaning a rifle.

"You been sightseeing?" Snead asked.

"I saw me a sight. What a sight!"

Dorken threw his hat into a corner. He turned a chair around and sat down, leaning his arms against its back.

Frake looked at Snead; "I'd say he was talking about a woman."

"I'd say you was right," Snead answered. He flipped the bacon into the air and there was a cloud of acrid smoke from the burning grease.

"There's a yellow-top girl riding around the country," Dorken said. "About twenty, maybe, and she burns a man to a crisp just lookin' at her. Any idea who she belongs to?"

"Why?" Snead asked. "You want to go out and kill him?"

Frake scowled and said: "There'll be no killing there. I saw her in town the other day. She belongs to the man we work for—she's Bates' daughter."

Snead grinned. "Now isn't that just luck? To get the gal you want, you have to kill the bird that's got the golden eggs you want. Why is it always that way? The good things always tied together in a knot you can't unravel?"

Dorken said nothing. He had a quiet, almost vacant look on his face.

Frake eyed him sharply; "Whatever you're thinking is no good—understand that! We're not messing up this deal over a yellow-haired skirt. Keep your needs in check until they don't get in the way of important things. Women come every day, but a Bates drops around once in a life-time."

"Maybe you're right," Dorken said.



He thought: I've got to have that girl. Come deals or hell or earthquake I've got to feel that yellow hair in my hands. When you want a certain woman the only thing that will stop the itching inside is to get that woman. Not anything in skirts, but *that* woman. That one.

"Pull up," Snead said. He dumped the contents of the frying pan onto a platter and set the platter on the table. The meal was ready.

FOR FIVE minutes there was an uninterrupted champing of hairy jaws as the men bolted the food. The platters cleaned, Dorken sat back and lit a cigarette.

"What's Bates waiting for?" Dorken asked. "I thought he had a lot of big plans. What the hell are they anyway?"

"He has got plans," Frake said. "We're going to fill in some squares in his checkerboard for him."

"Talk sense," Snead said.

"There's some land around here he wants, to make his holdings solid. A few of the nesters have held on too long and with the freight head coming, Bates has got to make a move."

"Like what?"

"Like our cattle drifting. Tonight, after dark we start. There's some four-inch corn shoots on a land over east. The herd drifts in and grazes that corn. By morning there won't be much left."

"It's a long way between tromping corn and taking over land."

"Not if you've got a plaster on the land that the corn's supposed to pay off."

Dorken was silent, staring at his cigarette.

"Bates takes the land when the mortgage comes due," Frake went on. "They're not his cattle that wrecked

the crop. He's in the clear."

"So the squatter comes after us," Snead said.

Frake grinned. "So he does. And what have we got? A damn bone yard he'd have to sue to get and wouldn't be worth anything after he got it." Frake grinned. "You afraid of being sued, Tip?"

The little knife artist was far from satisfied.

"Sounds like penny-ante stuff to me. How much territory can three hundred head cover?"

"It isn't so much what they cover as where it's located. This little raid tonight will get Bates two hundred acres. The corn's all this nester's got and he won't be able to plant another stand this year. He ain't got the seed or the time. We pull three or four like that before we're smoked out and Bates has got a nice lump of land."

"Maybe," Tip said.

"And later, there may be some fires. You never can tell."

Dorken leaned forward. "All right. So Bates gets his land. What have we got?"

Frake grinned. "We've got Bates."

"That's right," Snead said.

But Dorken scarcely heard, so quickly had his mind wandered. He was thinking of a head of shining yellow hair.

He had to have that woman.

EVERYTHING was gone. The land he'd cultivated and worked and seeded so carefully—the soft warm land—was torn and defiled by deep pock-marks. Cattle had been here and now all the precious stems had vanished into the bellies of the cattle. Effort—security—nothing left.

The sight was like a physical blow to the pit of the man's stomach. He stood motionless. His arms hung limp,



his gnarled hands clenched into fists. His throat worked but no sounds came forth.

He turned and moved away from the field, back toward his barn and corral. A slow stiff walk at first, then increasing to a fast walk; faster until he was running and his breathing was in audible sobs.

At the corral he got a bridle and put it over the head of a sorry-looking *goff*. He led the animal out through the gate and then the man's wife came toward him across the back yard.

"What's the matter, Sam? Where are you going? Why've you been running? What's the matter?"

The man paid no heed. He forked the bare back of the *goff* and dug his heels into its flanks.

The man's breath continued in rasping sobs as he belabored the animal—beat his heels against its sides as it struggled to please him. The sweat on its flanks turned to lather. Foam flecked its mouth.

"All gone," the man kept muttering. "Wiped out! All gone!"

When the *goff* finally made Ngania, the lather was thick and the animal was staggering. The man slid to the ground; left the *goff* in the middle of the street in front of the office of Henry Dalton, marshal of Ngania. The office was housed in a small building that had been a gift to the town from Frank Bates. The front door was open.

Henry Dalton did not take his spurred boot off his desk as the man entered the office. Dalton, a wispy oldster with a white goatee serving as an extension of a weak chin, looked up and said, "Sam Bendorf! What's the trouble? You act like a man with his britches full of ants."

"My corn's all gone! It's been chewed off and tramped into the

ground by cattle! I'm wiped out!"

"Are you sure you're all right, Sam? There aren't any cattle in these parts. You're going crazy, man!"

"I seen the tracks with my own eyes. Cattle it was. A big herd."

HENRY DALTON'S face took on a calculating look. He tugged at his goatee. "Say now—guess maybe there *are* some beeves in the neighborhood. I heard a rumor that Frank Bates let out some of his land for grazing—rented to a Terra man."

"It was their cattle then that done it and I want justice. I want that feller locked up and made to pay!"

Dalton got slowly to his feet. "Now, Sam. You'd better simmer down a little. That isn't the way the law works and you know it. I can't go running around arresting people just on your say-so. First how do we know it was his cattle? Did you see them in your field? You got any eye-witnesses to testify that his stock ate your corn?"

Bendorf's rage flamed anew.

"Don't be a fool, Henry. What you trying to hedge for? Whose beef could it have been if there ain't any others in the country?"

"Another thing—this man—Frake I think his name is—hasn't got a head of stock anywhere near your land. He's located way over the other side. You mean to tell me he drove his cattle six or seven miles just to graze them on your corn?"

"I don't know what he did, but the corn is plumb ruined!"

Dalton laid a placating hand on Bendorf's shoulder. "Tell you what—you just ride on home and cool down a little and I'll mosy out and have a talk with this Frake. You don't want to have anybody arrested until you think it over a little."



Bendorf shook off the hand. He backed away, raising his fist. "So this is the kind of law we got in Ngania! A yellow-back marshal without guts enough to make an arrest!"

"Now Sam—"

"Well you don't have to bother. I'll do my own calling. You just sit here in your office and collect your pay."

Bendorf stormed out of the office. He was back on his horse and off down the street before Dalton appeared on the small porch of the building.

"Don't you go off half cocked, Sam," Dalton yelled. "You haven't got the right to maybe kill someone over what was probably an accident!"

Bendorf could hardly have heard the warning, but several gaping onlookers did. They gathered around, watching the departure of Bendorf, and Dalton said:

"That man's gone plumb crazy. Acts like he's out for blood."

Halfway to where he was going, Bendorf was forced to slow down to a walk. His *goff* had begun to stagger and was showing signs of collapse. As he approached the place, two other riders were pounding along in his wake. When they had him in sight, they slowed down to move at a more leisurely pace.

Bendorf jumped from his *goff* and ran the last hundred yards. Just as he got there, the door opened and two men came out: Frake and Tip Snead.

"Which one of you is the boss? Which owns that herd of cattle?"

"What's the trouble, friend?" Frake rumbled. "I own some cattle. What about them?"

"They ruint my corn—that's what about 'em! Your damn herd tromped my whole crop into the ground, and it's going to cost you plenty!"

**F**RAKE RAISED his eyes and squinted across the prairie at the two approaching men. There was a calculating look on his face. He glanced at Snead—a glance full of silent meaning—and then walked slowly toward Bendorf.

"You're too excited, neighbor. If I was you I'd simmer down a little so we can talk this over."

Snead grinned in open contempt. "Yeah—I'd do that if I was you, neighbor. It isn't healthy to come around accusing people of ruining crops."

Snead moved off to the left, casually. His sneer had not been missed by Bendorf. It inflamed the man anew.

"It was deliberate! That's what it was!" Bendorf yelled. "What do you want to break me and starve my wife and kids for?"

He still spoke to Frake. Snead had circled and was standing behind him. Frake moved close to Bendorf. Frake was scowling now and the two approaching horsemen were close enough to identify.

Frake pushed close to Bendorf. "You son-of-a—!"

Frake's arms were high up and his gun side turned toward Bendorf. A pyro-gun hung there invitingly.

In a frenzy, the maddened Bendorf snatched at the gun. Instantly, behind him, Snead shook his arm downward in a stiff motion. A knife slid along the inner side of his forearm and into the palm of his open hand. His arm came up—flashed downward again—and a silver streak flew toward Bendorf's back.

Bendorf stiffened. The gun he'd snatched from Frake's holster was clutched for a moment in his hand. Then the gun dropped to the ground and Bendorf wilted down on top of it. Out on the prairie the two men



whipped into a gallop, covered three swift furlongs and were in the yard.

Frake had not moved. He said: "Hello, Bates. We had a little trouble here. This pilgrim came prancing in on us yelling for blood. He tried to grab my gun and Snead nailed him. Saved my life, Snead did."

Bates stared down at the dead man; "I wonder what got into him?" he said. "By the way—meet Henry Dalton, marshal of Ngania."

The men exchanged nods and Bates went on: "Henry came and told me Bendorf had been to see him and that he was on the rampage. Something about his corn crop being ruined. We thought he was heading this way so we followed along. Looks as though we're too late."

"If Snead hadn't been on the alert, you'd have found me dead instead of Bendorf," Frake growled.

Bates had dismounted, but Dalton stayed on his *goff*, saying nothing. Expressionless, he watched Snead bend over and pull the knife from Bendorf's back. The knife had gone in almost to the hilt. Snead had to exert considerable pressure to get it loose.

"It's too bad," Bates said. "A damn shame that a man flies off the handle like that. He has a wife and two kids." Bates sighed. "Guess it's up to me to see that they get back home."

He turned to Dalton. "Henry, you'd better ride back to town and round up a jury to hear the evidence. Bring them back here and we'll hold an inquest. In the meantime don't touch the body."

"We'll keep it legal, huh?" Frake asked.

There was a hint of mockery in his voice; a touch of contempt so faint that it evidently escaped all but Bates.

Bates turned away and looked up at Dalton. "Get going," he ordered.

"I'll wait here. Hurry it up, now."

Like an obedient child, Dalton kned his horse around and started back toward Ngania. Bates watched until Dalton was well on his way. Then he turned to Snead: "Get a blanket and throw it over him," he said harshly. "I'm going to water my *goff*."

Snead went into the house. When he returned, Bates was already leading his animal across the corral toward the trough near the well at the far end.

Snead covered the corpse and straightened up. There was amusement in his voice as he said: "Looks like the big boss gets a little disturbed at the sight of blood."

**F**RANK BATES had only wanted to be alone for a few minutes in order to assemble his scattered thoughts.

This initial foray in his land grabbing scheme had not gone according to his plan. He had not anticipated a killing and he wanted to ascertain the effect of that killing upon his own mind.

He was rather surprised to find himself taking it so calmly. Bendorf was dead and his land would revert to the bank. Of these two facts, Bates found himself far more satisfied by the latter than he was disturbed by the former. Already his brain was planning ahead. He would send Mrs. Bendorf and her children back to Terra—shoulder all the expense himself—so that no one could point a finger at him. The bank would take over the land, quietly, and that would be that.

A life for two hundred acres.

Bates contemplated this development with inward calm. But in the mind of every man there is an independent intelligence that will not be



blinded nor biased. That intelligence spoke to Frank Bates now. It said: "You've stepped over the line. Up to this point you were merely a sharp dealer. You were merely clever and you used your legal advantages to further your ambitions. But you're over the line now. You've thrown other men's lives into the pot. You've stepped across the divide, Bates. How does it feel?"

It didn't feel bad at all. In fact a new surge of power came to Frank Bates as the moral restraints slipped away. After all, why should he be held back by those with less astuteness, less ambition than he?

His conscience was now stilled forever except for one final, tiny twinge. That came three weeks later when he said good-bye to Mrs. Bendorf. The widow was seated in Bates' own carriage in front of Bates' own bank, and her two children were with her. Bates had arranged that she be driven cross-country to the nearest freighter head. As she looked at him, there were tears in her eyes and her hand clutched his warmly.

"Thank you for all you've done," she said, and her voice was choked. "Thank you very much."

Bates' last twinge of conscience came and went.

He returned to his office and found satisfaction in a sudden feeling of contempt. These squatters! Men so stupid and spineless had no right to own land. The sooner they were cleaned out, the better. This vast planet was the heritage of the strong!

**T**IP SNEAD was comfortably and happily drunk. His winnings at the poker table of the Golden King amounted to some fifty credits and that made it a nice evening all around.

Toward midnight he pocketed his

money, had one more drink, and left the saloon. He got his *goff* from the stable, waved a cheery good-bye, and set out for home.

His pinto had learned the way by this time and there was little need of direction. Snead let his reins hang loose and slumped forward in the saddle. His body moved to the rhythm of the animal's jog and he drifted into a doze.

The voice awakened him. It was a sharp voice he had never before heard: "Snead—rein up!"

He pulled the pinto to a halt and looked about into the darkness, the sleep still in his eyes. On each side a *goff* crowded close and before he was quite awake, his reins were snatched away and his holster was emptied.

"Whu—what is this? A holdup?"

The only answer was a short laugh coming out of the darkness, and cold fear flushed through Tip Snead. He said: "I won a little in the game. You can have it. It's in my right-hand pocket."

"He wears a knife in his sleeve. Get it!" A different voice clipped out these words and Snead was jostled again. Two hands grasped his right arm and tore open the button holding his sleeve. The knife snapped from its spring holder.

"Got it."

"All right. Tie his hands."

"Do you have to tie a man up to rob him?" Snead whined.

"Your money stays in your pocket. Don't worry about it. We aren't thieves."

Snead turned cold. Sickness welled into his stomach.

There were five of them. Five shapes in the dimness that rode close around Snead as his *goff* was hauled off the road and led across the prairie at a tangent. There was no uncertainty here. These men evidently knew



why they had come and where they were going.

"What's this about?" Snead yelled. "Where we headed?"

There was no answer.

"For God's sake! Talk, somebody! Say something!"

He could have been pleading with deaf-mutes.

"Answer me, God-damn it! What is this?"

No reply, and Snead went swiftly to pieces.

"Look! It wasn't my fault. I only did what any other man would do. He tried to snatch Frake's gun and I had to get him or he'd have gotten Frake. A man has to be loyal to his friends! You'd have done the same thing. Any of you."

The clop-clop-clop of the hoof-beats increased in tempo as the cavalcade went into a trot. The silent men traveled north and slightly west with their prisoner. Eventually Cotter's Creek blocked their path. They sheered eastward, following its course until they came to a grove.

"It was all legal," Snead screamed. "I tell you it was legal. There was an inquest and a jury and they said I done right."

For the first time, one of the men answered him, "We know all about that. We know who was on the jury and who told them to bring the verdict they brought. Hangers-on in the Ngania drinking halls. We knew Sam too, and he wasn't the kind of a man to kill unless he was driven to it."

"But you can't—aw please, men! Give a feller a chance! I'll get out of the country! I'll ride and keep right on going. You can't hang a man in cold blood!"

**T**HE ROPE came from somewhere to settle around his neck from

behind. He screamed a thin scream and tried to throw himself out of the saddle but there were horses on each side, hemming him in.

Perspiration made his sick white face shine in the faint starlight.

"Give a poor devil a chance!"

The rope was over a limb above his head.

"It was Frake. He's the boss—Frake is, I tell you. He made me do it. Frake'd killed me if I hadn't. What could I do?"

There was slack in the rope—enough for a two-foot drop. The riders on either side of him faded back. A moment of silence and the sharp sound of a hand slapping the rump of Snead's *goff*.

"Ghaaaaaa. Agggghhhhh."

Snead sought to hold the stirrups but they slipped from his in-steps. The *goff* danced ahead some twenty feet where it stopped and turned. It snorted and there were no other sounds in the grove.

After a time Snead stopped kicking. Then the five men rode away—in different directions over the prairie.

Snead's body dangled from the willow limb, turning slowly in the darkness.

Mel Dorken came awake with a start. He opened his eyes and wondered what had broken his slumber. Through the wall he could hear the even heavy breathing of Frake in the next room.

Dorken lay still for a moment. Then it came again—the impatient snorting of a *goff*. The man swung his feet to the floor and reached for his pants. He drew on his boots, pulled his gun from its holster, and went out through the back door into the yard.

The snort was repeated, along with the sound of a hoof scraping the



ground, and Dorken saw a large shadow by the corral gate. He approached in long strides.

A *goff*. Snead's, with no rider and its reins wound around the saddle horn.

Dorken scowled. What the devil had happened to Tip? Dead drunk and off his *goff* somewhere back down the road? That was probably it. Frake ought to lay the law down to the little saddle tramp. He had a weakness for liquor and he was dangerous. He'd kill somebody one of these days under the wrong circumstances and there'd be hell in camp.

Dorken unsaddled the beast and turned it into the corral. The *goff* galloped off toward the feed rack, and Dorken trailed back toward the house. No use waking up Frake, he thought. Tip would come straggling along, maybe before dawn if he slept off his jag.

The big outlaw looked up at the stars and forgot about Snead. He was thinking of a girl—a slim girl with blue eyes and yellow hair.

On the afternoon of the following day, Mel Dorken lounged by the hitching rack in front of the Golden King. He was watching a sorrel *goff* at another hitching rack down the street. Pretty soon a girl with golden hair would come out of the bank and fork that animal. Then—Dorken hoped—the girl would ride north as she had usually done before.

Her route had been—for the most part—along the eastern boundary of a section that had been homesteaded by an early hopeful and now in the possession of the Ngania Bank.

Then, at the creek, she would veer due east. Dorken had never been able to trace the girl to her destination, but that was not necessary for the purpose he had in mind. About three miles

down the creek, she passed close to an abandoned shack in an otherwise deserted stretch of hilly country.

This was as far as Dorken's thinking carried him.

The man waited almost an hour and was about to give up, when Kay Bates appeared. She mounted and Dorken turned his back and was studying the doors of the Golden King when she rode by.

Several minutes later he grunted in satisfaction, climbed on his own *goff*, and left town, following a line northward and slightly to the east. Clear of Ngania, he put spurs to his *goff* and pounded over the land, straight toward a thronga grove he had in mind. This grove, not two hundred yards from the abandoned shack, would keep him covered until the girl got close enough.

There was no finesse involved in Dorken's plan. His approach would be as elemental as his desires and his purpose. Catching the girl unaware, he could ride down the sorrel before she would be able to react. Surprise was in his favor.

He reached the grove and edged his *goff* into a thick patch of thronga that formed a wall cutting off the heavier section of the grove. He dismounted and took up a post at the outer edge of the thicket.

THE GIRL was not yet in sight, but she would come from the west along the creek bank, to pass within two hundred feet of Dorken.

The outlaw growled under his breath. This was the hard part—the waiting, here in the grove, with his trap set. Her arrival would be a signal for the snapping of a spring inside Dorken's mind—the unleashing of a tiger. It would probably all be over, he thought, before the girl knew what



had happened. In no time at all.

Strangely, the project was not as suicidal for Dorken as it appeared. This yellow-haired dream was no scullery maid. She came of fine family, the daughter of Ngania's leading citizen. There was a certain restraint in such people that could easily work to Dorken's benefit. It was an even chance that no one would ever hear of this incident on the prairie. Dorken sensed that a girl of Kay Bates' background would think twice before she accused him, because the accusation would do untold damage to her own reputation.

If it worked out this way, Dorken's position would be unchanged. He could go on as before. If the girl pointed a finger in public—Dorken shrugged. He'd ridden out of such spots before. He could do it again.

She was coming now; a mile up the creek, Dorken could see a small speck moving closer. The speck became a *goff* and a rider. Then the *goff* became a high-stepping sorrel and the rider was clearly a girl.

Of the girl, Dorken saw first what had originally set his emotions astir—shining yellow hair. Odd, he thought, that a simple thing like that could set a man's instincts afire. He went back into the thronga patch and mounted his *goff* and brought it just to the outer edge of the grove.

Now he waited.

The *goff* came dancing along, urged by an impatience in the girl. Her eyes were trained dead ahead as though they had no time for anything except what lay at the end of the journey.

Two hundred yards—a hundred. Dorken crouched in his saddle ready to spur into the open.

Then the girl jerked her mount to a sudden halt. She was staring at the thronga grove as though she had

caught sight of the devil himself crouching there.

Dorken was thrown off balance by this development. She'd seen him! What the hell! Did the girl have eyes that bored right through wood? She'd done the impossible. She'd caught sight of him!

A scream ripped the air and Kay Bates was down over the neck of the sorrel and the *goff* was flying by the grove at a speed that would have left Dorken's mount practically standing still.

In a flash she was gone, but not until another scream followed the first, to thin out as the sorrel sped over the red prairie.

Dorken cursed. As a vent for his rage, he pulled tight on his reins, arching his mount's neck, and began beating the animal on the head with his doubled fist. It was the *goff*! That was all it could have been. The horse had made some sound that the girl had caught. The fact that Dorken hadn't caught the sound—seated even as he was on the *goff* itself—did not enter into his reasoning.

The beast reared and plunged and finally Dorken gave off beating it and rode straight off across the prairie toward Ngania.

After he had calmed down somewhat, a certain strangeness in the incident came to his mind. That yellow haired skirt was certainly touchy. After all, what had she seen? A man and a *goff* in the thronga grove. It was enough to startle her no doubt, but it appeared that her fright was a little over done. Was she in the habit of screaming bloody murder every time a bug jumped across her path?

Dorken mulled the thing over as he rode back to Ngania. After a while he felt better. There would be another time.



KAY BATES buried her white face in Cory Balleau's shoulder. Her body, trembling in his arms, pressed close to him. Her voice was muffled by his clothing.

"A body hanging there from a tree. Its eyes were bulging and the tongue— Oh my God!"

Cory put a finger under the girl's chin and raised her head. "But you don't know who it was?"

"No. I didn't wait. I came away from there."

"And the man on the *goff*. You said you saw a man hiding in the thronga."

"Not hiding. I looked back and saw him come out on this side of the creek. The body was on the other side in the grove—beyond the thronga thicket. I saw it from up the creek. And Cory—do you know who the man was—the one on the *goff*?"

"Who?"

"The same one I met out on the prairie that day—the one that scared me so."

"The cattleman."

"That's right. I've seen him in town since then. He's with that Mr. Frake who owns the cattle that tramped down Sam Bendorf's corn."

"Not the knife-thrower who killed Bendorf?"

"No, but one of that gang."

Cory pushed Kay away from him and scanned her face; "You're over your fright a little now. You'd better head for home. I'll have to get Uncle John and ride up to that grove. We can't just leave a man hanging there."

"I suppose not. Be careful, though, Cory. Be awfully careful."

When the sorrel was a spot off on the prairie, the youth moved slowly toward his own *goff*. His mind shrank away from the situation. The knowledge of a hanged man up the creek had a peculiar effect upon him and

he was trying to analyze that effect.

In itself, the corpse at the end of a rope didn't mean too much. Beyond natural curiosity it stirred him not at all. But there was something else; a feeling that the incident engendered.

It was as if his subconscious mind were aware of not only all that had happened, but of what was going to happen and was trying to get through to him with a warning; as though his destiny were already foreordained and the hanging of this man—whoever he turned out to be—were another cog in an ever-moving chain, driving him onward toward something from which he shrank.

It seemed a part of a planned whole. There had been other cogs in this chain and he remembered them. And, in each cog, fate used the same pawn; in each incident loomed the sinister figure of Mel Dorken.

Dorken seated astride a victim, gouging out his eyes; Dorken walking into the Golden King and sending a cold shock through Cory Balleau; Dorken astride a horse on the prairie to frighten Kay Bates; Dorken emerging from a thronga grove in which hung the body of a man. Always the same man. Always this Mel Dorken.

There was a mysticism in the mind of Cory Balleau that responded to the seeming diabolical intent of this pattern.

At this moment, Cory Balleau was afraid of Mel Dorken. He was afraid of the symbol which the man had become. A symbol of evil destiny.

"THERE WERE at least four of them—maybe half a dozen," Frake said. "They caught him on his way out of town. They brought him here because it's the nearest tree—and they strung him up."

Frake's face was tight with uncon-



cealed rage. Astride a horse beside Frake, Mel Dorken sullenly eyed the lynching tree. A two-foot length of rope was still hanging from the limb.

Frank Bates chewed nervously on a cold cigar and Henry Dalton, the other member of the group, seemed bewildered, a man out of his depth.

"You still haven't told us what you were doing here, Dorken," Bates said.

The big outlaw scowled darkly. "I told you I wasn't here. I wasn't no place near this grove and I never have been 'til now."

"My daughter doesn't lie!"

"She could make a mistake, though. She was probably so damn scared she didn't know who she saw. And if we're going into that—what was *she* doing here?"

"That's beside the point and none of your affair. This country is free and my daughter can ride anywhere she wants to."

"All this palaver is doing us no good," Frake said. "It doesn't matter whether Dorken was here or not. We know five or six men strung Tip up and we know what we've got to do."

"There isn't much we *can* do, is there?" Dalton asked. "With no witnesses I'd say we're kind of helpless unless someone talks."

Frake threw him a look of rank contempt. Then, wheeling his *goff*, Frake made a quick beckoning motion with his head, and started away from the grove at a quick trot.

Bates, at whom the command was pointed, drew away from the other two and moved close to Frake. At a distance beyond earshot, Dorken and Dalton followed.

"Looks like you misjudged things a little," Frake said.

Bates flushed, resenting the superior tone. "Misjudged what?"

"Let's not dance around. You figured these nesters would sit back and

let you pick them off one by one. You didn't rate them for any guts at all. Now your cute little plan's back-fired."

Bates admitted—but only to himself—that he was shaken by this grim turn of events; shaken to the core. In all his calculations as to possible results of the operation, he had anticipated nothing like this.

**N**OW HE REALIZED a truth he had not been aware of. These men—these nesters—respected the law and bowed to legal dictates. If they borrowed money on their land and ran into hard luck, they paid off without a murmur and sought their fortunes elsewhere. But they dealt in the coin of the realm and if that coin was murder they paid off in kind.

"Night riders!" Bates said. "What are things coming to in Ngania? Have we gone beyond law and order?"

Frake spat in disgust. "If there's anything I hate it's a hypocrite! My name's Frake—remember? I'm in with you on this deal. Let's talk sense or to hell with it."

Bates didn't answer for some time. Then he asked, "What are your ideas?"

"That depends on you. Your hand's been called, man, and you do one of two things. If you're yellow you pull in your horns and let this thing die down. In that case you and I do a little settling up and I go on my way."

"When I leave this town," Frake added grimly, "I take something with me."

Bates thought that over for a moment. "And the alternative?"

"The alternative is war."

"And which do you suggest?"

"The last. You're in a perfect position to win. It won't be a picnic and maybe there'll be soldiers in the picture before it's over, but you're in



shape to keep the law on your side right from the start. Every move you've made so far has been legal, even the Bendorf killing. It's the squatters that are outside the law."

"You feel that we hold all the cards, then?"

"Of course we do. First thing, you get rid of that weak-knee you've got for a marshal and I take his job. Then somebody gets hung for this lynching. We build a scaffold right in Ngania and string them up at high noon. That's the way you keep law and order."

The fear in Bates' heart began to subside. What had he been worrying about? A lynch-mob prowling the night wasn't an indication of strength. Lynching was an act of weakness—of desperation. Such resistance would break in the face of determined reprisal. Frake was right.

But another point caught and held in Bates' mind. He'd have to come out in the open now. He would be hated and feared by his fellow citizens. He would walk the streets of Ngania a marked man. No more pussyfooting. This was war.

"I think we'll go forward boldly," Bates said.

Frake smiled. When he did that his lips came up off stained teeth and gave him a savage look. "How soon can you get rid of Dalton?"

"Give me a week. Then I'll see that he's displaced for lack of action in running down the lynchers. I think I can persuade him to go back where he came from."

"Good."

"And there's another thing."

Frake waited.

"Those two homesteaders who brought Snead's body in—the Balleaus. I loaned the elder Balleau some money. There was a three-Marsmonth clause in the contract and the money

is due now. He can't pay of course."

Frake's eyes scanned the face of the other. "You mean the man borrowed money like that? Nobody'd do that without knowing where the cash was coming from to pay with."

"It wasn't exactly like that. Balleau was under the impression he was borrowing for a longer period."

Frake grinned again. "I see. Another chunk of land for Frank Bates."

Bates ignored that. "No doubt there'll be trouble even though I've got a competent witness to swear Balleau knew what he was doing. My teller witnessed the signature. The contract is perfectly legal."

There was a touch of admiration in Frake's glance. "How'd you manage that?"

"That's not important. The thing is, Balleau will probably be stubborn. He may have to be evicted by force. That's a job you'll inherit with your new office."

Frake pondered for a moment. "That fits in pretty good. We might as well let them know that the honeymoon's over in these parts. Any excuse to get rough is fine."

"Give me a week," Bates said once again.

**THE** BODY of Tip Snead, at Frake's direction, was placed in the window of Carter's Farm Emporium. Also at his direction, a printed card was placed beside the open coffin:

### THIS MAN WAS HUNG BY COWARDS!

The due processes of law have been flouted in the town of Ngania by skulking night riders who took this man and hung him to a tree and watched him strangle to death.

Are we going to allow this kind



of thing in Ngania? The next victim may be you or one of your loved ones. Once started rats of this kind are only stopped by a bullet. We, the citizens, demand that our marshal apprehend these killers without delay. We demand action!

"That'll clear the way so you can get rid of Dalton without any trouble," Frake told Bates. "It won't be your fault when the citizens start grouching."

With the display of the body, a pall settled over the town. Men seemed to walk softer and the talk in the stores and the drinking halls was muted. Fear was there in the streets and every man and woman felt the fear.

The body stayed there two days, after which time the proprietor of Carter's demanded its removal, saying that his business was at a standstill. The women of Ngania avoided the store. They even gave the window a wide berth, circling out into the street as they passed.

Cory Balleau was probably more sensitive of the fear than anyone else. Yet not fear exactly; in his heart he felt great dread of the future. There was a certain bewilderment in his mind. He could not displace the feeling that this was only the beginning of something that would affect him deeply. Within him was a sense that the tides of time were sweeping him forward and that he was helpless to resist, driving him relentlessly toward a destiny not of his own making.

John Balleau held himself aloof from the trouble that had descended upon Ngania. After carrying the body of Tip Snead to town, he returned to his beloved land, giving no time to the gossip, the excitement, and the upheaval in the town.

He had seed and tools and, in the processes of his thinking, that would make any man content. He worked tirelessly.

As he tilled the acres, he spent a great deal of time thinking about Cory. The youth was changing. He had grown quieter and yet there was a renewed restlessness which John Balleau could discern underneath. John Balleau's attempts to urge Cory into a social life went pretty much to naught. During his leisure hours, Cory enjoyed roaming the prairies, following the creek and journeying to the rocky hill country further west.

But always alone—and that was the thing that worried the elder Balleau. The laughter and happiness that should be a part of youth were not to be found in long solitary treks.

He'd have to talk to Cory about it—dig deeper—find out what was troubling the lad—

KAY BATES slid off the sorrel mare and was eased to the ground by Cory's hands under her armpits. She moved close to him, rubbed the tip of her nose against his, and laughed.

"Cold nose," she said, "cold heart."

Cory turned away, evidently not noticing the kiss that was offered. He took three steps and dropped to the sod bordering the creek. He lay belly down with his head over the bank's edge, his face reflected in the still back-water.

A moment later he saw the questioning face of Kay Bates in the water beside his own.

"Why so quiet?" she asked.

"I've been thinking. I've been doing a lot of thinking. There's trouble in Ngania—bad trouble. I don't like it."

"But it won't affect us," the girl said quickly.



"How do we know it won't? Who knows what direction trouble will take?"

She studied his reflection, her own face sober. "You seem so worried lately. Is it something you know? Something you haven't told me?"

"No it's nothing—just—" He turned and looked deep into her blue eyes. "Well— I'm not the one for you. You've got to stop coming out here. We've got to quit seeing each other like this or the trouble *will* come our way—trouble for you."

She sat very still without answering. Then she spun her lithe body, pulled him around with her and he was prone on his back and her breast hard against his. She was looking straight into his eyes. She said:

"Cory—are you in love with me?"

He returned the look but with a vagueness in his eyes: "I don't know. Maybe. I guess I don't know what love is. Are you in love with me?"

"Always and forever."

"What is it then? How do you feel? Tell me."

Again she was silent as though seeking words with which to give her answer. Finally she said:

"I guess every girl is different and maybe, with every girl, the feeling isn't the same. With me love is—well, just everything. I know there will only be one person I'll ever love. I don't know *how* I know that, but I do. And I don't know what is is, I only feel it and I think of it in two ways—having it, and protecting it."

She stopped to kiss him—a casual, unpassionate kiss, and then went on:

"With me there can be no room for love and reservations at the same time. I belong to the person I love and that person is you. I belong to you anywhere, in any way, at any time. There isn't anything you could ask of me that you couldn't have now

or tomorrow or twenty years from now if it's within my power to give."

Her body was against his and the wonder came sharply into his mind: Why can't I put my arms around her? What's blocking me off from what any man on two legs would give ten years of his life to have?

"Please don't misunderstand, darling," she said. "I'm sure that I'm not a slut. I'm not immoral, because it's only *you*. Can you understand that? You—you—you! I want marriage, but I'm not afraid of love. I don't have to be protected by a piece of paper."

"Will you marry me, Kay?" Cory asked.

And he thought: I wish I could really mean that. I wish that I could really want to marry her.

She smiled down at him. "Silly! If that were possible don't you think I'd have wriggled that question out of you long ago? I'd have been able to make you ask that a week after I found that I wanted you."

"Why impossible?"

**S**HE STRAIGHTENED now, drew her body away from his, and sat cross-legged beside him. She stared out over the prairie.

"Because of my father."

"Doesn't he want you to get married?"

Her reply was indirect. "You see, I know my father. I know him even better than he knows himself. I've watched him take the land away from the settlers and I've seen the cruelty underneath his scheming. He wants me to marry some Terran man. To him I've just another asset to be used to the best advantage. He's very jealous of his assets."

"Tell him you don't want to do that. Tell him you want to marry me."

"He'd kill you."



"He'd *what*? What did you say?"

"I said he'd kill you. Oh, not personally of course. But he'd find a way. He's surrounding himself with some terrible, ruthless men. My father is too clever to commit his own murders. But he has a scheming mind that would manipulate things until you were dead. I know that as surely as I'm alive."

Cory was struck speechless by the flat, cold denunciation. He stared at the girl. She said:

"You think that's horrible, don't you?" She returned his look and her words came in dull monotone. "Maybe it is, but I know I'm right and if anything happened to you I'd die—inside of me my heart would shrivel up into a husk and I wouldn't be alive any more."

"I think you must be wrong," he said, gently.

"I'm not wrong. But maybe things will change. I keep praying that they will. But meanwhile, no other girl will get you—I'll scratch the eyes out of any who ever tried." There was no smile on her face. "I mean that," she said.

Eight days after the discovery of Tip Snead's body, Henry Dalton handed in his badge and the office of Marshal of Ngania was vacant for fifteen minutes.

After Frake was sworn in, Frank Bates made a short speech to the assembled citizens:

"...and we can rest assured that law and order have an able champion in the person of our new marshal. I am confident that he will be successful in his campaign to bring the killers in our midst to justice. We wish him every success and offer every cooperation."

Frake's opening statement was short and to the point:

"As Marshal of Ngania, I personally guarantee complete immunity to the first of the lynch mob who walks into my office and makes a confession. Also, Mr. Bates has offered a thousand dollars' reward for information leading to the capture of the night riders."

Frank Bates was somewhat surprised at this last. It was the first he'd heard of any reward. Thinking it over, though, he decided that it was an excellent idea.

**T**HERE WERE five men in the group that dismounted at the gate of John Balleau's place, and skirted the neat house to come into view from the corral. They were Frank Bates, Marshal Frake, Deputy Marshal Mel Dorken, and two spare deputies of less imposing proportions.

John Balleau had just turned his team into the back pasture and was coming forward across the corral. Upon seeing the men, he stopped short and stared for a moment, a slight frown on his face. What did this mean? There was no reason for a bevy of armed men to be waiting for him in his own back yard.

He continued on toward the pond and crossed the bridge at the narrow point. He approached the group silently, his unasked question reflecting in his face.

"How are you, Balleau?" Bates asked by way of greeting.

"No complaint. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

Bates took the cold cigar from his mouth. He appeared to be a trifle surprised. "You seem to have a short memory, Balleau. I've been expecting you to show up in town, but when you stayed away it made me rather uneasy—a banker's mind, you know—so I thought I'd drop out and pick up the principal on your note."



Balleau registered sheer unbelief. "You *what?*"

"I think I spoke clearly. Your note is two weeks overdue. It's hardly businesslike to let it run. I came out to clean it up."

A wave of quick weakness swept over Balleau. For a moment there was a blur before his eyes. This was some sort of a bad dream! But his eyes cleared and the men were still there and Bates was saying:

"What's come over you, man? You act as though you don't remember borrowing money from me. Don't you feel well?"

Balleau choked for words. His gaze moved helplessly to where Dorken had stepped casually away from the group. Dorken stood to one side. His legs were spread wide and his arms folded as he watched the farce through narrowed, lazy eyes.

"But—but the only money I borrowed from you was on an eighteen Marsmonth basis. The term has hardly begun! I don't understand."

Bates' words came as cold as dripping ice pellets. "I don't know what kind of a game you're trying to play, but that will hardly wash. If you can read English you can check your copy of the document that you signed before a reliable witness. It clearly reads that the time limit was three months. As I remember it you wanted the money for machinery—a short-term loan—I took it for granted that you had a method of repaying."

There was an odd glaze over Balleau's eyes. Like a man in a dream—stiff-legged—he walked toward the back door. He opened it and went inside.

The document in question was in his bedroom, in a box with other documents. He'd taken it from his pocket that day, upon returning home, and he hadn't even read it. Now, as panic

edged into his mind, he realized that he should have read it. But there on the table in Bates' office at the bank, he'd checked the important points. He'd seen the words 'eighteen months from date' very plainly.

But like the tolling of a doom-bell was the knowledge within his mind that those words would not be on the document he now possessed.

He took the box from his dresser drawer. The paper was upon the very top of the pile inside. He unfolded it carefully as though it were fine glass that would break at a touch. There they were—four words—"three Marsmonths from date."

THE WORLD of John Balleau went spinning out from under him and he was whirling over and over in space. The period of faintness passed. The man's mind cleared again.

Thievery! Sheer bald-faced thievery! The gypsy switch in a place where a man took integrity for granted. Cold-blooded, legal robbery.

Something in John Balleau's mind snapped.

He flung open the closet door and reached inside. His hand came out holding a rifle. He threw down the lever. There were live pellets in the magazine. He slapped the lever back in place, his brain awl.

They wouldn't get away with it! There flashed before him a picture of the old place back on Terra—the desolation he'd seen from the hilltop when he'd returned to his last hope. He recalled the long trek skyward—a grave back on the Marsriver. The weary months and years.

They wouldn't get away with it! And he was standing in the doorway with the rifle flung up, covering the group.

"You thieving blackguards! Get off



my property! Get off before I blow you all to hell where you belong! You'll take this land over my dead body and if I die you'll all go with me! Get out!"

Mel Dorken, standing away to the left, was outside the lethal arc of the gun. His hand slipped down to his hip and came up holding a pyro gun. Balleau's eye caught the motion and the rifle swung around.

Dorken fired from the hip as Balleau pressed the switch of the rifle and leaped backward into the shelter of the kitchen.

The pellet hit and melted a rock at Dorken's feet and whined off across the corral.

Bates and the lawmen went into a quick and undignified retreat. They found shelter by using an angle of the house to cover their exodus and gathered in the partial shelter of a grove by the road.

Immediately a corner of a front window-plastic was pushed out and the barrel of the rifle appeared.

"Over my dead body you'll take this land!" Balleau yelled. "Thieves! Thieves! Thieves!"

"Did you hit him, Mel?" Frake asked, scowling.

"I don't think so," the latter growled. "He moved too quick."

"I don't like this," Bates cut in. "I don't like it at all. We can't shoot the man down in cold blood."

Frake eyed the banker coldly. "Why not? He's resisting officers of the law. He endangered our lives with a deadly weapon. Why can't we shoot him?"

"It's too—too abrupt somehow. I just don't like it."

"You mean that Tip Snead's lynch-ers are still not captured and hung. You're thinking they might catch you some dark night and string you to a tree. That's it, isn't it?"

Bates reddened. "Nothing of the

kind. But we didn't come out here to kill this man—"

"We came to steal his property."

"Quit putting words in my mouth. We're going back to town and give him a chance to cool off. When we come back we'll bring some impartial witnesses."

Frake shrugged. They remounted under the watchful eye of the rifle and hit the road for Ngania.

CORY BALLEAU loped in from the east, trying to beat the sun. He felt guilty at being away so long. There were chores to be done and he was hardly carrying his share of the load. His uncle worked all day and should find a meal waiting when he returned to the house.

Cory raced to the corral gate, stripped his *goff*, and slammed the gate behind it. He crossed the bridge at a run and pelted into the kitchen.

He stopped—sharply alert. Something was wrong. The house was deathly quiet and a path of dark red stained the floor. It led toward the front of the house. Cory followed it on tip toe.

The trail ended in a pool and the body of John Balleau lay in the center of the pool. The blood had coursed down from a wound in his neck where a blood vessel had been charred.

John Balleau lay face downward, the fingers of one hand touching the butt of the rifle propped against the window sill. The corner of the plastic had been broken out and the barrel of the rifle protruded.

Cory knelt in the blood and lifted his uncle, turned the limp body and cradled it in his arms. He held it there and looked down into the still face.

No need for close investigation. There was too much blood on the floor. John Balleau's body was emp-



ty of blood and therefore empty of life.

After a while, Cory got up from the floor, took the rifle and went to the corral. He saddled his *goff* and rode off down the road toward town. He gripped the rifle so tightly that his fingers ached. And his jaw muscles, hard and corded, ached also.

CORY BALLEAU rode up the main street of Ngania and dismounted in front of the marshal's office. He entered and found Frake sitting with his chair tilted back and one booted foot on his desk. Frake lowered the foot, glanced at the rifle under Cory's arm and then looked up at the youth's face.

"Somebody killed my uncle," Cory said.

At that instant the door opened and Frank Bates strode in. Bates asked: "What was that?"

Cory turned. "I said somebody killed my uncle."

Bates' shoulder jerked sharply as though from a sudden nervous disorder. He cursed inwardly. These accidents! These unforeseen occurrences that were forever darkening his plans! He turned his eyes to Frake:

"Then Dorken's shot must have—" He stopped with some uncertainty.

Frake scowled and said to Cory: "We didn't know that, son. We went out to your uncle's place to collect a claim against him—a legal claim. He resisted with a gun; that very gun you're carrying. There was a shot fired but your uncle ran back into the house and we thought he was all right. Maybe after we left—"

"It was Dorken then?" Cory's voice held no emotion. It was a casual question made up of dully spoken words.

"Well— Dorken fired a shot—to defend himself—but we—"

Cory turned and went out of the

office into the street. He had little doubt as to where he'd find Mel Dorken. He walked west toward the Golden King. He pushed in through the batwings and looked up and down the bar.

Dorken was there, standing alone at the far end. There was a bottle and a glass in front of him. Cory walked up to him and Dorken turned. Cory poked the barrel of the rifle into his belly.

"I hear you killed my uncle," Cory said.

Genuine surprise on Dorken's hairy face. "That's a lie!"

"Did you fire a shot at him this afternoon?"

"I fired but—"

"I'm going to kill you."

Dorken's eyes flicked downward. The tenseness in his body faded as it had come. This thick-headed plow son! Holding a gun right close on a man with the switch locked. What could you expect of a squatter's kid?

Dorken pushed the gun aside and slammed his fist into Cory's face. Cory's body bent like a reed in the wind. His hands flew up and the gun fell to the floor. Cory reeled backward, struggling for balance.

He went down and Dorken was waiting for him at the spot where he hit the floor. Dorken's foot came back and swung out in a vicious arc squarely into Cory's side. The boy screamed, rolled over and came to his knees, head hanging.

Dorken reached down and lifted him by his shirt. Dorken swung him around and slammed the fist again. Cory skidded across the floor to stop against the wall.

The rage of Dorken seemed to increase rather than diminish. He hurled a kick against the boy's spine, bringing a groan.



**T**HEN THERE were men around Dorken; the barkeep and the poker dealer and a couple of hangers-on:

"That's enough, Dorken! For God's sake! You don't want to kill him! He's only a kid!"

They were holding his arms and it was as though they wrestled with an enraged grizzly. He shook them off and moved toward Cory and they threw themselves between.

"Get Frake," the barkeep yelled. "Somebody get the marshal!"

Dorken shook them off and picked Cory up and smashed a blow at his nose. But Dorken swung too low and the fist crashed against Cory's throat. The youth dropped, gagging for breath.

"Dorken! That's enough! You kill the kid and it's murder!"

"I'll blind him!"

Dorken lunged as the batwings swung and Frake walked into the saloon.

"What's going on?"

"Stop him," the barkeep yelled. "We don't want a killing in here!"

Dorken was on his knees over Cory. Frake took three long steps, hooked his arm around Dorken's neck and jerked him backward. Dorken rolled prone, his eyes ever seeking Cory.

"Get him out of here," Frake said. "Get the kid out. I'll handle Dorken."

The barkeep and the poker dealer dragged Cory and lifted him. They moved him toward the door and Frake crashed into the now-erect Dorken. His low words were flung against the wild man's ear: "You son of a bitch! You want to wreck everything? You want to get *us* lynched? Quiet down or I'll blast the top of your head off!"

The temperature of Dorken's brain cooled swiftly. He pulled away from

Frake and dragged a hand across his own mouth. He said: "The stinkin' little tramp! Let's get a drink."

**F**RANK BATES arrived at his home rather late that evening. He recounted the events of the day at dinner; recounted them sadly, as though such things disturbed him:

"...I think Dorken would have killed the lad if Frake hadn't gotten there in time. Good man, Frake."

Kay Bates was on her feet. "Where did Cory go?"

Her father got up slowly. "Why, home I suppose. Where else would he go?"

Kay ran to the stairs and up to the second floor. Her father left the dining room, genuinely mystified. He waited at the foot of the staircase.

As Kay came pelting down, Frank Bates asked: "What in heaven's name got into you? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to find him. Leave me alone!"

"But you don't even know him."

Kay's smile was a thing of light and triumph. "Oh, don't I? You'd be surprised who I know and what I know. Get out of my way!"

Bates flared. "Silence! You're speaking to your father, young lady! I don't know what this is all about, but I damn soon will know. Come into my study!"

She quieted then, appeared to become more quiet inside, but she made no move to obey:

"Dad—Dad! Why can't we—oh—"

"Come into my study!"

She hardened again: "Get out of my way!"

Frank Bates put his arms around her, snatched her roughly. Then he got the surprise of his life.

He could as well have laid his hands on a she-cougar defending her



young. Kay screamed, flung her body and pumped her arms in violent motions. Bates sprang back, his hands over his face. When he lowered them, his daughter was gone.

He stood there with the blood running down his face from the deep furrows clawed there by slashing fingernails. Flesh hung at the bottoms of these furrows.

Bates stared at the blood on his hands.

Kay Bates rode the dark prairie in a straight line. The *goff's* hooves pounded the night. Filled with energy, the animal hugged the ground and ate the distance with long, joyous strides. The pace created a wind that cooled Kay Bates' lovely face and dealt roughly with her hair, brushing it loose and flinging it out behind her.

When the *goff* sought to lessen her speed, Kay applied a quirt and the *goff* leapt forward with a surprised snort. There was no letup until Kay flung herself from the saddle in front of the dark Balleau house.

Dead quiet. No life. Only a brooding silence; the silence of defeat. The house itself seemed to have taken on the hopeless mood of the vanquished.

Kay entered the dark kitchen. She struck a match and found a quartz lamp to light. On the floor was the dark streak. Dried blood. She followed it through the house, carrying the lamp above her head. The streak ended in the black dry pool by the broken window.

The girl carried the lamp out into the still night along the path that skirted the house.

"Cory! Cory!"

She crossed the foot-bridge and was in the corral. No sounds.

"Cory!"

Kay forgot the lamp and as her foot

struck a clod, the lamp teetered and fell to the ground. Kay ran to the corral gate. It stood open.

Then from off in the darkness came the rattle of a *goff*. Kay's sorrel answered, and Kay called again:

"Cory! Cory! Darling—it's me! Kay!"

The invisible *goff* snorted and Kay knew. The animal was wandering the prairie. The Balleau stock had been turned loose to shift for itself.

That meant—

But the girl refused to believe. He was there—somewhere out there hurt and bleeding. The thought drove her to panic.

"Cory! Cory!"

Up the creek maybe, at their old place. That's where he would go. Her heart swelled in gratitude for the thought. She raced to the sorrel pounded westward along the creek. The miles rolled under the sorrel and Kay was there by the bend where the waters widened.

He's here somewhere—lying here hurt, waiting for me.

"Cory!"

The throngas murmured in sympathy, a vagrant breeze bringing their message. Kay flung herself to the sod. She knew now. She knew he was gone. She lay for a long time, her cheek pressed to the grass. Finally her sobbing became less intense. Her tears diminished as did the night and gray morning crept over the prairie.

The rude cross stood out, then and the girl arose and walked to the fresh mound of soil nearby. The cross was of thronga—two yellow branches fastened with a strip of bark.

Kay sank to her knees. There was no inscription, but she knew. Cory had been there before her. He had buried his dead and he was gone.

"Cory—Cory—Cory." But no longer a call.



Only a cry and a prayer.

NATE GOODROW'S place lay along the north bank of the fourth canal. A pleasant, rectangular stretch of country rich in farming possibilities. But he'd never gotten the place lined up to suit him. There was always something to be done; something he couldn't entrust to anyone else. And later, with things running smoothly, he found, to his surprise, that the wanderlust had been drained from his blood. Oh, it was still there, but in such a mild degree that the trouble of getting started north didn't seem worthwhile.

He thought often of the people he'd known up above. He thought often of the Balleaus. They should be doing pretty well by now, he opined. That boy Cory, and odd one for fair, that lad. There was probably a freight head in Ngania by now. Nate was sure glad John Balleau had been able to wait out the bad times. He'd have to hit north one of these days and find out how the Balleaus were getting along. Damned if he wouldn't. Maybe he could talk Cory into coming down to the place for a season. The boy stayed too close to home and that was certain. Get him out here and let him ride the country for a couple of months and mix with the boys and he'd come out of himself. He was like a turtle in a shell, that boy.

Course he'd had some pretty rugged times. That fight back on the Marsport River for instance. No ten-year-old should ever see a thing like that. Then his mom dying the same night. Pretty rugged on a youngster. But John Balleau had done a good job raising the lad. A lot of young ones without parents drifted into lawlessness and that was the end of them. They were just gallows-bait then, set to die when a posse outguessed them.

Yeah, John Balleau had done a good job.

It was morning and Nate had just roped a *goff* and was swinging the saddle up when he saw three riders approaching from the northeast. They were coming slowly and riding close together. Nate studied them, watching them grow larger. Then it appeared that two of them were his own boys. Jimmy Clare and Lew Sackey. That was all right. They were about due in, but who was the other one?

Lean as a fence post he was, and riding a *goff* that was all bones and neck... Rode funny too; like he was sick or something. Kind of familiar though. Kind of—

Nate Goodrow was in the saddle, pounding out to meet the trio. He jerked off his hat, started to wave it as a cry of welcome arose to his lips. But he put the hat back on his head and the yell was never uttered. Something wrong. The way that boy rode. The way he looked! What in all hell? Nate skidded his mount to a stop and spun the beast around on its hind legs:

"Cory! As I live and breath it's Cory Balleau. Welcome boy!"

THE WAN face smiled and the smile could have been one of gratitude: "Hello Nate. I remembered that you invited me down here once. Glad it still holds."

"You're a sight for sore eyes, lad," Nate said. He caught himself but not quickly enough because Cory smiled bitterly:

"I sure must be a sight. I'll admit that."

"I meant you're welcome to spend the rest of your days here. How's your uncle?"

When Cory ignored the question Nate didn't press it. He swung in be-



side them and the small talk back to the house was almost painful.

"The boys'll take care of the animals," Nate said at the gate. "I'll see about rousting you up a steak about four inches thick."

Cory slid from his *goff*. "Thanks. but they fed me already. If it's all the same to you I'll hit the tank for maybe twelve or fourteen hours. I'm done in."

"Sure—sure. Come on in the house. You can have a back room and shut the door and sleep for a year."

Nate Goodrow took his guest into the house. Ten minutes later he was back at the corral. The two men had finished with the *goffs* and were blowing like porpoises in the watering trough.

"Where'd you find him?" Nate asked.

Jimmy Clare blew water out of his nose and said: "He come up to Number Three cabin this morning—early. Woke me up. I opened the door and thought I was seein' a walkin' ghost. He said he was hunting for you and could I tell him where your place was. I told him he was standing on it. Said he knew you up north and had an invite. We gave him some grub and when Torky showed, we brought the kid on in."

"Did he talk? Did he say anything?"

Clare was back in the trough. Sackey said: "Not much. Nothing at all about how he got beat to all hell and gone. Looks to me he must have been jumped by a gang, but he didn't say nothing about that. Said he'd been riding practically day and night though, and from the looks of his *goff* he ain't lying much."

Nate rubbed at his bristly chin and walked slowly away. Had the kid been attacked on the way down? If he

wasn't going to talk, Nate was sure going to spend some time wondering. But there was something else. Nate had asked about John Balleau and Cory hadn't answered. Was the boy just too tired to hear? Nate frowned over that one. He'd just have to wait a few hours to find out, that was all.

Goodrow went vaguely about his business.

When Cory awoke the house was dead still. The darkness told him that it was night. He wondered what time it was. He could have gone right back to sleep, but he was possessed of a terrible thirst. He got up and pulled on his pants and boots. He went softly through the house so as not to waken Goodrow, and out the back door.

A voice asked: "Feeling better son?"

It was Nate's voice and the smell was from Nate's pipe. The pipe glowed in the darkness.

"Yes, a lot better. I thought you were asleep."

"I waited around. Figured you might perk up and maybe be hungry."

"No—just thirsty. What time is it?"

"Little after midnight. I'll walk out to the windmill with you."

THEY STRODE along in silence until Nate said: "I asked about your uncle this morning but you were pretty tired. Guess you didn't hear me."

"I heard you."

"You must not have felt like answering then."

"No. I guess I didn't. Uncle John is dead."

"I'm right sorry to hear that, son."

"He was killed by a deputy marshal named Dorken—Mel Dorken—when they came to take our land."

"You mean you lost your farm?"

"We lost it. Some kind of a fast



shuffle on a loan. I don't know what it was all about, but when they came, Uncle John got out the rifle. They shot him and he bled to death."

The windmill was turning slowly, bringing a small stream of clear cold water into the storage tank. Nate slipped a valve handle and the water shot out into the horse trough. Cory drank thirstily from a tin cup.

Nate dragged on his pipe. "Mel Dorken, eh?"

"You know him?"

"Know *of* him. Hardly on speaking terms though."

"Sure—you'd know who he is. He blinded a man in a fight back on the Marsport. I saw it."

Nate's voice sharpened. "You remembered him from that fight."

"As soon as I saw him in a Ngania drinking hall one day."

"Hmmm."

Cory put down the dipper.

Nate said, casually. "I've been thinking of taking me a little trip north. Been needing a change."

"Nate."

"Yeah?"

"I don't want it that way."

"What way?"

"I've got to fight my own battles. I've got to kill that man Dorken."

"Well—I'll admit he certainly needs killing."

"When I left Ngania I broke a store window and stole two pyro-guns, Nate. I came down here to ask you to teach me how to use them."

"You didn't have to steal guns, boy. We've got plenty."

"I know it, but somehow I had to steal those guns. Don't ask me why, because I don't know. And they're the guns I've got to use. Will you teach me?"

"A man should know how to defend himself. No reason why you shouldn't

pick up a little gun knowledge. But I'm getting old and kind of stiff. Not what I used to be."

"If I get to be half as good as you are—I'll be satisfied."

"I could hold my own in a gun fight," Nate conceded, "but I never ranked with the best because I had one thing missing."

"What was that?"

"The love of a gun, boy. To rank with the top men you've got to have more than just skill and speed and even luck. You've got to love a gun and what it stands for. You've got to love to kill."

"The way Dorken loves it?" Cory asked with bitterness.

NATE KNOCKED the dead ashes from his pipe: "That's right, boy. You put two good men against each other and that's when a split second counts. A shade of an advantage, and the man who doesn't love to kill—who has an unconscious dread of seeing another man lose his life—won't get that advantage. The split second goes to the born killer and all the top gun slicks—owl-hooters and lawmen alike—have got that love."

"I'm living for just one thing, Nate—to kill Mel Dorken. If I couldn't look forward to that, there'd be just nothing. I'd have no future."

Nate sighed. "I hate to hear you say it, Cory. God knows you've got just cause, but I'd still rather hear you tell me you've walked away from it all and want to stay here and raise cattle with me and maybe someday own this place."

"And I wish I could say it too—but I can't."

Nate dropped his arm around the boy's shoulder. When he spoke his tone was brisk. "Come on back to the house. I'll bet you can use some more



sleep. Let's get you back on your feet. Then we'll talk about guns."

Cory offered no explanation for his battered face and the sprawling purple bruise on his throat. Nor did Nate Goodrow make inquiries. He noticed that Cory winced under certain bodily movements. He thought: The lad was beaten up—beaten bad. I wonder if that was Mel Dorken's work too? But it never occurred to him to make blunt inquiries.

Cory—for well over a month—conducted himself as though he had not a care in the world. He lounged in the sun, rode the range, and finally began swimming in the Canal. He took long trips, got acquainted with Nate's men. His bruises faded swiftly. Within a month there was only a faintly dark area on his throat and his wiry body was free of aches and tender spots.

It was then that he brought out the two pyro-guns. Nate found him, one day, seated on the back porch, cleaning and oiling the weapons.

"No change in your ideas, eh son?"

Cory shook his head briefly. He said: "Nate—I've got a little money—not much—and these damn things need ammunition."

Nate scratched his chin. "You know where the gun room is. There's enough gun-food in there to stand off the Venusian army for six months. And don't be talkin' about money. The stuff ain't much good down on these parts."

"Thanks."

"Hook 'em on, son."

Cory got up and slid the guns into their leather. He hefted the pellet belt, put it around his middle and fastened the catch. Nate eyed him, moodily:

"You know what you're doing, don't you, boy?"

Cory looked up sharply and Nate

went on: "With what you got in your mind, you just put on something that's got to be closer than your underwear. From now on those guns will be pounding your legs at every step. Wherever you leave those guns you leave your life. Think the whole thing's worth it?"

CORY SLID his hands over the steel and purple leather. He looked down at the ungainly bulges on his thighs.

"There's no other way," he said.

Nate retained his somber expression. He took twenty pellets from his own belt and poured them into Cory's hand:

"Load 'em up."

Cory broke one of the guns and fumbled pellets into holder. One dropped to the ground.

"There's so much to learn," Nate said, "and while your at it there's no use skipping any. Now you take loading a gun. Nobody pays much attention to that but a fast load might save your life sometime. Get so you can do this."

Nate pulled his gun and dumped the pellets into his palm. He shook them around for a moment and they lay in a line, lead forward, along a groove formed by his palm and fingers. He then tilted his hand over the holder of his gun and moved the hand in a circular motion:

"See? Just like little trained pigs."

The pellets dropped swiftly into the cylinder and Nate snapped the gun shut. "You can load that way in fifteen seconds. Let's see how you can shoot?"

Cory raised the two weapons—held them tilted skyward; he squinted toward the fence, selecting a post.

"Just use one. This two-gun stuff is way over-rated. No man alive can



hit two different targets at the same time and no man can draw two guns as fast as he can draw one. Except as a spare that iron on your left leg is so much added weight."

Obediently, Cory put the left gun away and fired three times at a fence post with the right one.

One side of the post was faintly seared.

"Missed by two feet. A natural squeeze pulls your shot to the left." Nate faced the post and his right hand moved downward toward his leg—a smooth easy sweep of his arm. His fingers carressed leather and the gun was in his hand. The movement continued on in a backward arc, Nate's wrist bent at an angle which leveled his weapon. The whine came just as the tip of the barrel cleared the leather—while his arm was still moving backward. The top half of the thronga post disappeared, and without breaking the sweep of his arm-movement, Nate reversed the arc and the gun went back into the clip. The whole operation completed as a single unit; draw—fire—return—a beautifully integrated muscular coordination that took approximately one second to complete.

"That's not a fast draw," Nate said. "I'm way out of practice and when I was *in* practice I wasn't too fast. Facing a top gun-slick, I'd have been dead before my hand hit the butt. That's a draw that will do for rattlesnakes and killing broken-legged animals but that's about all. And if you're too close to the rattler he'll even beat you."

Cory stared morosely at the post.

"A draw isn't your problem though, son. You've got to learn to hit what you're shooting at first. You start out with fence posts and you end up by tossing pebbles in the air. When you

can hit the pebble, you can feel that your aim won't let you down. Then start worrying about a fast pull."

"There's a lot to learn all right," Cory said.

"**A**ND REMEMBER this, son. There's no such thing as the fastest gunman. That critter just doesn't exist. But the woods are full of gun-slicks that are faster than each other, if you get what I mean."

"I think I do."

"Guns are strange things and it all adds up to this: No matter how swift you are—there's a man somewhere that's able to shoot quicker and, just as sure as fate, you're going to meet him. Always remember that."

"I'll remember."

Time went on, and Nate found himself to be strangely disturbed at the tenacity with which Cory worked—the deadly intent mirrored there in his eyes. If Nate had had any hope of the youth cooling down and abandoning his mania, that hope died as Cory pursued his dogged way.

The whine of the pyro-guns had grown so commonplace that even the animals in the corral no longer raised their heads or pricked up their ears.

Cory set up a target range behind the bunk house and slammed away at it with dogged persistence. When any of the hands used the day for sleep, he rode off toward the river.

Nate left the boy pretty much to himself. Though viewing Cory's ambition with sadness and misgiving, Nate would nonetheless have been willing to help and *was* willing at any time. But he sensed that Cory preferred to work out certain things for himself. Not that he didn't accept the advice Nate gave—accept it most gratefully—but Nate sensed a drawing back, a desire for privacy, and the ex-scout did not intrude.



Cory could hit a pebble tossed into the air, now. He wore the two guns, but he used only one.

**A**NOTHER change was perceptible to Nate Goodrow. The youth was becoming surer of himself. The change was apparant in his walk, in all his movements, and in his conversation.

And Nate had to admit that, from all outward appearances, here was a killer. Cory's stride was a lithe motion of his entire body. He carried himself seemingly on tiptoe at all times, his shoulders sloping downward at a more pronounced angle. There was a certain follow-through in every motion he made that was the result of natural coordination not found in one man in a thousand.

The whine of the guns increased in tempo, as time went by. Then one day Cory came to Nate Goodrow and said, "Show me how to use a knife the way you do."

Here Goodrow noted another definite change. Six months back Cory would have put it differently. Something like: "You can sure throw that knife. I wonder if maybe you'd show me how?"

Now it was more like an order, spoken with cold assurance:

"Show me how to use a knife the way you do."

Nate said; "All right son. You take it this way...."

Nate was glad he'd had so little to do with it. Glad now, as he contemplated this newly created lethal masterpiece. Cory had turned into the sort of lethal machine Nate didn't care to contemplate.

"He's yet to kill a man, though," Nate said. "That's the test. He's yet to kill a man."

**C**ORY BALLEAU killed a man the following week. He'd ridden, with

a couple of Nate's men into the settlement to pick up some supplies for his trip north. They arrived there at around ten in the morning and the two men were ready to leave by four in the afternoon.

But Cory had gotten a few credits ahead in a card game at the local drinking hall. He showed no inclination to leave, so his companions went on their way—back to the spread.

Early in the evening, the game got a new customer. A wiry, dark-faced man who made frequent trips to the bar during the play. Liquor loosened his tongue. He lost money with jovial abandon. His laugh was grating and it annoyed Cory. Cory ignored the man, however, until the latter said:

"Haven't seen you around here before, son. Where you from?"

Every eye at the table centered on the man. This was unthinkable. Even liquor scarcely excused a man from committing a breach of etiquette so monstrous. However, Cory saw nothing out of the ordinary in the inquiry.

"Ngania," he said. "Up North."

The other slapped a palm on the table. "Well cut me off short! I got a friend up that way. A man named Dorken. Mel Dorken. Know him?"

The soles of Cory's boots pressed hard against the floor. He studied his cards with elaborate attention. Finally he said:

"I know him."

"Me—I'm Deac Thomas, pardner." The man waited.

"Cory Balleau."

"Well it's a damn small globe. I'll take two. Make 'em queens. Heard from a man that rode down not long ago. Mel's doin' pretty good. Damn town's boomin' now, with a freight head in there, and Mel's a deputy marshal."

Thomas threw back his head and



roared with laughter; "A deputy marshal. If that ain't one to hoot over!"

"So the freight head finally got there?"

Thomas got up and went to the bar. He downed two straight shots of whisky, wiped a hand across his mouth and came back to the table; he threw in his ante and roared again.

"Yeah, old Mel and me sure had some high times together. Knew 'im back when he was a mechanic working the truck trains. Great pal to have sidin' you—Mel. He liked his women plumb raw!"

Cory threw in his hand and got up from the table. There was an odd, cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. He went to the bar and ordered a schooner of beer. Maybe that would warm up the cold place. He sipped at the stuff. It was bitter and strong and it didn't help. He stood there until Thomas lumbered across the floor and stood beside him.

THOMAS' hilarity was fading. The look of amiability had departed from his face. He poured himself three fingers.

"You aint said much, Balleau. You act almost as if you don't like my friends."

The man had reached the belligerent stage. He was spoiling for trouble and a certain tension filled the place. The game went on, the players appearing to give their cards more study—deeper attention.

Cory was silent.

Thomas scowled. "You know Mel Dorken or don't you?"

"I know him."

Thomas considered that, tossed off his drink. "Maybe you had a brush with him or somethin' like that?"

"Maybe I did."

"Talk up! For Chris' sake! Look at a man when you're speakin' to him!"

Cory turned his head and spoke straight into Thomas' teeth. "Dorken's a yellow-bellied rat! You can smell him a mile away."

Thomas swung an arm, backhand. He hit Cory's shoulder, spinning the youth away from the bar. Cory staggered a few steps, got his balance and straightened. Thomas was facing him, ugliness paramount in his face.

"Nobody talks about my friends!"

Had Nate Goodrow been present, he would have told himself: This is it. This is the test. A man can learn everything there is to know about guns and gun fighting. But until he kills a man he's not a killer.

Cory stared at Thomas and thought: You're inviting this. This is what you've been wanting ever since the liquor hit you cross-ways. You've got to kill somebody and you picked me. You want it this way.

And there was a quick feeling of elation in Cory's heart. And no fear. Fear was so far away that it did not penetrate his mind even as an abstract thought.

Cory said: "I don't want to kill you, man." But he lied. He lied and he knew he was lying. He wanted nothing in the world so much as to test his skill against Deac Thomas.

Thomas grew dark in the face. "Why you spindlin' little maverick!"

Cory watched him with the cold detachment of an iced mountain peak. With sure instinct he looked at Thomas with unfocused eyes—eyes that took in the whole of the man—no particular part of him. Thus the slightest movement of any part of Thomas' body would register instantly.

The killer's stare.

Thomas went for his gun and Cory cut him down in his tracks. He burned the man down to his belt before his gun was half out of its holster.



Thomas never had a chance.

Cory holstered his right hand gun, stepped over Thomas and picked up the beer schooner. He drained it, then turned and walked out of the saloon. He mounted his *goff* and rode slowly out of town.

It was night and the darkness was comforting in that it matched the mood of Cory Balleau. The soft clop-clop of his mount was a restful rhythm.

Coldly the youth searched his mind—examined his emotions, for any change, any newness born of an act he had never before indulged. There was no change whatever.

He had just killed a man and it seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to do. It was as if he had been killing men all his life. He was neither elated nor depressed; there was within him only a desire for solitude—the solitude of the night. And, oddly, he was tired, as though he had just completed a full day's work.

He smiled grimly. Evidently killing a man was a job of work in itself.

NATE GOODROW was sitting on bench by the back door when Cory rode up. The bowl of Nate's pipe glowed cherry-red.

Cory disposed of his *goff* and came across the back yard. He dropped down on the bench beside Nate.

"The freight head finally got there," he said.

"You heard?"

"Met a man. He heard."

"It's sure a shame your uncle couldn't—had to be—"

"I know. It was a shame. This man's name was Thomas. Know anything about him?"

"Not much. Hasn't got too good a record."

"He knew Mel Dorken."

"Dorken was one of them too. Nobody on Terra felt bad when Frake and Snead and Dorken came to Mars."

"Snead was killed."

"That so?"

"Some night riders took him out and hung him."

"He was a slippery little cuss. Ain't at all surprised to hear he finished up at the end of a rope."

"They never caught the lynchers—or not before I left anyhow."

"Pretty hard to tie a kill on men like that."

There was a time of silence. Nate drew calmly on his pipe. Cory kicked at the dark earth with a boot-toe.

"You've been awfully good to me," Cory said. "I appreciate it."

Nate took his time before answering; "Ain't no call to bring that up, son."

"I wanted you to know that I appreciate it."

"Any time. Any time, son."

An empty spot.

"I'm heading north tomorrow."

"Thought you'd start getting restless. Better take that big black. He's got the weight for long hauls and I ain't seen anything faster for quite a spell."

"Thanks."

"No need to thank me."

Cory stood up, stretched himself, taking all the time needed to do it well.

"Guess I'll turn in."

"Good idea. You'll need sleep."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, son. Guess I'll sit a while."

THE SOUND of Cory's boots diminished into the house. Then he turned, came back and stood by the bench.



"Nate."

"Yeah?"

"That man Thomas. I killed him."

"Kind of figured you did."

"How did you know?"

"Oh, a hunch maybe. And the way you talked about him—in the past as though he wasn't with us any more."

"I beat him on the draw."

"You better hit out before dawn. Travel fast and get out of the Canal country."

"But it was fair. He reached first."

"He may have been among friends. You can't tell what they'll say about it."

"That's right."

Cory went to bed and lay open-eyed, staring at the ceiling. He was rested now. There wasn't a bit of weariness in him. Sleep was miles away.

But it came swiftly. Within three minutes his eyes were closed and he was breathing evenly.

Ngania had become a boom town. With the coming of the big ships the place hitched up its tattered pants and let out a whoop-hooray that was heard far across the prairie.

Lumber was now plentiful and the town expanded. Paint, plastic and cement became the order of the day, and land hungry Terrans flocked in, their eyes on the soil.

Frank Bates had moved up several rungs toward the goal of his ambitions. He had come to think of himself as the biggest man in the community—had grown used to the idea—had become a little more hard-faced—and far more rapacious.

He was hated and feared, now, but that made little difference to him. In fact the sense of power over his fellow-men had, for him, a heady taste. The black squares in his map stretched

in all directions, and he spent a great deal of time brooding over the squares which still remained white.

He had become the man to whom the people looked for leadership in spite of the fact that he was unpopular. Frank Bates' opinion was solicited on all important matters and that opinion had a way of becoming the majority opinion.

His relationship with Frake was a great deal more vague than anyone suspected; vague in the sense of a definite understanding. Frake, as Marshal of Ngania, ran the town, but he was careful to run it as Bates wished. And Frake was willing to ride along and bide his time. He drew his salary and accepted a certain amount of graft where it could be gotten, but he was careful not to overplay his hand. The man had an instinct for staying out of obvious trouble. Eventually he would make his killing and he was entirely willing to let events shape themselves without forcing them.

Times were on the upswing. He was content to watch.

Cory Balleau rode into Ngania, paused at the lower end of town. He lounged there in the saddle, totally unaware of how close upon the heels of his destiny he was treading.

It had grown. It wasn't the same town he'd left—Ngania. There were more people. The main street was transformed. This was something to stare at—something to get used to.

Cory touched the *goff's* flank and moved on. There was the gunsmith's shop. The window he'd smashed to steal the two guns was gone. A larger one had taken its place and there were more guns inside.

There were more guns outside too. Almost every male right hip was sporting a gun. The town had changed.



Well, I've changed too, Cory thought. That made it even.

He dismounted in front of the Golden King and surveyed the new plastic front. There was a look of prosperity here. Cory climbed the three stairs to door-level and pushed the door.

There wasn't much change inside. Only a new and longer mirror behind the bar. There was also a new bar-keep, a fat, aproned man who came down the bar and stood in front of Cory and did not recognize him.

Cory ordered beer. The schooners hadn't diminished in size and Cory leaned against the bar feeling the beer run cold into his stomach.

He was inspected covertly by the three or four other drinkers at the mahogany. They eyed his two guns and seemed to be trying to reconcile them with Cory's entirely apparent youth.

Rearward a poker game was going on at the old table. Cory had spotted Frake sitting in on this game; spotted him immediately upon entering. He watched Frake with a sense of disappointment. He had hoped to find someone else in the Golden King; someone who looked a great deal like the Marshal but who went under another name.

Mel Dorken.

**B**UT DORKEN was conspicuously among the absent. Cory finished his beer and set down the schooner. It was the sound of the glass hitting the bar that brought Frake's head up. Frake glanced idly forward and his eyes drifted back to his cards.

Then his head came up sharply. Cory Balleau. Why what the hell? John Balleau's nephew was back. The kid had a cock-eyed crust if Frake ever saw one. Frake scowled and got to his feet.

He moved forward with decisive strides, thumbs hooked in his pellet belt. He walked straight toward Cory. When he spoke his voice was hostile.

"Kind of nervy, coming back to this town, ain't you?"

There was genuine surprise in Cory's face: "Why? What's nervy about coming back to my home town?"

"Well, for one thing a couple of guns were stolen the night you left. Somebody smashed a window and pulled them right out of a store. They were just like the ones you're wearing. That's why I say you've got kind of a nerve."

Cory made no answer. He stepped casually away from the bar and faced Frake.

Frake said: "I think you and I better walk over to my office and have a little talk about those guns."

"We don't walk anywhere—together," Cory said.

"Now look here, son—"

Frake was curious about the boy—that odd motion of his. Almost a girlish motion wherein Cory raised his left arm from the elbow held rather close against his side. The hand was open, flat—stiff—with the palm out. It was sort of a salute, that motion; or rather like a girl getting ready to give a playful slap.

"If you take me anywhere, you take me with your gun, and I wouldn't reach for that if I were you."

Surprise and indignation. A scowl, and Frake said, "Why you damned little—" He reached for his gun.

Cory charred him down.

Cory holstered his right-hand gun and backed toward the door, his left hand up in the mock salute. No word was said. The witnesses could have been stone men. They stood frozen.



They heard the pound of hooves from the street. The sounds faded.

CORY BALLEAU rode out of Ngania, and the thought of pursuit was not foremost in his mind. Mainly, he considered the frustration of the incident in the Golden King. He had killed the wrong man, and the emotion engendered by so doing was one of irritation. Why couldn't he have been more fortunate? He had come to Ngania with one purpose—to kill Mel Dorken. Now, because of an unfortunate accident, the difficulty of his enterprise would be multiplied. Now there would be a manhunt. Poses would scour the country. Cory Balleau was a marked man. Reaching Dorken, now, would be a problem.

It was only at this point that Cory realized the direction in which he was traveling; a clear path, straight across-country toward the old place. This was pure foolishness. He should be heading west, into the rocky country where he could find sanctuary and get his bearings. This way, they would be on his heels in no time.

But the nostalgia within him—the urge for just a fleeting look at the house and the pond and the clean fields—won out, and he kept on going. There was the creek, a bright green line on the prairie; off to the left, the grove where he'd lain in the grass and Kay's golden hair—

He thought of her for the first time in weeks. Even upon arriving in Ngania, his mind had found no time to give her even a moment. His grim face softened a trifle now. Had she forgotten him? Probably. She was young and, regardless of the previous attachment, she would forget quickly, he thought. He rambled thus, without the slightest realization that, at twenty-two, he had excluded himself from

the category of youth. She was a nice girl. He granted this, wished momentarily, and vaguely, that things could have worked out differently, and then forgot her.

There it was. He reined up and stared, straightening, standing erect in the stirrups.

The place was deserted. Evidently Frank Bates had been too busy to give attention to his new property. Or perhaps there were technicalities created by the death of John Balleau.

It occurred to Cory, that, even now, he himself could be there working the homestead, carrying on in his uncle's place. He could have gotten the money from Nate Goodrow to pay off the loan. He thought of this not as an opportunity overlooked, but as merely a curious point. Curious in the sense that such a course had never entered his mind until this moment.

He took in the scene before him, deserted, weed-grown, bleak even under the hot sun of an unclouded Martian sky.

He nudged the *goff* and moved forward. Then, glancing back, he immediately pulled up.

THEY WERE already on his trail; three riders a mile rearward, coming at a gallop directly toward him. Cory felt only a sense of irritation. He had expected them and it was no surprise, but couldn't they have given him a few more minutes? He swung off-course, westward, and went into a dead run. He wasn't greatly worried. He knew of a place among the rocks over in the ridges where he could stand a posse off all day. Only three men. He could no doubt get one of them, or even two. Then, in the darkness, he could slide out.

The three riders pulled up as Cory started his westward run. They



seemed to be in conference. Then they veered their own course and came on.

Oddly, they made no attempt to cut him off. That might not have been possible, but it was certainly worth a try. Cory wondered. And only three of them. That was hardly a posse to send after a man who had just gunned down the marshal. Odd indeed. Cory traveled on, hugging the course of Cotter's Creek, following it until twisted away to the south.

The three men did likewise—holding their distance, even shortening it somewhat.

Cory studied the situation. Then he pulled the *goff* into a slower gait and hauled a rifle out of its boot. The rifle was loaded and ready and it seemed worth while to risk a brush with the three riders. If they dared come close enough, there would speedily be only two of them. Two, Cory felt, was better than three. And possibly Dorken—

The *goff* traveled at a canter now, and the three riders came on. Half a mile; a quarter. Cory pulled his mount to a walk. Closer now and he could see that Dorken was not one of the three. The *goff* came to a halt as Cory decided on a try at four hundred yards.

He dismounted and went flat on the ground, cuddling the rifle stock against his cheek. The lead man came into his sights.

But the men were acting strangely. They were all afoot now. As Cory watched, they unbuckled their side arms and threw them in a pile on the ground. Then one of them yelled something unintelligible and started walking forward. His hands were in the air.

He came silently forward. At a hundred yards, Cory shunted the rifle barrel upward and called: "That's far enough."

The man replied, "We want to talk, pardner! We ain't after you. We're friends."

"Hold your distance. I haven't got any friends in these parts."

"If you're the man that gunned Frake down, you got three of them, mister. We come to throw in with you."

Cory considered this. He had never seen any of these men before. This could be a trick, but if so, it was a far riskier one than the three realized. Cory bit at his lower lip, thoughtfully, then called: "All right. Walk up, but keep your hands high."

The man trudged forward. He was slight of build, hollow-cheeked. He had large blue eyes; eyes tending to bulge.

**H**E STOPPED at twenty feet when Cory said: "Your friends back there. Tell them to face the other way. Then I won't have to watch them so close."

The man grinned. He turned and began waving, making circular motions with his hands. Finally the two men got the drift and stood facing away. They lowered their arms and stood with thumbs hooked in their belts.

"You wouldn't be trying to hold me here would you?" Cory asked.

"What for?"

"A posse maybe—coming on behind."

"Nothing like that. You're John Balleau's youngster, ain't you? Cory Balleau?"

"That's right."

"Knew your uncle. Knew him pretty well from meeting him in Ngania. Name's Jim Kendall."

"I never went to town much."

"No. I never seen you there and I guess you never saw me. But you heard of something I had a hand in."

"What was that?"



"Hanging Tip Snead."

"You—lynched Tip Snead?"

"Not lynch, son. We executed him. We gave him the same as he gave Sam Bendorf."

"You and who else?"

"There was five of us. We all lost our land to Frank Bates. Two pulled out—they had wives and kids, but I'm still here and that's Mike Taber and Paul Thompson back there."

"Why did you follow me?"

"To throw in with you. It was luck, mainly, that got us out of town before the posse. Thompson was in the drinking hall and saw you kill Frake. We was hanging around town and so we lit out after you."

Cory's expression mirrored uncertainty. He studied the man. There were other things too. Did he want these men to side with him? Had he any need of allies?

"Look, Balleau," Kendall said. "You better make up your mind quick. We ain't wishing you any harm and standing around out here could be a mite dangerous—for all of us maybe. They're getting a posse together and it's probably on its way now and you left a trail a blind man could follow. If you don't want us, say the word and we'll be on our way."

Cory made his decision with characteristic swiftness and certainty. Once made, it was done and finished. No backward glance.

"Tell them to come on and let's get going."

Kendall yelled and waved, whereupon his companions gathered up their gear and remounted. They came forward at a gallop. As Cory watched them, his thought was the logical one for his single-track mind to produce:

I wonder if this will get me within shooting distance of Mel Dorken any quicker?

THEY KNEW of a comparatively isolated stop in the rocky country further west. An optimistic squatter had come and gone and there was a sod leanto against an eighteen-foot wall with a corral further in and a narrow exit out into the boulders a half mile back.

There was bacon and beans from Cory's pack and Mike Taber did the cooking. He had taken Cory's rifle slug through the flesh of his forearm and had a strip of red handkerchief as a bandage. He was a lean, bronzed man with no expression except one of sullen resentment. He did not mention the wound.

Paul Thompson was bigger than the other two combined. He seemed darker than even sun-burn could make him, and looked much more foreign than his name. After eating, he went to the mouth of the canyon and sat down on a rock, taking over watch duty without a word.

The remaining three sat on the dark ground and put their backs against the sod wall.

"You're a funny one," Kendall said to Cory. "I can't make you out, Balleau."

"Why funny?"

"I don't know. It's like you don't realize what you did, or something—like you've got no nerves maybe. God, man! You rode into Ngania and pulled your gun and shot the town marshal! You realize that?"

"I shot the wrong man."

"Who were you gunning for?"

"Mel Dorken. He's the one I came north to kill."

Taber scratched his chin. "He was the one that shot your uncle. Anyway that's how it got noised around. Self defense."

"Uh-huh. I shot Frake in self-defense too," Cory said with bitterness.



Kendall turned his head and eyed Cory with speculation: "You aiming to stick around 'til you get a crack at Dorken?"

"I'm going to kill him."

"Seems to me you went about it in a bad way. Before, you could have walked up and done it anytime. Now maybe it could be a mite hard to get close enough."

"I'll figure out a way."

Kendall sat silent, mulling something over in his mind, and Cory said: "That lynching. You men moved awfully fast. What was behind it? What did you expect to gain?"

Kendall's eyes narrowed. "What do you expect to gain by killing Dorken?"

Cory thought for a moment. "Yes. I see what you mean."

"We were all in the same boat. We'd been done out of our land by Bates and we all knew Bendorf well. It was only plain justice, and we figured we had to strike back. Guess we had a hazy idea to stir up the settlers too, but it didn't work out that way."

"Frake sure wanted to get his hands on you."

"And Bates too. He still does. That's why we were blocked on trying to stir up trouble for him. With that reward offered we had to keep our traps tight shut. We was even worried about each other for a while. Then two of the boys drifted on and us three kind of stuck together."

"Why did you want to hook up with me?"

This left Kendall a little at a loss. It was difficult for the man to explain why they'd instantly thought of Cory as being that leader. When driven to direct statement, it seemed absurd of Kendall, a forty-year-old man, to offer allegiance to a boy scarcely out of his teens.

He was never required to put it in words, however because, at that moment, Thompson called back from the mouth of the canyon:

"Trouble coming! Straight up the line."

THE THREE by the cabin came to their feet. Kendall's face showed genuine surprise. "God! They track fast. Thought we'd be safe for the night."

At the gorge entrance they looked silently out at the trouble. A dozen riders a mile away coming hard and fast.

"We've got to move," Cory said. "Hit for your goffs!"

Immediately there was the whine of two rifles, a single sound, and five men rose up not a hundred yards due south. Thompson leaped back, cursing. He flung an arm across his eyes.

The four dived back into cover and Kendall yelled: "You hit, Paul?"

"Molten rock in the face."

"This is too open," Cory said. "We can't make a stand here. Back to the leanto."

They ran silently. There was a hundred yards to cover before the attackers made the canyon mouth. Pellets were whining around the men's ears as they tumbled through the door.

Immediately Kendall was pushing the barrel of a rifle out the window.

"Don't use that," Cory said, sharply.

Kendall turned, questioning silently.

"You could only get one or two at the most," Cory said. "Maybe they'll get cocky and try moving in before the others get here. We've got to get them all—the whole five—or we're rats in a trap."

Thompson was shaking his head. The man seemed dazed, completely off



balance. "I didn't see that first bunch. They must of come up out of the ground."

"They circled and worked back down country. They must have spotted us from across the prairie. Maybe they've got a glass and saw us come in here."

"No wonder the posse was coming straight as a string," Kendall said. He was peering out the window and he saw that Cory was correct about the necessity of killing the five men. It had to be done before the main body arrived. This because the five, with rifles, covered the open area between the leanto and the horses.

"Maybe they'll get within pistol shot if we stay quiet. Then we shoot and we don't miss."

Taber was calmly lifting pellets from his belt and putting them in a pile near the door. When he had a respectable heap, he sat down cross-legged and awaited developments. So far he had not spoken a word. His jaws continued to work evenly upon a cud of tobacco.

Outside, the five invaders showed signs of exuberance. There were yells echoing up the canyon. Already the men were celebrating a victory.

Cory watched as two of them came cautiously forward, moving close to the canyon wall. They evidently expected to draw fire. When none came they hesitated, held a short conference in low tones and waved the other three forward.

But only one of the three came further into the gorge to join the two. Cory frowned. They were playing it smart. Back near the entrance, two rifle barrels peered out from between rocks. The advance was going to be covered.

One of the advance guard yelled, "Come out you yellow-bellies! Crawl

out o' your hole with your hands up. We'll see you get a fair trial!"

"And a quick hanging" another of them bellowed. There followed a series of hearty guffaws. They were in high good spirits.

CORY FINGERED his right-hand gun and studied the dark future. Not given to outbursts of anger, he nonetheless choked on quick rage as it welled up within him. Not rage at anyone or anything, but rather at the nebulous, mocking fate that was blocking him at every turn. Instead of getting closer to Dorken, he was coming closer to destruction. With plans laid for a safe hideout, he had to meet these three men and get himself maneuvered into a trap like this. His luck, definitely bad, had grown worse.

In a sudden spasm of frustration he dived for the door. He jumped into the open, landing, like a cat, on his toes. His left arm came around in a swift chopping motion, three times. Instantly the covering rifles whined a challenge. But Cory was back behind the shelter of foot-thick sod blocks, and Kendall was gaping through the window, lips hanging slack.

Kendell stiffened his mouth and muttered. "My great God in heaven! What kind of shooting was that? The whole three—dead! Like they was cut down with a blow torch."

"Damn!" Cory said, fervently. "We might have made it. I'm too slow. I'm just too damn slow!"

He spoke as the approaching cavalcade arrived in a great clatter and sent a dust cloud lazing up the canyon. Now the entrance was alive with rifles. Glinting steel was poked out through cracks and from behind rocks. The trap was sprung.

Cory surveyed the gorge entrance, standing well back from the door. He



reached out a hand and picked up his rifle from where it leaned against the sod wall. Going down on one knee, he spotted a rather unwary gunman who had climbed to a vantage point four feet up the gorge wall. The man's head and shoulders were in plain sight. Cory lowered his sights on the bulging forehead and pressed the switch. The pellet went exactly where he sent it, and the man's lower torso came upward in agonized reflex and then tipped forward like a tree falling. He hit the canyon floor and flopped down like half a tired rag doll.

Kendall fired three times through the window, but he scored no hits. Then a positive hail of pellets drove the trapped men back from the window of the leanto.

Cory sat on his heels in one corner and slid three pellets into his right-hand gun. He glanced out through the door and said: "We've got an hour of daylight left, and we've got to make a break before it's gone."

"That's plumb suicide," he said, mildly.

"Probably, but it's surer death to stay here after dark. There's no moon tonight and they'd just move in on us. If we wait until dark to slip out, we'll find them three feet from the door and they'd blast us to hell. We've got to run for it, one at a time."

"We won't make it though," Taber said. There was no fear, but rather a regretful sadness in his voice.

**T**HOMPSON scowled. "Better'n waiting for a sure bullet, though. He's right. We got to break."

A silence filled the sod leanto. It lasted only a few seconds, but it seemed like hours. Then Cory said:

"Want to draw straws?"

"On who'll go first, you mean?" Kendall asked. He looked at the others. "Personally I'd just as soon have

Balleau do the covering."

"The first man will have the best chance," Cory said. "The second and third, not so good. The fourth—" Cory shrugged. "He'll have no cover."

Simultaneously, both Kendall and Thompson looked at Taber. Taber caught their eyes and said: "I ain't in no hurry."

"You get back there and have the *goffs* ready," Kendall said. "We'll all be along."

Taber peeled off his belt and Cory said: "You cover a hundred yards and you'll be all right. It will take a lot of luck to get you after that."

"I'll make it," Taber said.

Several men of the posse had moved up now; had skirted the gorge walls and found shelter within easy pistol range of the leanto door. They kept up a desultory fire, but appeared to be waiting. In this, they were sensible. Why risk their lives when darkness would soon come to their aid?

Cory stepped to the window. He studied the layout before he said: "I'll take the close ones. Kendall, you use your rifle through the door and try to hold back their long-gun fire from back behind."

Kendall said nothing. He knelt down, slightly back from the doorway.

"I'll give you the word," Cory said.

He raised his guns, selected some targets, and said:

"Jump!"

Mike Taber went out fast. He veered west, up the gorge, running low in a straight line.

Instantly Cory's guns began to bark. He switched the shots carefully. There was a scream from a posseman who had come to his feet to level a pistol.

Kendall's rifle filled the leanto with its whine, slugs spewing out as fast as he could eject empty shells.

Then Thompson, peering through



the doorway at another angle, said: "He's down. They got him."

Cory and Kendall turned and saw Taber prone and motionless some forty yards up the canyon.

"I think I know who got him," Cory gritted. "Give me that rifle."

There were cheers from outside—sounds of savage elation—as Cory went flat on the ground inside the door. From behind a boulder, far back, he saw a lean figure come half erect and lift his hat like an actor acknowledging applause.

"Was it you, Lafe?" A voice yelled.

"My pellet," the man called back. "I want the bounty!"

There was laughter, punctuated by the whine of Cory's rifle and the lean figure stood perfectly still as the hat dropped out of sight behind the rock. There was a deathly pause and every eye watched the man pitch forward to hang over the big rock.

"Now!" Cory said. "Both of you! Run like hell! They're off guard!"

**T**HE TWO reacted instantly. Thompson went lumbering out first, with Kendall in his wake, while Cory began pumping a deadly stream of pellets into the posse.

He was in no position to watch the progress of Thompson and Kendall. He kept on switching until his own gun was empty. Then he snatched up Kendall's and emptied that. He knew, with absolute certainty, that he had killed nor hit no one, but he had kept many shots from following the two runners.

Now he moved around and looked up the canyon. Thompson was sprawled on the ground about twenty-five feet from the body of Taber. Kendall was not in sight.

"Kendall made it," Cory breathed. "The sons-of-bitches didn't get Kendall!"

Cory threw the rifle into a corner and saw Bates' makings lying there on the floor. Cory seldom smoked, but now he squatted down and carefully rolled a cigarette. He lighted it with a match from his own pocket and drew the smoke into his lungs. It tasted good. He blew out a white cloud and watched the smoke curl, listening the while to shouts and comments from outside.

"Set us up another duck!" some one bellowed, and Cory thought: I wonder where that one is? I'd like to kill him. I'd sure like to.

Suddenly Cory felt the urge to yell. "Ten shots to hit a cigarette!" he bellowed. "Go home and get some practice!"

"It's Balleau! That's Cory Balleau!"

Cory felt loose and easy. "Who'd you think it was? Some waddy who handles a gun like you do?"

There was laughter and now an atmosphere of mock hilarity, but with a deadly undertone.

"We've heard some about your shootin' Balleau! I'll throw up a rock! See can you hit it!"

Baiting the trapped animal.

"All right. Throw it."

A head and a hand appeared in the canyon—up from behind a dirt hummock. The hand tossed a pebble into the air.

Cory fired once, snapped the switch of his gun with a quick chop of his left hand.

There was a gargled scream and the man who had tossed the pebble slapped both hands to a face that wasn't there and went over backwards.

"Missed," Cory yelled. "Damned if I didn't miss! What do you know about that?"

There was a concerted howl of rage against which Cory laughed as he got



to his feet. He felt good. In all his life he had never felt so lighthearted and happy.

What am I doing in here, he thought. I'm going out—now. Nobody's going to stop me.

WITH THE sun low, he stepped out into the open and fired three shots.

"It's Cory Ball—" The man who shouted died with the rest of the name unspoken.

Cory's second pellet burned down another gunman, bringing him into the open, no longer caring about cover. The third melted rock and drove a third gunman down.

Cory turned and ran. He ran on his toes, light-footed feeling like a cloud. The pellets singing around him were of no consequence. He made fifty yards and glanced back.

They were up now—all of them up and silent and desperately shooting. Cory killed two of them with four shots—deadly pellets that either killed or missed entirely. Then he ran again, holstering his empty gun and moving the left one still in his right hand.

But he fired no more. He moved out of range, beyond the rocks, on flying feet, and there was Kendall holding two *goffs*, waiting.

"You made it," Kendall said. He could have been speaking of nice weather.

"My number's not up yet," Cory grinned, and they mounted and galloped up the canyon.

Cory thought: I wonder if Dorken was there. Probably, but he sure kept under cover.

Mel Dorken was with the posse. Acting town marshal now, he had to be there, but he saw no reason for risking his life, and directed operations from the rear.

He noted, with satisfaction, the deaths of Thompson and Taber. He'd always felt that they had been involved in Tip Snead's death and this proved it. Otherwise why would they tie up with an outlaw like Cory Balleau.

Elated with the way things were going, Dorken turned and looked back over the red prairie. He narrowed his eyes into the lowering sun. There was a rider approaching at a gallop and it was—

Damned if it wasn't! That yellow-haired skirt he'd been drooling over for months!

Dorken forgot the posse. He forgot that he was a lawman. He forgot Cory Balleau and everything else but the desire to get that yellow hair in his hands.

And a plan to accomplish this didn't have to be formulated. It was there in his mind, instantly, as though it had been lying dormant, waiting to be put into action.

He turned to a man close by and said: "That's Bates' daughter coming hell for leather. We don't want any women here. I'll head her off and get her back to her dad. Keep things going. I'll be back."

With that he mounted and rode off to meet the girl. He held his horse directly in her path, forcing her to rein up or swerve around him. She reined up and Dorken said:

"It's too late to see anything. It's all over."

Kay Bates whitened. A hand went to her breast. She spoke two words, forming a question: "Cory—Balleau?"

Dorken exulted inwardly. He'd been right! Balleau was the reason for those trips she used to take into the country—out toward Cotter's Creek. She'd met the boy out there, and now that attachment dropped neatly into Dorken's plan.



**WHEN A MAN** changes as fast as Cory Balleau had changed, there are always lapses; recessions—if not of a physical skill, then of a mental nature. A reversion of some sort even if it takes only a mild form.

With Cory it was a quick wave of wonder sweeping through his consciousness. He was riding through the night beside Kendall—through the rocky country at the western edge of the farmland. He looked at the dim shadow beside him and said:

"I killed at least four men back there and I've killed two others. A man should feel something after doing that—regret maybe, but I don't feel any different. I just feel sort of empty—like an old bucket."

"I guess that all depends on how it comes about; the killing I mean. Why did you come back to this town, son?"

"To get Mel Dorken."

"In other words you were just gunning for one man—not six or seven or whatever number got in your way."

"I guess that's right. But still I don't regret anything I've done. That's what bothers me. Shouldn't I at least feel a little sorry?"

Kendall's answer was a short, bitter laugh. "I don't know, boy. I guess it's hardly any use worrying about it though. I guess none of us had the cut of outlaws—you or I or Thompson or Taber. We just did what we thought we had to—to protect our own. Now Thompson and Taber are dead and here we are with a posse on our trail. Guess we didn't go about it right."

"I didn't see Dorken with the posse," Cory said.

Kendall was silent for a long minute. Then he said: "Cory, why don't you give up the idea—why don't you forget about killing Dorken?"

"Forget it?" Cory turned in his saddle to stare at Kendall.

"That's right. What's over is over. We were on the short end of the stick and whatever we did to get off was wrong for us. The proof of that is where we are now—can't push our heads over a rock without getting them blown off."

"I rode clear up from Texas to kill Dorken."

"So you had a long ride. But what good's killing him going to do you? Ain't you killed enough men? Six is a pretty good record for the short time you've been in the business. Why not call it quits right now and we'll ride west and start all over. Maybe we can take a crack at gold mining down the South Canal way. Leave Dorken alone. Somebody'll get around to killing him before too long."

Cory rode in silence. For many months now he had thought of no future in which the killing of Dorken wasn't included. Yet he found himself open-minded enough to give such a future some serious consideration now that Kendall suggested it. But why so suddenly open-minded? He had turned a deaf ear to Nate Goodrow's warnings that the path he chose was a bleak and cheerless one. That had been such a short time ago. So whence had his present doubts sprung?

**HE SAID**, "Aren't you making a pretty sharp switch, Kendall? A few hours back you were all set for the outlaw trail. There wasn't anything left for any of us inside the law. Now you've changed your tune."

Kendall took some time before answering. He appeared to be seeking an answer to Cory's question: "I see your point, but a lot happened in that short time. Thompson and Taber are dead. There's been a battle, with other men



killed. We've had a sample of what it's like and I don't think I've got the stomach for it."

Cory smiled grimly. "When you throw pellets they usually kill men."

"It's just that I can't see any use to it, and I have a feeling we're both in the same boat. Now take me—I did something—or helped do something—in the heat of anger that seemed just and right. It's a hard country out here and the law is slow in reaching it, so it looked as though we had the right to take it into our own hands."

He stopped and thought some more, then went on with greater surety: "But what has it got us—me? Am I better off for having done it? Have I got my place back? Am I a respected citizen? Snead's dead, but how did that help me? I'm running from a posse now."

There was enough stark logic in Kendall's talk to make Cory uncomfortable.

"Your situation's the same only you haven't killed the man you're after yet. But you're in a pretty good spot to see what it's going to get you afterwards."

"I'm way out on the limb now," Cory said.

"I know how you're figuring," Kendall returned. "You think what's the difference. One more man. What's another killing now more or less? But I've got a feeling, son, that it's damned important where you stop. Why don't you forget about Dorken and head west with me?"

They rode in silence, veering back into the prairie country. Cory should have been tired but he wasn't. Nor was there any inner demand for food.

"What you've really been trying to say," he observed, "is that you don't think either of us are born outlaws."

"What I'm trying to say is that I

hope it isn't too late. The law is after us now—sure—and it will stay after us, but it's what a man thinks of himself that counts. If we stop now we've got a certain justification for our past acts—small maybe, but a mite comforting. You take Dorken though, son, and you're a killer inside as well as out. There'll be no turning back then."

And now Cory was keenly aware of what had caused the uneasiness within him. He remembered the ease with which he had shot down those men. Almost with pleasure he had watched them fall lifeless and that bothered him now. Did he enjoy killing? He *had* enjoyed it. Now he feared that sensation he had known as drug addicts fear the white powder. He was suddenly afraid of himself as a killer.

"There's a limit to what a man can stand," Kendall said. "I'm about beat out. Let's get a little sleep while the night holds and you can think over what I said."

They roped out their mounts in a place where the grass touched their ankles and stretched out on the ground with their bed-rolls for pillows. Kendall was asleep in three minutes, but Cory lay wide-eyed, looking up at the stars. Oddly enough, he wasn't thinking of Mel Dorken. He thought of Kay Bates and there was the wish in him that her bright head could be close to him now, resting on his arm. He stared up at the stars for a long time. Then he sat up and called out to Kendall.

Kendall stirred and mumbled. Cory said:

"How about the north country? We can start at dawn. We can be out of the state in an hour—up in the rough country."

"Fine, son. Fine."

**F**RANK BATES rode the prairie alone in the darkness. He followed



no particular route but cut a meandering trail that wound in a circle roughly northeast of Ngania.

At times he pulled his horse to a halt and called out: "Kay! Kay! Where are you? It's your father, Kay!"

But there was never an answer, and Frank Bates would ride on, knowing it to be foolish, but unable to do otherwise.

There was panic in his heart and a roiling of emotions that made him physically weak.

She had gone off at first word that the posse had Balleau trapped in the rocky gorge. Bates had followed later, to bring her back, to drag her if necessary, but she had already left.

They told him she'd left with Dorken. Dorken had felt that the canyon was no place for a girl and had said that he intended to see her home.

Bates' fear had been a small trickle of ice water through his mind when he'd heard that. Strange indeed that an Acting Town Marshal would leave important fugitives holed up in a canyon for any such reason as that.

Then, when Kay and Dorken failed to appear in Ngania, Bates went sick at the possibilities. Now he was wandering the prairie, unnerved by the appalling thing that he felt was happening.

Where was Kay? Where was Dorken?

So many things clarified for Bates now. These men he'd used to further his ends. Had he used them or were they using him? He'd always been somewhat afraid of Dorken, but with Frake to stand between, the danger had appeared small. He had seen Dorken looking at Kay more than once and had been annoyed. Now he realized that those looks had been far more sinister than he'd realized. Or had they?

Possibly his natural anxiety of the moment was magnifying his recollections. He rode on through the whispering grasses. At intervals he called out: "Kay! Kay! Where are you? Kay!"

**T**HE DECISION Cory made seemed to lift a cloud from his mind. He awoke just before dawn and was surprised at the eagerness with which he opened his eyes. There was a quickening, a sense of expectancy that warmed him. Somehow the world seemed new. He faced what lay ahead with an enthusiasm he hadn't known for a long long time.

He watched the first faint signs of morning come out of the east, and when dawn broke he was on a nearby rise, checking for signs of water.

To the northwest lay dim ridges that were far higher than they seemed. Soon he would be crossing those mountains, moving toward a new life. The thought was pleasant.

Cory spotted a meandering creek a quarter of a mile northward, but no sign of life in any direction. He returned and got the horses and took them to the creek. While they drank he stripped down and jumped into the icy water, rubbing himself down with clean sand.

Dressed again he returned to camp and found Kendall dressed. He had bacon frying over a small fire. When the meat was cooked, Kendall stamped out the fire and they wolfed the bacon with cold biscuits.

"We'll head straight for the Red Hills," Kendall said. "Then we can roam on west on our own time. Maybe we'll hit something we like."

"I'd like to take a crack at gold mining," Cory said.

They were ready to go now and Cory pulled up at the top of the rise and twisted in the saddle. Kendall turned and rode back: "Ain't regret-



ting your decision, are you, son?"

Cory shook his head: "Not for a second. I'd have liked to go back home once more though—just to look the old place over. I wonder what Bates will do with it."

"I heard he was going to build there himself. I think he suckered your uncle out of it. Frank Bates is a slick article. Don't think John Balleau would have signed a three-month note unless he was tricked into it."

Cory didn't answer. That was all over and done with now. Part of a past that was water over the fall. A past to be forgotten. And, looking back toward the old place, Cory realized that the hardest part of it to forget would be Kay Bates. There was a definite longing when he thought of her. Too late now, though, he told himself.

He swung his *goff* toward the northwest and nudged it with a heel. Then he pulled up again and looked back. Kendall hadn't moved.

"A rider over yonder," Kendall said. "Maybe we overstayed our welcome."

Cory whirled back and they sat squinting southeast. The rider was over a mile away.

"Seems to be alone," Cory said, "and not coming toward us. Going straight north. Probably some home-steader."

"We ought to get behind a hill maybe until he's out of sight."

"The hell with him. Let's get moving."

Still Kendall hesitated, his eyes squinted: "Something funny about that horse. It doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Look. It stopped to crop grass."

"You've got better eyes than I have," Cory said.

"They're pretty good," Kendall said.

"Let's cut across east on the other side of that rise," Cory said. "We

can keep out of sight and get closer."

Kendall shook his head doubtfully. "It's damn foolishness, but come on. I'm kind of curious myself."

They rode east at an easy lope, covered a half mile, and Kendall moved up to a vantage point.

"It's a—say! Damned if it ain't a girl!"

"What's a girl doing out here?"

CORY WAS up beside him leaning forward in the saddle.

"Looks like she's in some kind of trouble," Kendall said.

But Cory was racing down the slope, the steel dust sending a cloud of dust up behind. Kay Bates! What was she doing out here? And with her blouse torn!

He came closer. Her yellow hair was loose and hanging free down her back. The blouse was only shreds.

Cory reined up and was off his horse and drawing her out of the saddle. "Kay! Kay—for God's sake! What happened? Tell me!"

Her eyes were dull and empty. They stared through him as though he didn't exist and seemed to be seeing some horrible picture beyond him.

"Kay! Don't you know me? It's Cory! Cory Balleau! You've been hurt. Talk to me!"

She made an effort but it was hard to force out the words. Her lips moved: "He had a bottle of whisky and he got drunk. Then he went to sleep. I sneaked out."

"Who got drunk? Where?"

"At your old place. He told me you were there and I went with him. But it was a trick—just a trick to get me—"

"Who?"

She passed a hand over her eyes. She appeared not to hear Cory—to forget he was there. Then she raised her eyes and said:



"Mel Dorken. It was Mel Dorken."

Kendall reined up close by, as Cory leaped to his own saddle. "Bring her along," Cory yelled. "I've got to go back to the old place. Bring her. I can't wait!"

He was off across the prairie punishing the surprised steel dust into top effort.

Dorken again! Dorken—the pawn fate had used to cross Cory Balleau from the very beginning. Dorken again—and gone was the new hope, the new dream, the urge to build something solid before it was too late. Dorken was back and with him all of Cory's cold rage; all the determination and deadly purpose that had driven him to the south and through the long months of practice in the art of the gun.

And it was as though the other—the later urge—had never existed. Cory thought of this now-dead hope and realized how foolish it had been. This was his destiny. This was what he had trained himself for. He had lived for one purpose. To kill Mel Dorken had been his objective in life. Now he was going to do it and it would be enough reward in itself. What happened afterward was scarcely worth a thought.

As Cory thundered on a *goffman* over to the west reined in his mount. He was Frank Bates and he beheld a strange cavalcade. A rider thundering southeast at a killing pace and further back two others coming on—coming slower but in the same direction.

Bates strained his eyes. He studied the rearward two, saw a wisp of bright yellow and a high-stepping sorrel *goff*. Bates' heart leaped as he sent his own *goff* racing toward the sorrel.

CORY LEFT his *goff* up Cotter's Creek and approached the house

on foot. He came downstream, hugging the thronga, and had cover to a spot fifty feet from the kitchen door. He separated the throngas and surveyed the house. All was quiet. There was a gray blanket stretched across the window facing the pond.

Had Dorken left? There was no sign of a *goff* anywhere around. Right gun in hand, Cory left the *goff* corpse and raced toward the back porch. He crossed it in long careful steps. No sound from within or without. Utter silence.

Cory wrapped his left hand around the door knob, turned it slowly. At that moment there came the sound of the others approaching. Cory frowned. Why couldn't they stay back and wait? Why did they have to barge in? Kendall should know that this was strictly Cory Balleau's kill. Cory threw open the door and leaped into the kitchen.

He leaped straight into a whine of guns and his whole left side seemed to fly to pieces. He heard a voice—Dorken's voice—grating on his ears:

"Wise little hombre, huh? Thought you was catching Mel Dorken off guard! The day you can do that won't never come, Balleau!"

The force of the pellet melting Cory's side spun him completely around, but he kept on moving across the room to crash to the floor near the entrance to the living room. The gun fell where he was hit and as he lay stretched on the floor there was no pain but it seemed that all his life and blood and strength were pouring from the gap left by Dorken's pellet. A wave of weakness such as he had never known, swept over him. Raising even his head was an effort.

He saw Dorken's huge form looming above him, saw the outlaw's gun poised.

Then Dorken lowered the gun and



went to the kitchen door. He opened it a crack and stood looking out, thumbing the switch of his gun nervously.

Cory rolled over and reached back on his hip with his right hand to come up with a razor-edge knife. I've got to have the strength, he thought. The strength has got to come from somewhere.

The strength came from somewhere, maybe from the boy's heart which was about all he had left. Bracing himself on his left arm, he half straightened, brought the knife over in a full-sweeping arc, and sent it toward Dorken's back.

A prayer rode with the knife.

It whanged into Dorken's back, dead center, high between the shoulder blades. A yell came from the outlaw's lips and he fell; but the fall was clumsy—ungainly—as though his body had turned to tallow.

He lay stretched out in the doorway and there was a look of surprise on his face. Slowly the surprise turned to horror and Dorken's expression was a terrible thing.

His deep voice went shrill as he cursed. "I can't move! I can't feel nothing. I ain't dead but I can't feel nothing!"

Only his head and eyes and facial muscles moved as he lay there on the floor. The face had turned sickly white and his eyes stared at the gun three inches from his hand. But the hand might as well have been made of stone, because the knife had entered his spine, completely paralyzing his body.

Now Mel Dorken knew fear. He knew the panic of utter helplessness as he watched Cory crawl slowly across the floor.

Inch by inch the boy came, each movement of his body an individual

effort requiring concentration. Closer he came and the hoof beats outside ended in a clatter close by the door and Dorken lay perfectly still, his eyes glazed in terror.

"No! No! For God's sake kid. No!" And again the thin high scream of an animal.

Cory was on top of him now and Cory's mind had gone beyond reason. There was no restraint in him. All the hatred built up in the years now past was in his face as his stiff thumbs moved toward Dorken's staring eyes.

Then there was another scream, clearer, younger, and not an animal scream and Kay Bates was clutching at Cory's hands, pulling him back.

"No! No, darling! You don't know what you're doing! Whatever he deserves you can't do that to him!"

Thus Kay Bates saved Mel Dorken from blindness during the last two hours of his life. And because of her, Cory would have one less horror to remember.

When she tore the bloody shirt from the wound in his side, he didn't feel it. He was unconscious.

**T**HEN, ON A later day, Kay brought visitors into the bedroom in the Bates home where she had nursed Cory for six long weeks: "Visitors," she said, and left.

Cory said: "Hello, Nate. What brought you north?"

"You," Goodrow said, gravely. He indicated the second man: "This is Bart Ludlow—an old friend of mine and a big muck-a-muck at the capital now. The governor sent him out to investigate this mess."

Ludlow, a lean, mustached man, looked down with frank admiration: "So this is the great Cory Balleau," he said.

"Nothing great about him," Good-



row muttered. "Just a kid that got too big for his pants."

Cory looked at Ludlow: "Are you a lawman?" he asked.

Ludlow nodded.

Cory's face was white and gaunt. He turned and reached down under the edge of the bed. When his hand came up there dangled from it a cartridge belt and two holstered guns.

"You'd better take them," he said gravely.

Then Goodrow denied his muttered words of a few moments before by saying: "There's an honor, Bart. You can tell your grandchildren that Cory Balleau handed you his guns."

Goodrow sat on the edge of the bed and talked while Ludlow stood with his hands behind his back.

"All hell's blown up around here the past few weeks. They got plenty of information out of Dorken before he died. And Frank Bates went completely to pieces. He had the heart scared out of him and all he wants to do is liquidate and get out of the country."

"Are we going to get decent law around here now?" Cory asked.

"That's right," Ludlow said. "And it's here to stay."

"Just between us," Nate Goodrow went on, "things are pretty mixed up now. Nobody's sure what charges will stand and what ones will be dropped. Looks like Bates will be allowed to

settle the Bendorf killing by settling some money on the widow."

Cory had made no inquiry concerning his own fate and finally Goodrow got around to that.

"You'll have to stand trial—no doubt about it. There's a big point in your favor though. Frake was a crook from the word go, Dorken deserved killing, and that posse was nothing but a bunch of outlaws Frake had gathered in from all over the west. I'm not saying you'll come off scot free but I doubt if you'll hang. Bates will be a state's witness."

"When it's all over," Cory said, "does that South Canal offer still stand?"

"What about the guy you killed down there?" Goodrow asked.

"I'll take my chances there too."

"Don't think anybody'll appear against you on that one. Sure, the offer still goes."

"I'll have a wife with me. How about that?"

"What do you mean how about it? How can you raise a family without a wife? If you haven't got any kids who you going to brag to about what a gunman their old man was?"

"I don't think I'll ever feel like bragging about that," Cory said, smiling wanly. "Frankly, I hate guns."

THE END

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# Cycles

## Call The Turn

By Sam Dewey

**I**S IT POSSIBLE to tell the future of the world by studying the cyclic variations in everything from weather to historical events? Is there a pattern to happenings? Does a semi-predestiny exist?

These questions, which sound as if they might have come from the mouth of an astrologer or a palm-reader, are in fact serious questions posed by very scientifically minded people. Numbers of economists, historians, and scientists of every type, who have had the occasion to pour over vast masses of data, have begun to notice that there seems to be a tremendous amount of "coincidence" in all sorts of happenings. In addition, these coincidences are cyclic, that is they occur in a rhythmic pattern which seems too regular to be pure chance. Making an analytic study of such apparently unrelated items as sun-spots, business cycles, weather changes and the like, are dozens of people whose scientific objectivity is unquestionable.

Historians, of course, have long noticed that human events seem to fall in cycles and that certain successful predictions can be made by studying these cycles. In fact, some amazing predictions which have come true have been made on this basis. The object, however, of the new researchers is to mold the whole study into a reliable pattern—if it is at all possible—so that long range predictions of coming events may be made with reliability and accuracy.

The migration of people to and from cities, the increase in religious interest, the trend toward simplicity in clothing—all such diverse phenomena seem to be part of a greater pattern which may some day be read by a shrewd interpreter. This is not razzle-dazzle hocus-pocus stuff; far from it. It is based on cold analytical reasoning such as you'd find in any scientific group.

Among the predictions that are scheduled for the future on the basis of the work done so far—although this can't be regarded as conclusive—is the belief that the world is in for a greater renaissance—one which should dwarf that of the Italians! Everything, think the observers, is tending toward such a wonderful future that within a hundred years this Earth will be transformed into a paradise, not only technologically, but morally, spiritually, esthetically, and every other conceivable way. Democratic institutions will triumph everywhere and we will live the abundant life.

# KILL THAT BUG!

**T**HE USE of radioactive tracers in a wide variety of fields is becoming commonplace. In no other way can minute quantities of material be so nicely followed during the course of events.

And now, in one more blow against the insect world, radioactive tracers are entering the picture, so effectively that the power of most insecticides is being increased enormously.

Insecticides have been widely used in protecting plant life simply through spraying. The actual operation and one relation of the poison to the plant have not been studied—until now. Previously it was sufficient that a plant be covered or doused with a poison harmless to itself. The hungry insect, biting into the poisoned plant leaf, took care of the rest.

Using a minute quantity of radioactive phosphorus-22, the scientists "tagged" a given poison; that is, they made it detectible by a geiger counter no matter how small the amount. When the poison was sprayed on the plant and left there for varying lengths of time, it was then a simple matter to cut up the plant and accurately locate the distribution of the poison both within the plant and on its leaf surfaces. It was noted that spraying should be done in the light, which enables the poison to be carried through the plant rapidly and completely; in the dark this does not occur.

An equally ingenious use of radioactive tracers comes in the study of an entirely different field, the amount of wear in bearings and cylinders in engines. "Poisoning" the bearing shaft or a piston with a tiny amount of radioactive tracers, then, after assembling and operating the engine, taking it apart once more and examining the bearings and the cylinder walls with a geiger counter, will disclose the exact amount of metal scraped from both.

What makes the system so accurate and so effective, of course, is the fact that even a single atom of tracer can be located. Thus, if only a layer of metal a minute fraction of a millionth of an inch is scraped off in the bearing or the cylinder, it can be detected and measured accurately. There is no longer any need to run the engine for months. Furthermore, the latter method was crude and its results were approximations.

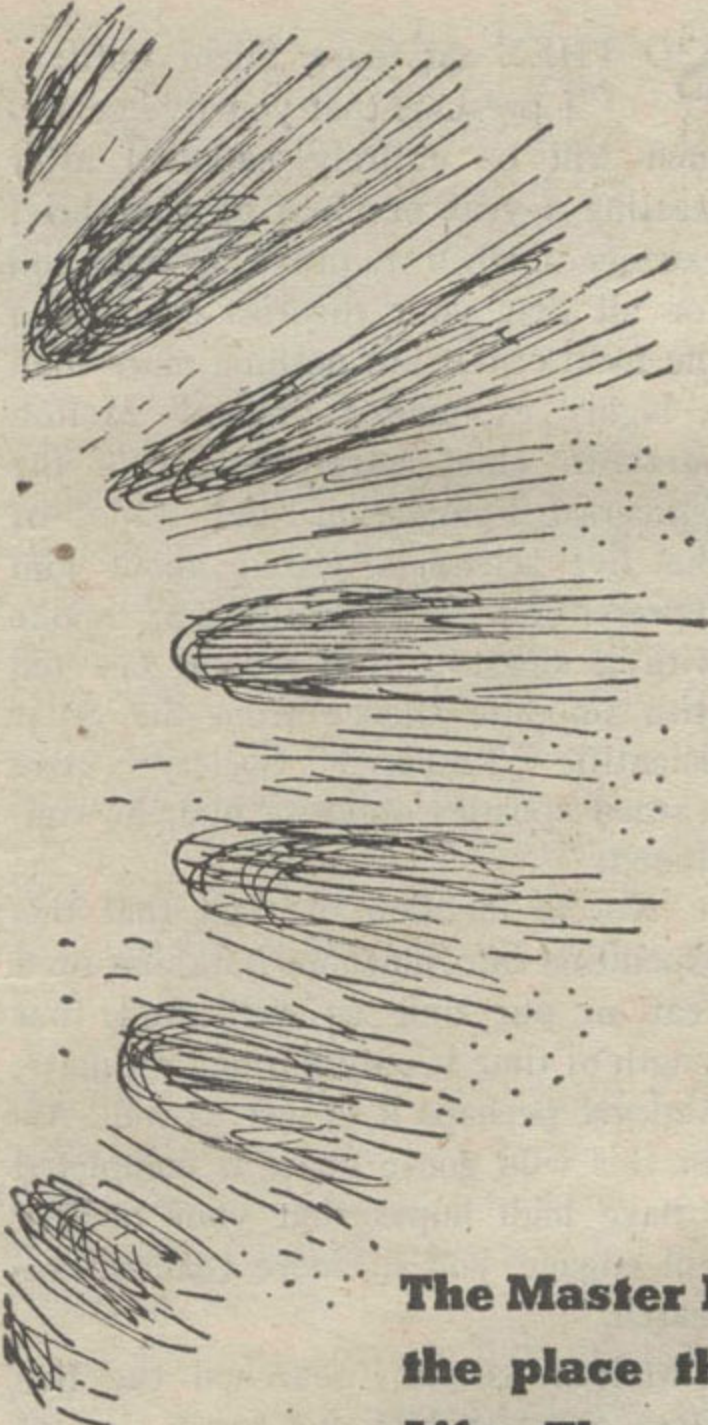
—Fay Beslow





It was a grim, accusing face, there before them





# THE FLOATING LORDS

By

Chester Geier

**The Master Entity warned them away from the place they sought — the Center of Life. They refused to heed the warning**

**T**HEY HAD been hurtling through space for months, the ten of them. Ten of the greatest scientific minds the world had ever produced. They were bound for an unthinkable remote point in the stellar cosmos—a destination further than men had even thought of, further than futuremen would ever travel.

Their course had been computed and

fixed long before they left Earth. Every hour, every minute, of their flight—from the instant their space cruiser, *The Theorist*, shot away from Earth—had been predetermined.

The revolution of every one of the thousands of planets they had passed—the movement through space of the countless suns they had flashed by—the drifting, even, of space itself—



all had been carefully considered, computed, and accounted for.

They knew every solar system, every galaxy, every island universe they had passed and were going to pass. They had, in fact, reduced the wearisome vastness of space to figures and points—lines and formulae. Which accumulated data was electrically recorded upon a sensitized chart before them, revolving in direct ratio to its size in connection with the vastness it represented and the speed of the ship hurtling through it.

Their goal was a point unguessably distant. They had come far. They had much farther to go.

It was quiet in the control room of the *Theorist*. Not even the sound of the atomic engines, hurtling them through the void at a now incomprehensible velocity, could be heard. There was no sensation of movement. There had been none since the first blast of the atomics that sent them rocketing from the Earth with an acceleration constant of 1 Earth Gravity. That had been four months ago. Four months of acceleration of 32 feet per second. They knew they were traversing space at a speed far exceeding the crawl of light. But there was no sensation.

They sat there. The ten of them. Five on one side of the revolving chart which showed them their exact position in the void, and five on the other. They were completely silent. Not even the sound of breathing interrupted the stillness.

Physically they were not imposing men, not muscular giants; nor were they, in the exact sense of the word, weaklings. They had something surpassing these material characteristics. It burned from their eyes. Mental power. Each was unexcelled in his own branch of science.

SO THEY sat there. Silent until:

"I presume that you five gentlemen will be entirely satisfied after wasting a year or more of your brief existences, when we prove for once and for all that your theories concerning the focal center are nothing more than a highly expounded dream." Melton Sarzkoff, chief astro-physicist of the Universal Foundation, and leader of the five scientists seated about him representing that institution, spoke with a measure of boredom. Greeted with impolite silence from the Solar Scientific Research Society's five learned apostles opposite him, he continued:

"Not to mention the fact that this expedition into nowhere is taking up a year of our time as well. And that length of time is only a rough estimate. And yet perhaps it is just as well. After this wild goose chase is completed I have high hopes that your Society will engage you in more realistic research."

Melton Sarzkoff searched the five faces opposite him for some sign of unease. Especially did he glance at the stony features of Anthony Cregg, his leading rival in the field of astro-physics. Anthony Cregg had eyes only for the chart.

"I hardly feel it necessary to repeat that the mere idea of there existing a focal center of the Universe is preposterous."

Anthony Cregg turned his gaze from the minutely revolving chart. His hard grey eyes fixed themselves on the taunting smile of Melton Sarzkoff.

"For the past four months I have sat here and listened to your mockery, Sarzkoff. To be perfectly frank, I am becoming unusually bored. You only condescended to make this expedition because you felt that I might be made to look a fool. It is quite apparent that



you are beginning to suspect that my colleagues' and my theory concerning the focal center of the Universe is not all the madness you make it out to be. And you're afraid of the effect it will have on your reputation." Cregg allowed a smile to ease the hardness of his eyes. "You should have been a Religious Sectarian, as you started out to be, instead of a physicist."

Fury burned in Melton Sarzkoff's eyes. His face flushed and his hands gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles went white. Anthony Cregg had hit the one sore spot in Sarzkoff's scientific armor. The fact that he had started out to follow religion as a vocation and then suddenly denounced it for the atheistic brotherhood of higher science.

JOHN BRENTNER, of the SSRS, interposed.

"If you two would cease acting like jealous suitors it would make it a lot more pleasant for the rest of us. After all, whether you agree to it or not, you both are scientists—highly respected at that—and this is a scientific expedition. I suggest we forget that we represent rival institutions and cooperate on the business at hand."

Anthony Cregg sighed. "Very neatly put, John. I apologize. If I've hurt your ego, Sarzkoff, please consider me deeply distressed. And now, our position."

All eyes reverted once again to the chart before them. The horizontal indicator was bisecting the edge of a small star cluster. Cregg switched on the visiplat.

The blankness was immediately gone. Dazzling points of light became visible. Each star was checked. Each point of light was accounted for. The course of the ship through the cluster was computed; it was found to be exact. Anthony Cregg sighed and was

about to switch off the visiplat when something attracted his attention from the void.

Out of the blackness of space, scintillating with the pinpoints of light from the star cluster, an opalescent mist suddenly grew visible. It was an intangible substance of nothing. But it was not nothing. For *nothing* could not be seen. And this could. Around him, Anthony Cregg heard the sudden buzz of excitement.

"Look!" The voice was that of Melton Sarzkoff. "There is *something* out there!"

The scientist's words were corroborated by the others.

"But what is it? We've charted every stellar body on our course—it isn't anything conceivable."

With each passing second the mist that was not a mist grew plainer; it also grew larger. It vaguely resembled a huge cloud in space, a cloud that looked like a cloud, and yet was not. The visage covered fully three quarters of the visiplat now. Within seconds the tremendous speed at which their ship was moving would shoot them beyond it. Already they were passing it.

"I can't understand it," Anthony Cregg muttered, his impassive features suddenly showing a frown. "I've never seen anything like this in space before. I'd like to analyze it but we'll be beyond it in less than a minute."

The visage now covered nearly the full visiplat. Suddenly it did, and seconds later began to edge off the plate. The *Theorist* had passed it. Anthony Cregg looked once at Melton Sarzkoff. He saw there the same bafflement he felt was on his own. Then he glanced at the receding space phenomenon.

Before his features showed bafflement. Now they showed sheer amazement. The space mist had formed into a definite shape! Where before it had



resembled nothing in the absolute sense of the word, now it had instantaneously assumed the shape of a perfect sphere. And the sphere was bearing down on them. Was actually moving at them with a speed greater than their own incomprehensible velocity!

Sheer amazement left the scientists speechless. Their eyes were glued to the visiplat. Melton Sarzkoff suddenly came to life.

"I can't believe my eyes! That mist is actually bearing down on us. Only something controlled by intelligence could cause such a thing. But what—"

THE SPHERICAL mist had ceased to rush upon the ship. It had reached it and now completely enveloped it. The ten Earth men could actually seem to *feel* it as it folded over the vessel. And with it there came another feeling. A feeling of something weird. A sensation indescribable. It was as if some mighty force—unnamable, utterly alien, and incomprehensible—had settled about them.

Silence descended upon the control room of *The Theorist*. Silence that was tense, ominous. Ten sets of eyes no longer gazed at the visiplat. There was nothing there to see but an opaque mist. They gazed at each other. Ten of the greatest scientific minds the world had ever produced. They who had solved every problem man had offered them. They stared at each other; with the realization that *here* was something their combined brains could not even pierce.

There was a sound. A sound that first was nothing audible. It simply commenced to exist. There was another sound. It might have been the chorus of rushing winds; it might have been the symphony of an astral organ; it might have been anything. They did not know. Then there was the voice.

"I have traced your thought patterns, men of that Solar body you call Sol. I am pleased to find that you are capable of the rudimentary elements of thought. As you would say in your own somewhat crude, but acceptable, language: Greetings."

They sat there, the ten of them. Rigid. Stony. And the voice faded out. It had come in a rush of sound, bass, turbulent, vibrant. Then came the words. From nowhere in evidence, but seemingly from within their very brains. Anthony Cregg was the first to regain his presence of mind. And his face was transformed. Gone was the stupefaction. In its place eager interest. The scientist was in him again. Here was something he could understand. That had been a voice. A voice must come from an intelligent source. Some being had spoken. Anthony Cregg voiced aloud:

"Who are you? We saw only what appeared to be a mist in space. What are you?"

Silence for a moment. Then the sounds. And the voice.

"It has been a long time since I have conversed with intelligent beings. A time inconceivable to you. My name even I have almost forgotten. In your brief tongue it would be useless to say it. Call me *Orklonch*, it is as near as I can come.

"As to what I am. Aeons ago I was even as you, born, educated, and matured. My home was on a planet that has long since ceased to exist. Even as the sun about which it revolved. When I reached my maturity I was chosen as one out of millions of my kind for what you would term immortality. My mind was set free from my mortal casing. I am what you would term an entity.

"I was immortalized for the purpose of increasing the scientific knowledge



of my race. For countless centuries I did this for what I thought was the betterment of my people. But then I discovered the uselessness of my endeavors. Wars had sprung into being. Wars of power, hatreds, and jealousies. Members of my race were no longer interested in science—in the buildup of a galactic civilization. They were more interested in tearing down that which I had tried to help them build.

"So I let them destroy themselves since I could not stop them, with reason. They died in their own stupidity. I alone was left. The last of what had once been a great race. I would have destroyed myself along with them, but I was incapable of doing so. I am not material, though I have control of material forces.

"For countless measures of your time I have existed; traversing the distances of the voids in eternal quest of knowledge. And there are others like me. But always I have returned to the scene of my birth. I have assumed the visible image you now see. When your presence was brought within my range of thought I had been in what you would term a quiescent state. Your coming aroused my interest. You are far from your home planet. Where and why are you bound?"

THE VOICE faded. There was silence. Silence in which the ten scientists gazed at one another. They sat unmoving. Five facing five. Scientific opponents on a voyage based on theory. Eight of the ten looked to their leaders. Anthony Cregg, face immobile, but eyes alight with awe, gazed across at Melton Sarzkoff. It was Cregg who answered.

"We are of that Sun known as Sol. We are beings even as you once were—as your race once existed. In our Solar System exists much the same conditions as you have related. There are

wars. There are hatreds and jealousies. There is destruction and turmoil. But there is also science. I and my four associates are venturing to prove the existence of something that we hope may turn our race's thoughts to science once again. We are trying to prove the existence of a focal center of the Universe. A point around which everything revolves. A spot in the Universe from whence arose the primal force. We feel that if man gains the knowledge of this scientific realization he will bend his efforts toward unity in building a Galactic civilization with all the resultant powers at his disposal.

"These other five men disbelieve our theory. They have accompanied us to disprove our contention. The course of this ship has been computed beyond error to a point which we are nearing. If we fail in our attempt man will have nothing to base his future on. No truth. And he will go to his destruction even as your race did."

Anthony Cregg lapsed into silence. Across from him Melton Sarzkoff spoke.

"What my noted colleague has said in part, is true. I and my associates are on this voyage to disprove this theory. It is, in itself, inconceivable. The Universe is boundless, infinite. Being such, there cannot exist a focal center. For if there is, then the Universe is finite. Our interest is purely scientific. We will reach this hypothetical point of the Cosmos and prove our contention."

There was silence again. Then the voice renewed.

"Beings of Earth, your aim is commendable. But it is futile. You are entering upon things that you cannot conceive of. Turn back to your world. There are truths that are beyond your reach. Even beyond mine. I am old. Older than you can conceive. My advice to you, my command to you, is, return to your world."



The voice faded. The scientists gazed at one another. For an instant there was fear. Then it was gone. The determination of a goal being strived for, of an ideal immovable prevailed. Their silence was refusal. The voice came again.

"Think. Think strongly, beings of Sol. You who are called Sarzkoff, I see a past of doubt. To you, science followed a thing called religion. Do not tamper with this machine we know as the Universe. Science is not all."

*The voice* was gone again. And this time it did not return. In its place there was a silence. A silence in which ten men gazed at one another. Gazed in doubt, awe and, in some, the first faint vestiges of fear.

They were not cowards, these men. They did not know what it was to be afraid. At least, they hadn't before. Now they felt for the first time how really small they were—pebbles cast against the shores of infinity. For out there in the void, hovering over their vessel, was a being. A being so old it could not recollect its age. A being so wise as to be inconceivable to them. A being of pure thought. Unbounded thought. Beside him the ten of them were as nothing. And they suddenly realized it. It shone in their eyes as they gazed at one another.

"It is incredible," Anthony Cregg breathed. "Never in my wildest dreams had I hoped that there could exist a free entity." He addressed the nine men around him: "You have heard as well as I, the advice given to us. What shall we do? Abandon our expedition?"

One by one he searched the faces about him. He saw the mingled emotions of awe, unease, and indecision registered there. He saw that he must assume the initiative.

"I'm not sure what the rest of you

want to do, but as for myself, I say that we should and must continue to our journey's end. There is more now to spur us onward. The being did not verify or disagree as to our theory. He merely tried to dissuade us. This only proves to me that there is *something* ahead of us.

"Think of the glory man will achieve if we actually do succeed in our endeavor. Earth's civilization will rise to galactic heights. With the forces at our disposal tapped from the primal matter of the focal center—we can build a race of supermen. The possibilities are unbounded!"

His eyes aflame with scientific zeal and with the potential aspects of his words, Anthony Cregg's voice aroused the others from their lethargy. Conversation sprang up, heated and tense. Melton Sarzkoff alone was silent. Anthony Cregg watched him as the others voiced approval of his words. The expedition would go on.

As the scientists once again grew silent Anthony Cregg turned his attention to the visiplat. The mist no longer covered the ship. But it was out there in space—a spherical cloud, far to the left of the ship. And it was keeping constant pace with them. He reached out and switched off the plate. Then he glanced at his chronometer.

"This is hardly a time for rest after what has just occurred, but I believe some sleep would help to straighten us out.

With lingering glances at the now blank visiplat, the men from Earth arose and made their way to their respective quarters. Finally only Cregg and Sarzkoff remained in the control room. Anthony Cregg looked at his scientific rival. Sarzkoff sat immobile in his chair, gazing into nowhere. There was an odd expression on his face. The look of a little boy who has encoun-



tered something that he cannot understand.

"Sarzkoff!" Cregg spoke the name loudly. Sarzkoff shook his head and the expression of puzzlement vanished.

"I suggested that we all get some sleep. The others have already left."

Sarzkoff gazed long at Anthony Cregg. His eyes held a vacant stare.

"Of course," he said. "Yes, we must sleep. Our minds must have rest." The words were toneless. As toneless as was the vacant stare in his eyes. Anthony Cregg frowned as Sarzkoff arose and walked from the control room. For there was something unnatural about Sarzkoff. The way he looked, talked, and walked. Anthony Cregg made a final check on the instruments before he closed the control room door behind him and went to his quarters. But he could not erase that vacant stare from his mind.

TIME, INEXORABLY, crept onward. Seconds ticked into minutes; minutes crept into hours; hours changed to days; days into weeks. And with each passing instant of time the *Theorist* increased its mad dash through space.

Time passed. The ten scientists watched it pass; felt it grow upon them. There was tension. Because their acceleration was reaching its zenith. Already the revolving chart had neared the point where the speed of the ship would have to be broken. There were prepared for this. The *Theorist* had been constructed for the express purpose needed. The outer hull of the vessel at a flick of a lever would make a 180-degree turn without moving the inner hull of the ship. It was in fact a gyroscope of space. And the thundering jets of the atomics would instantly be pouring their power in the opposite direction of their acceleration. The

ship would gradually lose its momentum.

Out in space the entity followed them. Always beside them. But never did it make its presence known.

Anthony Cregg sat before the controls of the ship. A look of unease was in his eyes. He was thinking of Melton Sarzkoff. For Sarzkoff had been acting strangely ever since that day they had encountered the entity. Seldom did he leave his quarters. And when he did he only glanced intently at the space chart, never speaking. There was that vacant stare in his eyes—and something else. Something that grew as the days slipped by.

Sarzkoff was in the control room when Anthony Cregg snapped the lever that revolved the outer hull of the ship. There was no sensation as the ship to all outward appearances suddenly twisted upon itself and seemed to be heading in reverse. There could be no sensation, for there was nothing to cause one. They would not even have been able to tell that their vessel was beginning its long-drawn-out process of braking had they not known that it was doing so.

Anthony Cregg turned from the studded panel and for the first time noticed Melton Sarzkoff standing inside the threshold. He looked at him. Sarzkoff returned his gaze with that semi-vacant stare.

"You have begun deceleration," he said tonelessly.

"Yes." Anthony Cregg replied. He walked toward Sarzkoff. "Is there something bothering you, Sarzkoff? You've been acting queer these past few weeks."

The faintest semblance of a smile crossed Melton Sarzkoff's face.

"Something wrong with me? No. There is nothing wrong with *me*. We are slowing down. But we won't get



there. We must not get there."

He spun on his heel and was gone.

The nine remaining scientists gazed at each other in perplexity. They all knew Sarzkoff had been acting strangely—almost as if he had lost his sanity. But why? And just when the end of their journey was in sight.

**T**HE *THEORIST* continued its plunge through space. Days passed. Days in which the tension that had been mounting for months was reaching its climax. The time was close at hand when that tension would let go. One way or another. For there could be only success or failure. Success with all the undreamt-of power man would control with the primal matter of the Universe's focal center. Or failure. And the weary months of returning to report it.

Anthony Cregg kept an almost ceaseless vigil at the visiplat. His eyes flicked from the stygian gloom of space ever and again to the revolving chart opposite him. He did not need to calculate himself—although he would have welcomed the task of actually doing something. Delicate electrical wave indicators did the work much better than he could have. Their position was pre-calculated to the nth decimal. So he sat and watched, oblivious of the others grouped about him.

Outside the *Theorist* there was another watcher. A watcher who needed no space charts or delicate instruments; with something far more accurate and far-seeing than a machine. He had thought. Pure, free, unbounded thought. And this watcher kept pace with the slowing space vessel. There were none to tell what he was thinking. Or if he even were thinking. There was only the visible evidence of the spherical mist. Nothing more.

Anthony Cregg found his gaze shift-

ing to Orkloneh. Why was he accompanying them? Had they, mere mortal beings from Earth, excited interest in this timeless entity? Was he even now pondering over their theory? Could it be that this being who had searched the Universe in quest of knowledge had never found the Center of the Universe? The Earthman felt a surge of pride at the thought.

Slowly the hours slipped by as the horizontal bisector of the chart moved infinitely closer to a point designated by a gold cross. Each scientist sat in his accustomed place now, waiting. Anthony Cregg surveyed them as he felt the tension reach a climax. Their instruments were set and ready for the moment when they would reach that point of the void indicated on the chart. Instruments that would register every force, every variation of a force, every atom, every electron, that was known to the scientific mind. They would know by their instruments whether success or failure was in their grasp.

Nine sets of eyes watched the chart. Nine scientists from Earth. Anthony Cregg glanced at them and the vacant chair of Melton Sarzkoff, who had chosen to remain in his quarters.

Slowly, with almost infinite care, the bisector edged toward the gold cross. Anthony Cregg turned to the visiplat. The banging of the control room door arrested his attention.

Melton Sarzkoff stood on the threshold. Or what had once been the famed scientist. His clothes were disheveled, as if he had been tossing about on the floor of the ship; his hair hung down over his forehead; his eyes—his eyes gleamed madness. And his hands—gripped tightly within one of them was a gun, a gun capable of loosing a bolt of force strong enough to reduce them to ashes. He stood there.



"Fools!" his voice was harsh. "Did you not take the warning? Would you tamper with things beyond your comprehension? Did you believe you could see into the Creator's very soul? Well you won't! None of us will! For unto God alone shall be rendered the things that are His!"

THE SCIENTISTS sat there unmoving, amazement written across their faces. Anthony Cregg alone showed calm thought. For a question he had been pondering had suddenly been answered for him. He now knew why the entity had accompanied them. It was trying to stop them inches short of their goal—through the drugged mind of Sarzkoff!

Anthony Cregg arose slowly from his chair. He began to walk toward Sarzkoff. Slowly, deliberately.

"Stop!" Sarzkoff shouted. "Stand where you are! Or would you die faster?"

"Sarzkoff. You cannot kill us. Think." Anthony Cregg spoke calmly, forcefully. "Do you remember your Commandments, Sarzkoff? Do you remember the fifth of them? 'Thou shalt not kill.' Would you disobey your Creator's will?"

He continued to advance. Confusion played across the face of Sarzkoff at his words. His brain, thinking only in terms of religious law, seized upon this. For an instant there was doubt in his eyes. A wavering. Cregg had been watching for this. He sprang forward.

There was a shout from Sarzkoff. There was the sizzling bolt from the gun he held. Then Cregg hit him. It was a hard blow. Thrown with every ounce of strength in his body. Even as the beam of death grazed past his shoulder, burning the flesh painfully, he struck Sarzkoff. The gun fell from his limp fingers and he sagged forward

to the floor. Anthony Cregg stood over his unconscious body and retrieved the gun. Silently he returned to his seat before the control board, oblivious of the agony that tore at his shoulder. Around him the others relaxed gratefully.

There was a sound. A sound that at first was nothing audible. It simply commenced to exist. Then there was another sound. It might have been the chorus of rushing winds; it might have been the symphony of an astral organ; it might have been anything. Then there was the voice.

"Beings of Sol. Look to your instruments." The voice faded.

Anthony Cregg glanced at the chart. The pain suddenly left him. The bisector was about to connect with the gold cross. Cregg looked into the visiplat. His pulse leapt.

"Look!" he breathed.

Out there in space it was black. There were no stars to be seen. There were no stars near enough to be visible. There was blackness. But there was one point in the inky void that was not black. It was so dense an absence of light that mere blackness was blindingly bright. It was absolute, total, *complete* darkness. It was the essence of eternal night. Straight for it the *Theorist* shot.

There was the voice.

"It is too late now, Beings of Sol. You cannot turn back. I tried to stop you, as you, known as Anthony Cregg, now realize through your associate, Sarzkoff. I failed. There is nothing left but to go on.

"I am old. So old I am weary even of myself. I have seen many of the great phenomena of the Universe. I have witnessed the birth and death of stars, races and galaxies. I have solved every mystery of creation and destruction. I have seen everything. I shall



now witness the culmination of it all. Perhaps it is as well. For this shall be the greatest scene of them all."

THE VOICE faded. The *Theorist* shot into the depths.

There was the sensation of infinite stillness. The complete absence of any moving organism. It was as if the *Theorist* itself, hurtling at a still tremendous speed, had suddenly become quiescent. It grew upon them that it had. The atomics had ceased their wild expulsion of power.

There was an aura about them. A weight of unnameable nothingness. An absolute, incomprehensible feeling of all of the unguessable depths of infinity compressed into a single gigantic aura.

They could not move. For the first time they felt fear.

There was the voice.

"You have reached your goal, Beings of Sol. You have penetrated the Center of the Universe—that from which all has sprung. Look into your visiplate."

The voice faded and they looked. Their eyes saw. They gazed upon—

They had the illusion of viewing a mighty spectacle from an invisible source. They had the feeling of being three-dimensional. It was as if they gazed from a window overlooking the vastness of infinity. They saw the Universe.

It was beautiful. Far more beautiful than their meagre senses could appreciate. And it was vast. So vast as to be incomprehensible. But it was perfectly organized. Pebbles; meteors; planetoids; planets; stars; solar systems; galaxies; island universes. They were all there. Moving in perfect order.

Then there was havoc.

It was as if an almighty hand had turned a switch. The awesome beauty, the orderly balance—vanished in an instant. Pebbles crashed into meteors;

meteors tore into planetoids; planetoids shattered into planets; planets collided with stars; stars absorbed solar systems; suns exploded against suns; galaxies against galaxies; island universes against each other.

The voice echoed into their consciousness as they watched, terrified.

"Look, Beings of Sol. Look upon the greatest sight ever to exist. And take pride in the fact that you were its author. Could your feeble minds not see what would happen when you invaded the Center of the Universe? You who have spent your lives building machines—could you not imagine the Universe as a machine—a mechanism so finely balanced that the weight of a grain of sand at its focal center would destroy its equilibrium?"

"Look at the greatest sight time has spawned. The Universe, all of its splendid glory, crumbling, descending upon itself. Upon you; upon me. The balance is gone. The machine is running wild. It cannot be stopped until it is destroyed. Look!"

They looked. Space was alight with flame. The flame of countless billions of stellar bodies, winging at infinite speed toward the center of their birth. They had come to gain power for their race. For the glory of man. They had found power. But it was beyond their reach. And man whom they had striven to glorify had already ceased to exist.

"You sought a truth, Beings of Sol. You have found it. The ultimate truth. The culmination. In your religious tenets there is, perhaps, a prophecy. 'And the Heavens Shall Rent Asunder. For there was a Beginning and there shall be an end.' You have found the beginning, Beings of Sol, you are witnessing the end. Watch, Earthmen, before you die."

They watched. They saw.  
They died.



# The Big Trigger

By Salem Lane

**I**N TERMS of "feet and inches" numbers, very little information has been made public on the operation of the atomic bomb, either the one using uranium or the one using plutonium. In spite of this dearth of detailed knowledge, it is possible for anyone acquainted with the nature of atomic fission to deduce the "basics" of the bomb. As a matter of record, Japanese physicists flown immediately to the site of the Hiroshima bombing were able to deduce with remarkable clarity and accuracy the material of which the bomb was constructed and its essential mode of operation, just from their general knowledge of nuclear fission. They too had read the reports of Hahn and Strassman in the physical journals.

In a similar way, relative laymen in the science of atomic physics can get a good idea of the way such bombs work, and that fact is attested to by the multitude of articles of the Sunday-supplement type which appear regularly. It is possible that the close guesses of some of these articles must turn atomic physicists—especially those responsible for security—hair gray!

Bring two chunks of uranium 235 together and their mutual neutron emanations trigger each other off into a devastating explosion. The critical point for triggering is simply dependent upon the masses of uranium. This also applies to plutonium. A little uranium and you have nothing—lots of it and you have an explosion! But there are varying degrees of explosiveness, and that's where the delicacy and secrecy of atomic fission comes in. If you can bring the critical masses of uranium into extremely intimate concentration rapidly, the explosive reaction is incredibly intensified, because fission is able to take place amid a greater amount of material before the explosion itself scatters the explosive material! This paradoxical relationship requires that the uranium components be forced together by some powerful method, such as literally "firing"—as from a gun—one lump into another. The result is that the penetration is so good that a larger amount of uranium is able to fission, triggered by its neutrons.

This really constitutes the basic "secret" of the bomb, the methods of mixing critical masses. Whatever information the Russians have gotten must be essentially of this nature. The basics of the bomb itself are common knowledge, or at least can be acquired in the laboratory without much trouble. The triggering process is another—and most important—matter.

# FILLING THE SKY

By Art Norman

**I**F YOU KEEP one eye cocked on the newspaper and news-magazine reports on rocketry and the other eye cocked on what is *not* reported, you come, eventually, to some pretty startling conclusions! A perfect example of the ambiguity and double talk immersed in hush-hush that surrounds the coming age of rocketry is given by a recent incident involving the famous G.E. engineer Haviland, who had a great deal to do with the high-altitude record of the Army's two-stage rocket that was flown a couple of years ago.

Haviland was recently scheduled to speak before a group of amateur astronauts (including Willy Ley) on the setting up of television relay stations on auxiliary satellites, a subject near and dear to every rocket enthusiast's heart and one which has been spoken about in great detail. Willy Ley himself has often discussed this project, and if anything in the future is at all certain, this project certainly is.

Nevertheless, the talk was canceled at the request of G.E. authorities, ostensibly because it was too "sensational and speculative". No mention of the government was made. Instead, Haviland substituted some minor subject—and that's all.

As a result this whole picture becomes intriguing. Why should the subject of satellite rockets be dropped so abruptly? This conjecture may be equally "speculative", but we're inclined to think that the picture Haviland was going to present would have been so realistic and perhaps so near to the point of attempt, that people thought it would be better if nothing were said.

Haviland's proposal in skeleton outline, as treated, too, by Ley, is the picture of simplicity, and it requires nothing but money to be put into effect.

He proposes that three satellite rockets be established in equidistant orbits and at a distance of about twenty-two thousand miles from the Earth's surface. These perpetual satellites would serve as perfect TV relay stations, blanketing completely, at all times, the entire surface of the Earth. They would be stationary with respect to the points on the Earth's surface beneath them. Naturally they could be adapted to scores of other functions, but these matters were not to be considered. Here the only project involved was relay usage.

In sum and substance, then, it appears that the rocket-satellite project is hovering tantalizingly near, and that there are soon going to be in the sky quite a few objects other than the Moon—and pie!





the hands that held her aloft were invisible



# THE LADY KILLER

By  
Franklin Bahl

**Invisibility had its points — especially for a lady's man like Paul. But then the novelty of it wore off, and he faced such misery as no human ever faced before**

SHE HAD unhappy eyes. The rest of her was put together in such a way that any red-blooded man would immediately know an impulse to create happiness in those blue pools under shadowy dark-haired embankments of eyelashes.

Paul Green was a red-blooded man.

He had just bought a pack of cigarettes at the cigar stand and turned around. She was walking across the lobby with a trim summer coat over her arm. A bellhop loaded with bags ran ahead of her like some lumpy little crustacean on the beach.

Paul unconsciously opened the pack of cigarettes while his eyes followed her movements. All of them. She went directly to the room clerk's counter. Paul timed his stride to get there just

as she finished writing out her name on the registration card—Mrs. Naoma Franks.

"My mail, please," he said to the clerk, his lips no more than six inches from her delicately molded ear. She looked around, startled. Paul's eyes were directed toward the clerk. "Paul Green's my name." He appeared to become conscious of her stare and smiled at her absently with a murmured, "Sorry," then did a well-practiced double take and wound up staring wonderingly into her eyes.

"The mail hasn't arrived yet this morning, Mr. Green." The room clerk was saying something Paul already knew.

"Thank you," Paul murmured. He broke his gaze into Mrs. Naoma



Franks' eyes with obvious effort. He tabulated with satisfaction the fact that a faint flush had already spread over her beautiful face; he read the room number the clerk was writing on the registration card—433—and walked over to the bank of elevators where he was followed within several seconds by the girl and the bellhop.

On the silent trip to the fourth floor, Paul presented a dramatic picture of a man trying desperately not to look at a lady while his eyes rebelled with frequent success.

The sidelong glance and almost imperceptible smile she gave him as she turned into the hall after stepping out of the elevator, was a satisfactory and most promising reward.

The smirk that quirked his lips as the doors closed on her was still there when he looked in the mirror in his own room, 605, moments later, to make doubly sure the appearance he had presented was one to captivate such a fragile flower of early womanhood. Since it obviously was, as both his eyes and her reactions had attested, he began to hum happily.

A brief telephone conversation with the bellhop five minutes later brought an exchange of promises, the one a dollar bill, the other a call when Mrs. Naoma Franks came down for lunch.

For two hours he relaxed in a book which he didn't read, his ears tuned to the jangle of the telephone, his mind speculating on various things of immediate interest, all of which gave him a distinct feeling of satisfaction and a zest for life.

It was exactly twelve-thirty when the phone rang.

WITH A LEONINE leap, Paul was at the phone lifting the receiver. "Okay, and thanks," he said.

The receiver left his ear the full

distance of a quarter of an inch before superfast reactions stopped it. "Mr. Paul Green?" the feminine voice was saying.

"Yes."

"This is Mrs. Naoma Franks." The voice was warm and rich with caution, fear, friendliness, worry, pleading, and desperation all mixed underneath. "Please, do as I say. Forget about me. When you see me in the lobby, look the other way. Don't show any more interest in me. Please, you must promise to do this and not ask questions."

Paul blinked at the mouthpiece of the phone in surprise. This was a development completely new to his experience. "I must talk with you first."

"No! That would be the worst thing possible!" She was frantic.

"I must!" His voice was masculine and determined. "I'll be right down."

"No! You'll force me to leave—" His finger on the hook cut off her voice. He hung up.

In the hall he paused briefly, decided the stairs were faster, and moved with his decision. She was trying to slip the key into the door lock with shaking fingers as he came up.

"Let me help you, Naoma," he said softly, putting his strong well-formed hand over hers. Her eyes locked with his despairingly. His fingers were on the key. His other hand took the knob and turned it. The door opened.

"No!" Her hand came up to her lips. Her eyes were wide and unhappy. "Here would be better than downstairs for our talk." He let the door open under its own momentum. He was calm now under the pounding in his temples. He took her elbow gently and moved her through the door.

She was unresisting until she was



far enough in for the door to close, then suddenly she was turning in protest; but the door was closing. She looked at its creamy blank surface, her arms dropping, then looked up into his face with her lips parted in mute protest.

He pulled her to him, neither gently nor violently, one arm circling her waist, the other over her shoulder and around the back of her head. The kiss he gave her had that feeling of perfection of a bowling ball leaving the hand for a clean strike. He stepped away with the same sort of satisfaction the bowler would feel.

THE DEVASTATING impact of it was in her unguarded eyes for a brief instant. Anger replaced it. "Oh! You fool. You fool." She raised both fists as though to beat at his chest. Her face contorted in a struggle between anger and despair. Then she was crying.

And Paul, his arm about her convulsing shoulders, was leading her toward a comfortable ottoman that would hold both of them. She was completely overcome with her weeping, and to Paul's experienced eye it was the weeping of a woman whose passion has at last defeated the voice of caution. He thought, admiringly, "What a torrid creature!" Smiling tenderly, he picked her up as he would a child and sat down in the ottoman, with her on his lap.

"No." Her voice was completely flat. "No." She pushed away from him, trying to rise.

"Yes," he whispered fiercely.

She jerked away and sat erect, looking at him with eyes as dull as her voice. "My husband..."

"We can talk about *that* later," he soothed.

"No. We can't. You've got to go.

You don't know. You *can't* know." Her eyes were those of a wounded deer. "And yet..." Her body became limp. She was crying convulsively, her head and shoulders resting against his chest in his encircling arms.

A knock at the door exploded into the room. It brought Naoma out of Paul's lap before its echo could return from the nearest wall.

"Your hus—?" Paul began, and didn't complete as the knob twisted and the door opened.

A male voice was humming absently in an off key as the door opened wide enough for a person to walk in. Paul stood up slowly, his eyes on the empty doorway, waiting for whoever was outside to step into view. The humming voice became abruptly silent. The door jerked a little as though there were a hand on the knob. Then it was closed slowly and firmly.

In plain view of Paul's staring unbelieving eyes the key materialized in midair. Parts of it were visible and parts of it weren't. It went into the lock and twisted with an ominous snap. A soft moan sounded beside Paul. It was Naoma.

But Paul didn't turn to look at her. His eyes were fixed on the rug at a new discovery. The nap of the rug was flattened in two places in front of the door as though invisible weight pressed it down. The invisible weight lifted from one of them and appeared a foot and a half further into the room. The other lifted. Paul's eyes followed the successive flattening of the nap of the rug in the form of footsteps coming toward him.

"No, John. No." Naoma's voice was a whimper of protest.

"Shut up, Naoma." The voice originated in thin air, undistorted by even the slightest refractive evidence of the presence of transparent matter.



**E**XCEPT for the obvious fact that Naoma's husband, Mr. Franks, was invisible, the situation was not new to Paul. It called for a swift blow of the fist to the right point just under the man's ear that would leave him unconscious, a hasty departure, and a change of residence without delay.

He understood now what Naoma had been trying to tell him. Compassion for her passed through his thoughts, leaving in its wake anger directed at the invisible husband.

These thoughts occurred during the space of time it took for Mr. Franks to say, "Shut up, Naoma." And with crystalized decision Paul lashed out at the point of origin of the voice.

His fist connected with something solid. The flattening of the nap of the rug showed the invisible man staggering backwards. A chair moved a little. The next instant the flattening of the rug came toward him in rapid jumps. He was suddenly aware of his disadvantage as painful blows landed on his face and then, as he raised his arms to protect that, his midriff.

He backed away under the rain of blows, his mind working frantically for some system of defense and attack that would show promise of success. The invisible husband was energized by insane anger and jealousy, from the force and rapidity of the blows that were quickly driving Paul to a state of complete confusion and would have driven a lesser man into unconsciousness.

He brought both arms up to protect his face and bent over in a crouch to get his stomach out of range. From the corner of his eye he saw a vase-based table lamp rise into the air of its own accord and start toward him. He was trying desperately to get out

of its way when everything exploded into star studded blackness.

Before he had had time to fall to the floor, so it seemed, he awoke to the awareness of a splitting headache and tightly bound wrists and ankles, and a shattered table lamp on the floor beside him.

Through the curtain of the headache he heard voices. "If you do I—I'll kill myself, so help me." That was Naoma.

"You won't and you know you won't." That was Mr. Franks' voice, originating from a spot in front of her. "I'm going to fix him if it's the last thing I do. Get out of my way."

"I'll call the police!" Naoma rushed toward the phone and picked it up. The receiver jerked out of her hand and went back on the hook. Her arm twisted to a cruel angle. She stumbled, and was propelled toward the bed. She landed face down, rolled over, and lay there in a crouch of defeat, her features etched with despair.

"Now then." It was the voice. "I'll fix his goose and we'll check out."

**A**LARM BATHED Paul with sweat. He tried to move, and realized with a sinking feeling that Naoma's husband knew how to tie a person securely. It might take hours of hard effort to get free. Another thought increased the flow of perspiration and created a prickly-heat sensation. An invisible man might kill to preserve his secret—especially with the added motivation of jealousy.

"Look," he said desperately. "Don't do anything hasty. Let me go and I'll keep my mouth shut and get out for good." He looked at Naoma apologetically.

"Shut up, heel," the voice said contemptuously. "You think you look the lady killer, huh? Glistening black hair



with a wave in it. Quite handsome too. Almost six feet tall if you could stand up. Nice shoulders, built just right for an unhappy woman to lay her head on comfortably. Well, you won't have much longer. I'm going to fix that."

"No, John. Not again. Not this time." Naoma's voice was a wail of despairing protest.

"You'll learn," the voice said. "You'll learn to leave men strictly alone."

A suitcase lifted off the floor and sat itself on a chair. The lock snapped open. The lid lifted. A crackle-finish green case lifted and floated through the air, coming to rest on a table. Rolls of straps with light cords attached to them spilled out of the suitcase and dragged themselves across the floor. They wrapped themselves around Paul and there was nothing he could do to resist successfully. The light cords plugged themselves into the box on the table. Another light cord trailed across the rug to a wall outlet and shoved into place with a snap of finality. Paul flinched, but nothing happened.

"Now," the voice said. There was a long moment of silence. A black toggle pin on the box moved with a sharp snap. A humming sound came from within the box. Tubes began to glow through long narrow slots in the sides of the box.

Paul became aware of a tingling sensation coursing through his body. A gasp of despair came from Naoma. She placed both hands over her face as though to blot out what was happening. Paul looked down at himself.

The straps around him were becoming transparent. The transparency was spreading into his body!

AS HE WATCHED it spread he saw it change from transparency to total invisibility. Numbly he listened to Naoma's husband talking.

"You're going to know what hell is. I used to be a research scientist. For ten years I worked until I perfected this machine. The only thing wrong with it is that I haven't been able to find any way to restore visibility. The change in the nuclear structure seems to place it out of reach."

"Shut it off," Paul said, speaking with swift urgency. "I have money. Enough to finance your researches for several years if necessary. I'll back you. I'll help you find the way to become visible again."

"It's not a question of money. I have plenty of that. It's a much simpler thing. My wife seems to have fallen for you. All right. In all fairness I deserve an even break. If she can still love you when you're as invisible as I am, you can have her."

"No. No. No. No." Naoma was sobbing heartbrokenly.

"But frankly," the voice went on unperturbed, "I'm quite sure you're just a hotel wolf. You don't care anything about her, really. In a few hours you can work yourself loose. We'll be gone. You'll be on your own."

"No. I'll grant that everything you say is true. But you have a defeatist attitude. We can solve this thing. Let me work with you on it. I have a college education. I can quickly learn what you can tell me about this invisibility effect. At least give me a chance to work on it."

The answer was a bitter laugh.

The toggle switch on the box snapped over. The light of the tubes inside died down. Paul watched the straps slowly reappear, seemingly wrapped around nothing but air. A horror was rising in his mind. It was a terrifying feeling to look where one's body should be and see nothing to indicate it was there.

The straps unwound themselves and



flew back into the suitcase. The crackle finish box followed. The suitcase lid came down. The lock snapped home.

"Call the desk and check out," the voice said. "I'll be with you every second."

"Yes, call the desk," Paul said. "Tell them to get the police—" Stars exploded in a black universe again.

"WEREN'T WE lucky to get this room, Martha?" The honeyed southern voice crystalized Paul's diluted stream of consciousness into perfect focus.

"We sure were, Bertha honey." The second voice was even more honeyed and southern.

Paul opened his eyes. Dismay overwhelmed him. He was in a world of darkness. Then details clicked into place. He was on the floor in the closet.

He tried to move, careful to make no sound. He was untied. That was a relief. Undoubtedly Naoma's husband hadn't wanted invisible straps left behind. He sat up slowly with his back against the wall and waited patiently for the wave of dizziness to subside.

The crack of light under the door lit up every square inch of the closet floor. Paul had an uncanny feeling that he must be perched on a shelf and looking down, even though he could feel the floor under him.

Right now, he realized, there was no time for despair. He must take things as they were and learn to work with them.

"Unloosen my brassiere strap, will you Martha?" There was a delicious chuckle. "I can't quite reach it."

Paul's headache went into forgetfulness. He stood up carefully, slowly twisted the knob, and opened the door a crack. He formed his lips into a noiseless whistle. The two girls were as

nice as their voices. "Mmmm MMM!" he thought.

They weren't looking in his direction. He reflected on how little people notice. If he could get the door open without them seeing it he could leave it open and they would never notice. He moved it slowly.

"Now, let's see," the one named Martha said, studying the contents of an open suitcase. "Brown slacks and blue sweater won't go so well together..."

With a reckless smile Paul stepped noiselessly out of the closet. Already Naoma had faded into forgetfulness. She had been a little dumpy compared to these two girls anyway. On impulse he went over and kissed the one named Bertha in the crook of her neck as she bent over the suitcase.

She giggled deliciously. "Martha! Stop that. You know how ticklish I am!"

"Stop what?" Martha said. "I didn't do anything."

"You sure did," Bertha said. "You kissed me on the neck."

"Don't be silly, honey. I'm saving my kisses for some nice sugar boy as soon as we can locate one."

"Well, you did," Bertha said in a tone that dismissed it. She turned back to the suitcase while Paul stood between the two girls, thoroughly enjoying himself.

MARTHA LOOKED at Bertha as though she wanted to say something more, then turned away. Paul reached out a hand to pat her, grinned, and decided against it. No use frightening them.

He went to the door. If he could get it open and slip out and get to his own room he could have time to think. There must be some way out of his predicament.

He stood by the door, hating to leave.



Martha had rich auburn hair that fell around her perfectly formed shoulders in rich waves that enhanced the soft tan of her body. Bertha's hair was a lustrous, almost platinum-straw color, done up in a cute bun. Her mouth wore a cute pout as she worked her hands around in back to fasten the new brassiere she was putting on.

Sighing, Paul cautiously twisted the knob and opened the door. He was looking at them as he backed out into the hall. That was a mistake. Someone was walking down the hall and crashed into him.

As he fell, his hand on the knob brought the door shut with a slam. Screams in honeyed high-pitched tones came through the door. A pleasant-faced man of fifty was picking himself up from the floor with a vacuous expression on his face.

The door opened violently a concealing two inches and Martha's face appeared. "It's a peeping Tom!" she yelled. "Bertha, call the house detective!"

Paul waited for no more. He hurried. The voice of the man followed him, trying to convince her he had quite defied down the hall to the elevator while initially not opened the door and peeked in.

The elevator stopped. Paul stepped in while the boy was staring at the vacant hall. "Damn these people who ring the bell and go away," he muttered, closing the door. Paul opened his mouth to say "Six," but decided against it. The elevator went down to the first floor. The dour-faced hotel detective was just about to jab the bell. He stepped into the elevator while Paul ducked to one side to avoid being bumped. Clamping his half eaten cigar between yellowed teeth he growled, "Four, Joe, and stick around when you get there."

At four Paul slipped out of the elevator and hurried to the stairs while the defensive voice of the fifty-year-old stranger, the authoritative growl of the house detective, and the honeyed but angry voices of the two girls rose in a symphony of argument that was blotted out by the closing of the thick stairway door.

A man and woman on the sixth floor gaped vacuously as the stairway door opened, seemingly of its own accord. Paul stepped around them and went on to his own door. He hadn't taken time to lock it when he left. He opened it and went in, slamming it shut with the thought that the couple in the hall would just think someone inside had opened it and changed his mind about coming out.

He almost bumped into the maid. She had been on her way from the bathroom to the door with the dirty towels, and stopped abruptly as the door opened and closed. She mumbled something indecipherable and went out.

Paul went to the bathroom and stared into the medicine cabinet mirror. He looked for signs of some distortion that might indicate his presence. There was nothing.

He pressed his fingers to the mirror. They should have left a fingerprint. They left not the slightest sign of a smudge. Even his perspiration was invisible.

He stared into the mirror speculatively. He picked up a glass and filled it with cold water. He drank it and saw the water seem to flow from the glass into an invisible channel and utterly vanish at a point about even with his chest.

He felt in his pockets until he found his cigarettes. He took one out entirely by feel, since they were invisible. He took out his invisible lighter and



snapped it open. If it had ignited the flame was invisible—or not quite! There was a faint sign of blue fire. He held it where the tip of the cigaret should be and sucked in. A faint coal appeared.

There was no satisfaction in the smoke when it was invisible. He went in the other room and opened a new pack that was visible. The visible cigaret was all right. He went back to the mirror and watched the smoke go into the invisible passages of his lungs and fade from sight. It was a definitely upsetting sight, as though he were looking into some sort of X-ray screen.

Irritated, he went into the other room and picked up the book he had been reading that morning. He slumped into a chair and tried to read, but the sight of the book suspended in apparently thin air before him disconcerted him. He laid it down and got up, pacing about the room.

Invisibility, he reflected, was beginning to be a little hard on the nerves. But with that thought came another. Acting on it, he took off his coat and shirt and tossed them on the bed where they landed with a quite material plop but remained invisible.

Getting a fresh shirt out of the drawer he put it on. He went to the bathroom mirror again. The shirt fitted his body and seemed to be frozen in thin air. But it was comforting to have a visible sign of solidity. He went back to pacing again, waiting to see if it would become invisible. Half an hour later it was still as it had been.

"That's something," he grunted.

He took the can of shaving talc and powdered his face. That was even more reassuring, but it didn't last. After a minute it faded into invisibility. And anyway, it had been pretty awful, a semi materialized face with no eyes...

"Anyway, it's a start," he said cheer-

fully. "A flesh colored rubber mask and dark glasses..." He went into the other room again and paced nervously while he planned. Plaster of paris for a mold of his features, a wig, gloves...

The maid's key tapped at the door. Absently he called for her to come in. The door opened and there was a shriek before he remembered. He started toward the door in an impulse to reassure her. She backed out, her face chalk white, and slammed the door.

Paul glanced down at the shirt, the only visible thing about him, and smiled ruefully.

"That's another thing," he said. "I'll have to always remember."

He took off the shirt and put it away. It would be better to remain totally invisible until he could get things together to appear completely solid.

By feel he found his invisible shirt again and put it on, then his coat. A knock came at the door. He opened his mouth to say, "Come in," then remained silent.

A key rattled. It locked the door then unlocked it. The door opened wide. The hotel detective stood there chewing on his cigar, his eyes darting about the room. "Nothing here," he said.

"But they is!" the maid's fear impregnated voice said. "I done seen it as clear as—as anything. A ghost. That's what it was. Mis' Green's daid. I just know he is. Look aroun'. Go ahead. His body's 'round someplace." She appeared behind the detective, her eyes large and round, ready to flee if anything appeared. "An' *he's* still here, too. I can *feel* him lookin' at me!"

"Nonsense," the detective snorted. "Go on in and finish your cleaning. I'll stand here and watch."

"Huh uh!" she said, shaking her head violently. "Not me, nor any t'oth-



er girls either. I'll quit first. You don't catch me makin' beds in haunted bedrooms." She tittered with nervous boldness.

Paul chuckled. The hotel detective's eyebrows shot up. He bit into his cigar nervously and moved back a step.

"I heard him!" the maid said. "Didn't you hear nothin'?"

"No, of course not," the detective said. "And I haven't got time to stick around here. Go ahead and finish the room." He cast a final searching look about the room and stalked off.

The maid stood petrified for a moment. Paul thought fast. This was a critical point. If she left and refused to clean the room he might have to move. And where could an invisible man rent a room?

He went to the door and looked out, his face almost touching that of the maid. He hesitated no longer, but seized her wrist and jerked her into the room so that she had to take several quick steps to catch her balance. While she was doing this he closed the door.

She turned toward him, her face completely bloodless, her lips working soundlessly.

"I'm sorry you're frightened, Marie," he said. "Hang onto yourself and give me a chance to explain and everything will be all right."

She uttered a low moan. Her eyes turned upward so that only the whites were showing. Slowly she started to fall. With a grunt of exasperation he leaped to catch her and carried her over to the bed. Then he went to the bathroom and soaked a towel in cold water, wrung it out, and came back with it.

He wiped her face with it, and shortly she opened her eyes. She blinked them several times. Suddenly they fixed unblinkingly on the towel.

With a muttered curse Paul dropped it. "Let me explain now," he began. But now she was screaming in a highpitched hysterical screech, her arms flailing as she tried to rise. He tried to catch her hands. One of her fingers poked his eye. He fell back from the pain, and she was off the bed running toward the door.

"Stop!" he shouted. But she had the door open and was in the hall, running and screaming. He ran after her in a frantic attempt to catch her and bring her back. He gave up when people started opening doors and sticking their heads out to see what was going on.

Seconds later the hotel detective and the manager stepped out of the elevator, their faces grim. With a sinking feeling Paul watched the manager go to his door and lock it, then place a slug in the lock that would keep his key from working.

"It's all right, Marie," the detective was saying soothingly. "Just a nervous breakdown. You'll be all right. Come with me."

She stopped screaming and followed him, whimpering a little with every other step. When they were in the elevator the manager came back, almost running, to not be left behind.

Paul stepped into the elevator too. He had to follow along to see where the manager kept the key for the lock slug so he could get into his room again.

It was placed in a strongbox. The manager locked the strongbox with a key fastened with several others to a chain clamped in his belt. It would take physical violence to get it.

With a feeling of panic Paul realized that now he would be unable to get into his room. Where would he go? What would he do? Someone bumped into him violently, stumbled and fell. Instinctively leaping out of the way,



Paul bumped into a woman who blinked at the space he occupied and uttered a thin screech.

He waited for no more. Half running, he crossed the lobby and pushed out through the revolving door to the sidewalk.

Paul had always been of the opinion that pedestrians never looked where they were going and expected *him* to get out of *their* way. Now, suddenly, he was finding out how wrong that opinion had been. He was encountering the real thing. All the skill he had acquired in carrying the ball for a touchdown on the football fields of high-school days, all the skill for evading the blunted point of his opponent's rapier in fencing, and all the instincts built up during two years of amateur and professional boxing during college days were brought into full play in the deadly earnest game of avoiding people who couldn't see him. Even so, in the two blocks he covered before retreating behind a row of ashcans in an alley for time out to catch his breath, he had left behind a round dozen slightly bewildered people.

He was wondering why he had left the hotel. There was no place he could go. It wasn't like him, he knew, to become panicked. But things had happened too swiftly and too adversely. The maid's eyes rolling up in her head had sort of got him. And being locked out of his room had destroyed all hope of being able to use his phone to order things he would need.

An odor swept down the alley. Food. It made him realize he had had nothing to eat since breakfast. That too would be a problem. How could an invisible man sit down in a restaurant and order a meal? He put his hand in his pockets and brought out an invisible half dollar, fingering it with a rueful smile. And his billfold! It contained

a couple of hundred dollars in singles to twenties, but an invisible twenty dollar bill is no different from an invisible single.

He put the half dollar back in his pocket and came out from behind the ashcans, and followed his nose down the alley toward the source of cooking food. Shortly he was standing in the open doorway of a restaurant kitchen. He had eaten in this place before, but had never seen its kitchen. Five cooks were busy behind a long counter. Every few seconds, it seemed, another steaming plate of food was placed on the counter, to be snatched up by one of the several waitresses that kept coming in and going out through the swinging double doors at the other end of the counter.

Paul advanced cautiously until he was within reach of a plate on which rested a nicely prepared steak dinner. Right at the moment no waitresses were coming in and the cooks' backs were turned to him.

He picked up the steak with his fingers and retreated toward the alley door. The steak floated along with him, seemingly unsupported. It would never do to go into the alley with it. He crouched down behind a large can of garbage where he couldn't be seen unless someone were standing directly in front of him.

While he ate it he listened with considerable enjoyment to the argument between the waitress and the fry cook about what became of the steak, with her answering his every assertion by suggesting he sleep nights. He finally proved to her the steak had been on the plate by the meat juices still there. They came together on an agreement that the cat must have stolen it.

Paul finished the steak and licked his fingers. He was still hungry. He started to rise, then sank back in dis-



may. Suspended in thin air about where his stomach would be was a compact handful of well-masticated steak!

He had to crouch there for the better part of an hour before it faded into invisibility. For a while he studied the problem of invisibility. In some way, it seemed, the atoms had been changed so that the optical band of radiation was not affected by them. This change was obviously transferable to other atoms. Otherwise the steak would make his body somewhat visible as it became part of him. Naoma's husband was proof that the process went on indefinitely. Maybe it was a sort of atomic polarity analogous to magnetism. Probably it took a preponderance of invisible matter to make other atoms invisible. If that weren't so then eventually everything would become invisible as the effect spread by proximity.

That seemed to exhaust the subject of invisibility. He spent the rest of the time watching the waitresses come in and go out, and in watching an occasional cockroach knock itself out bumping against the sole of his shoe.

At last the steak was digested enough to be invisible. He went out into the alley, and discovered that in the better light there was still visible evidence of the steak. The smells of the garbage cans made him take the risk of going down the alley to the ashcans again. There, safe for the time being, he slumped down and dozed.

When he awakened it was dark. He was cramped and sore, but after standing up and stretching, and coming out from behind the cans and exercising a little, the soreness left.

Hungry and thirsty, he returned to the open door of the restaurant kitchen. A new shift of cooks and waitresses were there. Paul, feeling less off

balance mentally, decided boldness was the better course.

He followed a waitress through the swinging door. The clock on the wall of the restaurant said ten thirty. He followed in the wake of the waitress until she passed the men's powder room where he left her, boldly pushing open the door and entering.

There was one man. He was sitting on the white enameled paper towel repository, a pint bottle of a cheap brand of bourbon clutched in one dirty hand. Paul ignored the man, turned on the hot water and washed his hands and face. The drunk watched the soap and water go through its visible maneuvers without a visible form beneath it. He watched with a great deal of interest and complete silence. When Paul pulled paper towels from the dispenser and began wiping his hands and face the drunk stood up with slow dignity, poured the remaining contents of the bottle into the washbasin with eloquent silence, and staggered out.

When he had gone Paul chuckled. He was still chuckling when he left the washroom, and had to exert self control to stifle his mirth as he emerged into the restaurant.

The drunk was at the counter drinking black coffee as though it were medicine. Dodging out of the way of waitresses and customers Paul went over to him and bent close to his ear, and whispered, "That's the boy, ol' boy. Plenty of black coffee and then the water wagon." The man stiffened and hunched his shoulders. Paul patted him on the shoulder.

Without warning the man brought his coffee cup up over his shoulder. The coffee caught Paul squarely in the face. Instinctive reflexes sent him back. The coffee wasn't hot enough to burn, but it smarted.

A hurrying waitress bumped into



him and sent him completely off balance. He fell against a table and pushed it several feet. When he caught his balance and stood up the drunk was observing him owlshly. Around him was bedlam. He looked down and saw the coffee stains outlining his invisible coat and knew that his face was undoubtedly outlined the same way.

The drunk got up and started toward him. In a loud voice he was saying, "'Sall right folks. 'Sall my fault for getting drunk. I'll gettim outta here 's soon 's I c'n ketchum."

Rage overcame caution. Paul looked around. There was a pitcher of ice water handy. He picked it up and upended it over the drunk's head, spilling water and ice cubes over him. In the absolute silence that followed, he calmly set the pitcher back on the table where it had been, then stalked toward the front door.

Pasty-faced statues of men and women watched him depart. A man just coming in bumped into him and uttered an instinctive "Pardon me," then did a double take and stared vacuously at him.

At the door he turned around and looked back. The drunk was wringing out his coat lapels with sober dignity. The rest of the hundred or so customers had their faces turned toward him with the rapt attention usually reserved for some masterpiece of the stage.

There were fewer people on the sidewalk at this time of the night. Paul headed back in the direction of the hotel, his feeling of exasperation toward the drunk cooling down to a bed of coals. A block later the entire *incident cafe* was abruptly swept into forgetfulness. Two girls were coming toward him, arm in arm. They were Martha and Bertha. Even dressed they were knockouts.

When they passed him he turned and

followed them. They seemed headed toward some definite place. After half a block Bertha, the one with the platinum hair, looked back over her shoulder uneasily. "I'd *swear* I heard a man following us, honey," she said.

Paul immediately began matching his footsteps with those of the girls.

Two blocks later they turned into a nightspot. He kept right behind them. They asked for and got a table as close to the striptease act already in progress as it was possible to get. They ordered cocktails and ignored them, watching the show. Paul sat down and drank their cocktails in a leisurely manner. The table was just out of the spotlight beams and in relative gloom so that no one would notice the glass apparently lifting and tipping of its own accord.

After the show the lights went up and the girls ordered food and more drinks after observing their empty glasses and eyeing each other suspiciously. While they were waiting two men descended on the table. Paul rose hastily and stepped aside.

The two men made their introductions and were invited to sit down. Paul decided to go back to the kitchen and satisfy his own hunger. An hour later he came back. The girls were talking in honeyed tones to their new acquaintances. Another show started. When it was over the girls said they were tired.

The men paid the check and said they would see them home. Paul followed along, and when the girls got rid of their escorts he cheered up again. The men hadn't liked it, and when they had ungraciously departed the girls looked at each other, then laughed delightedly and hugged each other.

Paul chuckled with a feeling of ruefulness. More than once he had been



led along in the same way and paid the check with a hopefulness that was soon shattered.

"Let's go to the room, Martha honey," Bertha said. "I'm powerful tired."

*"It comes from under the bed and we were afraid to look."*

*"It's stopped now, Martha."*

"Come out from under there or I'll shoot." This last was a gruff male voice Paul recognized as the night hotel detective's. Further identification was provided by the scowling face thrust into view as the man bent down and looked under the bed. The scowl changed to disgust and the face vanished. "You young ladies must have been imagining things. There's nothing under there."

Two wide-eyed faces appeared briefly. They went away again.

"But we *both* heard a man snoring under the bed!"

"It couldn't have been a ghost!" There was a gasp. "Or *could* it?" Paul grinned to himself at the delicious accentuations of the two girls' voices.

"If you want to change rooms I'll see if the room clerk has any available. I can't stay here—much as I'd enjoy it."

There were honeyed but nervous giggles.

Paul silently rolled out from under the bed on the other side and stood up. The detective was oblivious to everything but the two girls. Paul moved toward the door, wondering what the detective would do if he knew more about them.

He slipped out and stood in the hall in indecision. So he snored. He had never known one way or the other, but now it was proving a distinct liability. He would have to find some place to sleep where he wouldn't be discovered.

Or would he?

The question hit him between the

eyes. Why shouldn't he make himself and his condition known? Why all the secrecy he had been building up? What he should have done right at the start was go to the authorities and prove he was an invisible man and get them after Naoma's husband.

With the fact established and accepted that he was invisible, he could get his room back and not have all this trouble. He studied the idea of waiting for the hotel detective to come out of the girls' room and corner him and convince him. The thing wrong with that was that the detective would then know it was he who had been sleeping under the girls' bed. The thing to do, he decided, was go directly to the police and convince them.

Doubts assailed him half an hour later as he approached the sergeant's desk in police headquarters, but he stilled them with the argument that anyone was going to be a little difficult to convince.

"No, lady. I'm sure your husband hasn't been arrested. He'll probably show up and have a good explanation of where he's been." His voice was tired and his face was tired, both in a shaggy dog sort of way. "No, he hasn't been murdered either—or at least his body hasn't been brought in to the morgue or I'd have a report on it on my file for tonight.... I wouldn't feel that way, lady. It won't help. Maybe that's why—I mean maybe he's been unhappy. Why don't you greet him with a smile and a dish of scrambled eggs and... Maybe it isn't my business, since you mention it... Look here, I'm not your husband and if you keep talking that way and there's any trouble when he gets home it'll be you the boys bring down... No I'm not threatening you... I hope you never meet me. If I wasn't a public servant I'd tell you your voice is



enough to kill all desire to meet you. Good-bye."

The phone was yapping shrilly as the burly sergeant hung up, an expression of distaste on his rough face. Paul grinned in sympathy, leaned his elbows on the desk, and took a deep breath.

"She sounded pretty obnoxious to me," he said conversationally.

"Yeah," the sergeant said without looking up. "These dames are the worst part of this night shift."

"If they're all like her I can understand," Paul said. "I pity the guy she's married to."

"Me too," the sergeant said, continuing writing in the ledger he was working on.

"What's your name, sergeant?" Paul asked.

"Bradford. John Bradford." He half looked up and dragged another paper off the small pile beside the ledger and began studying what was written on it.

"Mine's Paul Green."

"What's your trouble, Green?" The sergeant began writing on another page after turning several pages.

"I got locked out of my hotel room, for one thing," Paul said.

"That's too bad, but this isn't the place to go. See the rent control people in the morning." He wrote several words in the ledger. "What'd they lock you out for? Behind on your rent, or making a disturbance?" His voice was uncurious.

"Neither," Paul said. "It was my fault, I guess. I scared the maid into practically a nervous breakdown."

"That's too bad," sergeant Bradford said sympathetically. "She come in when you were undressed?"

"No. I had a shirt on," Paul said, wondering how long this could go on without the man looking up. "She couldn't see anything else, so she fainted."

"Some women react that way, all right."

Paul watched the man for a minute. "How would you react if *you* saw an invisible man?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, I don't know," the sergeant said, continuing his slow penmanship. His pen stopped for a moment. "The rent control board's on the third floor. It opens at nine thirty." He started writing again.

"What would you do if an invisible man were leaning his elbows on your desk right now?" Paul persisted.

Sergeant John Bradford grinned and raised his eyes. "That's im—" He broke off, his mouth left hanging.

Suddenly he laughed. "You had me going there for a minute. Come on, stand up and get on your way. I've had enough trouble tonight without practical jokes."

"It's not a joke," Paul said. "I really am invisible. I'll show you."

He reached out and took the pen from the sergeant's fingers and started to write on a slip of paper.

"Hey! Not that one!" sergeant Bradford said. Then his eyes grew very big.

*This proves I'm invisible*, Paul wrote rapidly. When he was done he looked up.

Sergeant John Bradford's eyes were rolling upward into his forehead.

Paul stared at the man incredulously. It seemed impossible that a man well into his fifties, who had probably been on the police force for thirty years, could faint. It was more than a trifle eerie. For the first time Paul felt the empty lonesomeness of the room. And, as if to add to it, the phone began to ring.

Suddenly he felt that it was a mistake to have gone to the police. If they finally were convinced they'd probably third-degree him about every



unsolved crime in the books. They'd see in his invisibility an instrument for committing crimes.

"What I should do," he decided while he lifted sergeant Bradford's head and cradled it in his limp arms, "is find a scientist with enough intelligence to accept the fact that I'm invisible, and maybe help me find Naoma and her invisible husband."

Feeling very discouraged, he left the police station. It wasn't until later that it occurred to him Sergeant Bradford's superiors might believe he had been sleeping.

"Yes?"

"Is this Dr. Greer Lane?" Paul asked.

"Yes."

Paul breathed a sigh of relief. It had taken one of his three invisible nickels to make the call, and there were only two left. "Please don't think me a nut and hang up. I've got a very serious problem and I need some expert help. Will you promise to hear me out?"

"If it doesn't take too long," the voice on the phone said cautiously.

"Well, look," Paul said. "My trouble is that I'm invisible. I—a man who had some kind of machine did it. He put straps around me and made me invisible with something that looked like an electronic device in a cabinet. Then he and his wife moved out while I was unconscious. That was yesterday. Since then everyone I've tried to talk to about it has fainted. That's why I called you on the phone first. To prepare you. This man, his name was Franks, said that there was no way for me to become visible again, and I guess he was right or he would have made himself visible. Then I got locked out of my room. I need someone to help me. I don't know where to go. My money is in a checking account and I

can write you a check if you'll help me. What I'll need is to get some kind of flesh colored face mask and some clothes and a wig so that I can present a visible appearance to the public." He came up for breath. There was silence at the other end. "Do you believe me—at least to the extent of being willing for me to come over and prove everything, without your fainting when you meet me?"

"It's all very interesting," the voice on the phone said. "Tell me, how were you locked out of your room? It's very important."

"Why," Paul hesitated, confused at this tangent, "the hotel manager put a slug in the lock so my key won't work. And then he locked up the key that fits the slug."

"I see," Dr. Greer Lane said. "That's a very vital point. I'll tell you what you do. You come right over to my office in my home. I'll stay home from the university today—call them and tell them I have a bad cold or something. I'll leave the doors open. Remember that. I'll leave *all* the doors open. You can come right into my study, where I'll be sitting waiting for you. When you get here move something to prove you've arrived. A piece of paper will do. I'll leave a piece of paper on my desk that you can pick up and drop on the floor."

"Thank god!" Paul said. "At last I've found help. Thanks, Dr. Lane. I'll be over as fast as I can get there. About half an hour."

It was a white clapboard bungalow type house. The front door was wide open. Paul hurried up the walk and knocked. Then he noticed the button and pressed it. Musical chimes sounded loudly. Nothing happened.

He frowned, then remembered that Dr. Lane had told him to walk right in. He stepped inside. He was in a large



living room. There were three doors, each open wide. He went to the nearest. It was to the kitchen. The back-door was open too, with the screen door propped wide open with a chair.

"When he says the doors will be open he means the doors will be open," Paul thought with a feeling of friendly indulgence.

The second open door proved to be the right one. Inside, fairly oozing invitation, was a desk on which was absolutely nothing but a sheet of white paper.

On the far side of the room a man was sitting on a chair. He was a small man with a neat Van Dyck beard, erect shoulders, and sparkingly alive eyes behind rimless glasses. His hands were on his knees and his head was cocked slightly to one side in a listening attitude.

Paul started to speak, then hesitated. Memory of Sergeant John Bradford fainting, and the maid at the hotel fainting, made him decide it would be better to start in with the paper first. He went over to the desk and picked it up and waved it around a little, then held it still.

Dr. Greer Lane's eyes followed its movements eagerly.

Paul watched, waiting for the man to faint. Instead, he fairly quivered with happiness. "Well," Paul said abruptly, "I'm here."

"Good! Excellent. Wonderful." Lane stood up, and Paul saw he was taller than he had seemed to be, narrow-shouldered and small-boned. "I wonder...would you be able to shake hands with me?" He held out his right hand.

"Of course!" Paul said, surprised. He took the man's hand and shook it warmly. When he released it and the man still hadn't fainted he felt that at last he was accepted. "Now, if

you're finally convinced," he said, "I wonder if you'd give me a cigaret. I still have a couple of my invisible ones left but they don't give real satisfaction, and you can imagine the effect of my smoking a visible one in public." He stuck the cigaret the doctor had leaped to provide in his mouth and sucked in the flame of the lighter he held.

"Why don't you sit down and relax," Lane said. "We have a lot to talk about. I've thought of several questions I want to ask you. And before we start I want to assure you that I feel we can get everything straightened out for you." Paul sat down while Lane remained standing. "My first question—I hope you can answer it—is, what are the details of the events that resulted in your becoming, er, invisible?"

"I'd rather not talk about that," Paul said evasively.

"But you must! It's vitally important. Please believe me."

"Isn't it enough to know the identity of the man who did it?" Paul asked. When Lane shook his head, "Well, I got acquainted with a woman. Her name was Naoma Franks. It was at the hotel. It was a rather swift thing, if you know what I mean. We clicked. She was a married woman. I'd learned that but hadn't had time to learn whether she was separated from her husband or not. I gathered they were separated, because she had signed in at the hotel alone."

"Very good!" Lane said. "Go on."

"We were in her room when suddenly the door burst open and her husband came in."

"And what did he look like?"

"I told you over the phone. He was invisible."

"Hmm. I see," Lane said. "Tell me, what was your profession?"

"I haven't one, really," Paul said.



"I majored in engineering in college, but I've inherited quite a sizable fortune and haven't had to work."

"That's very important. Very. Now—what was your religion?"

"Religion?" Paul echoed. "None to speak of."

"You might call yourself an atheist?" Lane said, cocking his head slyly.

"Just indifferent is a more accurate way of putting it," Paul said. "But what has that got to do—oh, I see. You just want to get acquainted with me. Well, as a matter of fact, I've been just playing around since I left college. Sowing a wild oat or two. I suppose eventually I'll use some of my money to go into business. If I can get this invisibility business over with." He took a final drag on the cigaret and mashed it out in the ashtray. "I'd like to get started on this right away. If you have a blank check on the First National I'll write you out enough to cover quite a few current expenses, and—"

"No, no," Lane said. "That won't be necessary. And the problem is more subtle than you have supposed. I'm here to help you. Please understand that. I know a great deal more about things than you might think. I know what caused your invisibility, and I know exactly how to get things straightened out. The big difficulty is with you yourself."

Lane hitched forward in his chair. "You see," he said, "the secret of it lies in the mind. We won't need machines or wires or gadgets. You have already given me the clues I need to get at the roots and causes."

"Then I've come to the right place!" Paul said. "From what Franks said his discovery was new and completely secret. At least I gathered that."

"Forget about Franks," Lane said.

"He has nothing to do with it any more. Now listen carefully. The mind is a tricky thing. Most people don't realize how much symbology goes into their thinking and how little fact. In your case, there is a great deal. I can tell you that Franks was not invisible. Definitely not. You have blotted out all material image of him from mental compulsion. In place of the fact you have substituted a wish-fulfillment symbol. In short, from the moment you discovered yourself in your present state your mind has been substituting symbols for facts in an attempt to make a rational picture that agrees with your convictions."

"That sounds screwy to me," Paul said, "but you sound like you know what you're talking about. What are you driving at?"

"I'll show you in a moment," Lane said. "First, I want you to tell me exactly what happened when Franks made you invisible and right afterwards. Then I'll tell you."

"Well," Paul said, "he hit me over the head with a table lamp and knocked me out. When I came to a moment later he was getting out this equipment to make me invisible. I was tied up. The straps from his machine became transparent. The transparency spread to my body. Finally it had gone completely through me, and changed to complete invisibility. Then he knocked me out again. When I woke up I was in the clothes closet of the room and Franks and his wife were gone."

"Exactly," Lane said. "It's exactly what I expected. So exactly so that I could have told you it happened that way before you told me."

"Then you—" Paul began.

"Brace yourself," Lane said. "This whole thing can be resolved right here, in just a few moments. The keys lie



in your mind, and you have one of the most powerful minds I've ever encountered. Once you see the facts underlying this it will straighten itself out. Now. I want you to listen and not interrupt. I'm going to tell you exactly *what did* happen. You won't accept it. You'll hotly deny it. But in the end you will have to recognize it as the truth. Okay?"

"Okay," Paul said eagerly.

"When Franks hit you over the head with that table lamp he didn't knock you out," Lane said. "He killed you. There was a mo—"

"You're crazy!" Paul said. "I'm not— Well I'll be darned. That's why you could accept me so calmly. Well I'll be..." He slumped back with a sinking feeling.

"A moment of unconsciousness," Lane went on, "while you dissociated from the flesh. Then you were in your astral form. But you were an atheist so you couldn't accept and reconcile the fact of death and continued integration, so you rationalized the facts by a fictitious theory of invisibility..."

Dr. Greer Lane continued talking, but Paul had silently departed.

A hunger was gnawing at him. He reached up and felt of his clothes hanging over the branch of a tree. They were almost dry. The sun was getting low in the cloudless blue sky. The sluggish stream washed past along the grassy bank at his feet.

Two weeks had gone by since he had become invisible. Two weeks during which he had mastered the rudiments of living. Pilfering from the kitchens of restaurants, dodging out of the way of pedestrians and automobiles until it was second nature to assume no one would avoid him and he must do the dodging himself.

Long ago he had used his last two

nickels just to talk to someone over the phone. The pleasure of talking to someone normally had made the loneliness of his ostracism even more intense...

And two dangers had dogged him constantly. Birds, who flew into him occasionally. And dogs, who had to be avoided at all cost because they universally resented his invisibility and attacked him.

He had stayed away from the hotel. The newspapers had carried an account of his disappearance, and a humorous account of the drunk at the restaurant, headed by the intriguing question, POLTERGEISTS, YET?

He whiled away most of his afternoons in theaters when they weren't crowded. He spent some of his evenings in nightclubs where he could help himself to cocktails while his inadvertent hosts and hostesses watched the floorshows.

But more and more he was feeling the impact of having people sitting next to him ignore him completely, or leave hastily in fear if he dared speak to them.

The hunger gnawing inside him was not for food. It was for companionship. More, it was for the type of companionship he had loved the most. Female companionship. Fresh female companionship. The chase. The triumph of personality over feminine reluctance.

Memory of a hundred vibrant bodies against his, a hundred delicious nights, made him dizzy with loneliness. He thrust those memories out of his mind. They were nothing but torture now.

He reached up and felt his clothes. They were dry now. He stood up and dressed. After he had dressed he stood for a moment, rubbing the thick growth of beard on his chin. "I'm getting more like a bum every day," he



mused. "Unpressed clothes, badly in need of a shave and haircut..."

He chuckled and shrugged, then climbed the steep embankment to the street. It was beginning to get dark. The streetlights were on already, their feeble glow hardly noticeable yet. And the street was deserted except for a young lady coming toward him half a block away.

A thought crystalized. He frowned at it and shook his head. "I must be getting desperate!" he said ruefully. It came back, and he let it lie there in his mind, watching the girl come nearer.

She was only a few yards away. Her hair was a rich brown, held in symmetrical waves that framed her face. Her face was rather plain. There was no makeup to enhance it. Her eyes were hidden behind sunglasses with wide rims suspended from a gold bar that hid her eyebrows. A type of sunglasses quite popular and dressy. She was perhaps five feet five, with good proportions. Her dress showed either carelessness or poor taste in style and color.

As she approached him he reached out toward her. At the last instant he drew his arms back and stepped aside. She went on past. He watched her, his heart pounding against his ribs, his breath hot.

Reluctantly, but with growing decision and purpose, he started after her. His eyes went past her. A dozen yards ahead was a steep path leading down to the river. He hastened his pace. And still the street remained destitute of all movement except for the girl.

Two more steps and she would be just past the path. Then a quick leap, one hand over her mouth to keep her from screaming, the other around her waist...

His heart was pounding painfully against his ribs. She took the last step that took her past the path.

"Now!" The thought triggered Paul into action. He was behind her in two quick steps. His left arm circled her waist and imprisoned her against him. His right hand clamped over her mouth, pulling her head against his chest.

She struggled desperately. There was a tinkling sound as her sunglasses fell and broke on the sidewalk.

"Quiet!" he gritted. "Quiet and you won't get hurt."

She stopped struggling. Paul looked up and down the street. There was no indication from any of the houses on the other side of the street that anyone had seen what was going on.

All he had to do was drag her down the path. In a moment the bushes at the bottom would conceal them from view. But a new feeling was emerging. Self disgust. Self disgust and a realization that this wouldn't help. It would be worse than being ignored.

He stood there in indecision while the struggle went on within him. The self disgust was replaced by bitterness against the fates that had, by the simple act of making him invisible, placed him forever outside the warm circle of human relationship. The bitterness drained away and left a backwash of self pity and despair.

A shudder shook him. "I can't!" It was a hoarse whisper. The girl remained motionless. "Look, kid," he said gruffly. "I'm going to let you go. Just don't yell when I take my hand away from your mouth. And when I release you start walking and don't look back. See?"

The brown glistening waves of her hair under his chin moved in an imperceptible nod of agreement. Her hands, one of which had been gripping



the wrist of his hand on her mouth and the other of which had been pulling at his arm around her waist, relaxed. He took the hand away from her mouth, ready to clamp it back if she screamed.

"I'm glad." Her voice was calm.

"Okay," Paul snarled. "Now get going and don't look back." He took his arm from around her waist and stepped back.

She took a slow step and stopped. "I'm going to turn around," she said calmly.

Paul didn't answer. He was in the clear now. She would turn, and not see him, and think he'd made a hell of a fast getaway, and that'd be all there was to it.

"I want to tell you why I'm going to turn around," she said. "You were going to attack me, but changed your mind because of something inside of you. You aren't really bad or you wouldn't have done that. And you're lonely. That's why I'm going to turn around."

Paul didn't answer. Something choked in his throat. He fought to keep from coughing. He had to be absolutely quiet.

She turned around slowly until she

was facing him. A smile appeared on her face. "See?" she said. "I've turned around. I know you're still there. I heard you swallow just as I turned. You won't speak to me because you're ashamed of yourself. Please. I forgive you. Won't you say something?" She held out a hand pleadingly.

Paul held his breath, dumb wonder flooding through him, and with it a surge of hope. But even stronger than that hope was a feeling that had until this moment been a stranger to him. A feeling that he had scoffed at and believed could never exist in him. A feeling that had never been present before. The first tender sprouting of a seed that could grow and grow forever within him.

The girl smiled with a mixture of shyness and bravery. She took a step toward him. Her fingers encountered the invisible lapel of his coat and gripped it gently. "I'm Dorothy," she said.

Paul's hands came up and cupped her face, tilting it so he could look into her sightless blue eyes. "I'm Paul," he said, his voice unsteady.

And in his mind a voice whispered, "This, then, is the answer."

THE END

## LINE OF FIRE

THE MOON is a perfect target for meteors and meteorites. It is probably being pelted constantly by millions of these projectiles, all of which reach the surface because there is no atmosphere to stop them.

The recent discovery of two large craters on the moon leads to the conclusion that a giant meteorite must have passed through a mountainous ridge. If it fell into a path parallel to the lunar surface, a meteorite could have bored a tunnel-type construction through the mountainous ridge, leaving one crater on the ascending slope, and burning its way through to form another.

—Lee Pope

## BIG WIND

FOR THOSE of you who think the Chicago winds are something to be reckoned with, winds have been discovered 100 miles above Earth, blowing at a velocity of 1,000 miles an hour. These gales, were they much lower, could level our cities with no effort.

But 100 miles up, they are, in actuality, merely ghost winds. Since at those heights there is little, or hardly any, atmosphere, nothing exists that could indicate to man that he is facing a wind that blows with more than 13 times the speed of winds of hurricane force on Earth. If a man were able to go up into the ionosphere, these winds would appear to him to be merely faint breezes.

—Neal King





# THE CLUB HOUSE

*By Rog Phillips*

MARI AND I were at the convention in Chicago over Labor Day. Our being there was something of a miracle, brought about by extreme recklessness. On the Sunday before Labor Day I was loaded with codein. On Monday the doctor at Loma Linda Hospital broke open the blocked sinus cavity, ending the pain. On Tuesday morning I felt good. Tuesday evening Mari and I started out in our car. We drove a thousand miles a day to get to Chicago, and codein by the bottleful kept me able to be aware most of the time of what went on.

I'll be perfectly frank and admit that if the convention had been in any other city I wouldn't have gone. I knew that every person I wanted to see once more would be there. All during the convention a perfect title for that renewal of old friendships kept running through my drugged mind. Appointment In Space and Time. Ted Sturgeon, now wearing a beard. Katherine MacLean, Sam Moscovitz...an evening in the cocktail lounge with two editors...and people I know personally, who live in every state in the union, passing by, pausing to exchange a word with me....

And there were many people there I wanted to meet. Lee Hoffman, the Number One femme fan, Raoul Bru from Cuba... But from that standpoint the convention was too big, too vast. There were people there I wanted to meet whom I never did find. "Yes, Lilith Lorraine is here. I'll find her for you." But no one ever did....

There were well over eight hundred people registered at the convention, and a couple of hundred that were there and didn't register. The daze I remained in most of the time was not entirely induced by codein. The convention was just too big. There are two schools of thought on that subject. I realize that. The one says that the bigger it is the better for stf.

The other school of thought is that the annual convention is for the amateur fan, and should be kept that way. It's difficult to know which school is right. Perhaps both are, in a way.

But the two schools of thought are producing two divergent vectors. It seems quite probable that they will result in a total separation of fandom from the official annual stf convention. It will still be the official annual convention, but amateur fandom will hold its own conventions. I'd hate to see that happen.

There is, in my opinion, one change that should be made in the convention machinery. It represents a change of opinion on my part. Until this convention I believed the present way of choosing next year's convention site was the best possible one. A vote by those attending the convention.

At Chicago I saw the basic weakness and injustice of that system. Therefore I would like to propose that a new method be used. It wouldn't be too radical a change. It would eliminate the evils of "getting the next convention site out of the way."

The next convention will be at Phil-



adelphia. All of you who are interested are to send a dollar to the convention treasurer. (I don't know who that will be yet, but will tell you when I find out.) That dollar makes you a member of the convention committee, whether you can attend the convention or not.

I propose that in the future all groups putting in their bid for next year's convention should present their choice by mail to the entire convention membership including those who aren't able to attend. They should do so well in advance of the convention, so that the pros and cons of each potential site can be weighed by each member. I further propose that *membership in the convention*, not attendance at the convention, *entitles a person to a vote on the next convention site*. The vote would then be mailed to the secretary of the current convention. Then, the city that receives the most votes (not necessarily a majority), would be the site of the next year's convention.

That, in my opinion, would be a much fairer method. It would mean more mature consideration of where next year's convention will be. It would mean that no pressure groups could maneuver things to their advantage. It would mean that a city that desired to hold the next convention would not be forced to spend large sums getting to the convention and putting on a show to get the convention. It would mean that the fan who helped support the convention by sending in his dollar (and fifteen hundred dollars were provided for the convention at Chicago in this way) would have his vote. If that system had been used in 1952 there would have been fifteen hundred voices in the matter instead of one fifth that number.

Now then, how could this change in the setup for choosing the convention

site be adopted? There is no machinery for it, so far as I know. The annual convention just grewed like Topsy.

Therefore I suggest this—that the groups who want the convention in 1954 let the convention members know by mail before the convention in Philadelphia, and each of you who donate your dollar and can't attend the convention write the convention secretary which city you choose for the 1954 convention, of those cities who have bid for it. If that is done there will at least be plenty of pressure to get those votes counted. And if they aren't, at least we who attend the convention will know beforehand what cities want the convention, instead of learning that half an hour before the voting begins.

In closing this subject I want to emphasize the fact that I do not intend to take any active part in making a change like this. It is, in my opinion, a sensible answer to the one basic weakness in the convention system being used. It is up to you fans to do something about it. The 1954 convention will be in Philadelphia. If there are a thousand people there, over half of them will be from the East. The West Coast fan will have no voice in choosing the 1954 convention site unless he pays out the two hundred or more dollars it would cost him in basic expenses to attend.

Back to the Chicago convention for a moment. I think all of us, fan and pro, owe an eternal debt of gratitude to the Chicago group for the fine job they did. When I said earlier that the convention was too big, I meant it only from the standpoint of finding people. From any other standpoint it could never get too big.

Judy May, the chairwoman, devoted a large part of her time for a whole year to the infinite details that made it the success it was. And it was a



success. For the first time the World Science Fiction Convention assumed the proportions of a national convention of the Shriners or Veterans or other groups like them. And the miracle of it is that there is no national organization among us. We don't belong to some group that has a national headquarters, national officers, etc.

We are a group of people of all ages. Some of us earn a living writing or editing or owning publishing companies that bring out science-fantasy stories. Far more of us are merely people who buy a magazine of science-fiction on the corner stand. Many of us are people who publish the amateur magazines that further our interest in the subject, and further our feeling of kinship with one another. And that, to me, will always remain the miracle of science-fantasy.

The past four years have seen it grow to such proportions that now the several local conventions are each bigger than the national convention used to be. I like to think that I have been of some help in that growth. Before the Club House began in *Amazing Stories* it was common practice among fanzine editors to write those whose letters appeared in the reader columns to try to interest them in subscribing to their fanzine. I know of no fan editor who has to do that today. It is the fan review column that treats the fan as a person of respect and deserving of respect, and as a thoroughly likeable human being, that has drawn the thousands into fandom that are there today. You, perhaps. If you haven't seen a fanzine, if you haven't joined in the fun of corresponding with people who have your interest in stf, then here's your opportunity to start in. The fanzine reviews that follow will give you a choice of places to begin....

\* \* \*

First of all on the agenda is a letter. A short one. It says:

Dear Mr. Phillips:

I am organizing a science fiction club in San Bernadino, California. I would appreciate it very much if you could print my request in the Club House. All people interested, to get in touch with me by phone—857143, or mail, Sylvia Kinder, 143 Wabash St., San Bernardino, Calif.

Respectfully,  
Sylvia Kinder

\* \* \*

**CRY OF THE NAMELESS:** free to any stf or fantasy fan residing in the state of Washington. A bi-weekly publication, the official newsletter of the Nameless Ones, the statewide fan group. Wally Weber, Box 92, 905 Third Ave., Seattle 4, Wn. Number 34 contains a report of the last meeting of the University of Washington branch of the club. It also contains a "factual" report of the "impeachment" of the club president, which sounds very authentic until the last line, where it is reported that the president himself instigated the impeachment proceedings. Changes of addresses of members, letters, and cartoons fill the rest of the six pages.

The Nameless Ones are a very active group. At the convention in Chicago Mrs. G. M. Carr, who belongs to this group, was injured in an elevator accident at the Hotel Morrison. It seems that the hotel was short of help. An inexperienced elevator operator was on duty. I hope she has recovered by now....

\* \* \*

**BREVZINE:** 10c; Warren A. Freiberg, 5018 W. 18th St., Cicero 50, Illinois. A monthly pocket-sized mimeographed zine. Forty-eight pages. I want to quote a quote this zine quotes from a 1932 *Wonder Stories*. The quote is a statement there by Hugo Gernsback. "When we contemplate the future in the light of the past hundred years, and if we are assuming that during the next hundred years the rate of progress will be the same as it has during the past hundred years, we are apt to say the sky will be the limit. If, in Napoleon's time, the wonders of 1931 had been enumerated, the author would have been committed to a lunatic asylum. So, in contemplating the wonders of 2031, it may be said here that the most vivid and most extravagant predictions made at present will no doubt fall far short of actual accomplishments in the future."

True. In fact, already in 1952 such progress has been made that the term "lunatic asylum" is obsolete. "Mental hospital" has replaced it, and the change of name repre-



sents a change of viewpoint toward insanity undreamed of even in 1931!

This is a well-rounded zine. Better than half the contents is fan fiction. The rest is articles that are and will continue to be interesting. Nine people work to make this zine a success.

\* \* \*

**SCIENCE FANTASY BULLETIN:** 15c; July issue; Harlan Ellison, 12701 Shaker Blvd., Apt. 616, Cleveland 20, Ohio. Formerly the bulletin of the Cleveland SF Society, now an independent zine. This is becoming a classic fanzine. Pages of different colors, lots of fan art, stories, articles, letters, editorials, forty-four pages... The cover is a beautiful gal floating on a cloud, with a dream city floating on another near-by cloud. It's by Richard Z. Ward, a name familiar to all fans as an outstanding fan artist. The thing I like about this type of zine is the wealth of departments. It's like strolling through a rambling house with a wealth of rooms, each one a surprise. To give you an idea of what this zine has I'm going to quote the entire lineup for the next issue.

"Next issue promises a series of big surprises we have hesitated to give you, but now that we have our new machine we are stepping up our circulation and picking up the lost month on the publishing schedule by issuing two issues this month, and by getting the finest lineup of any amateur magazine in the field. It's for you and we sure hope you are enjoying it all, because we sure are. But here it is for August.

"Experiment, our cover will be the first of a special series of line drawings by DEA whom we have featured often enough on the inside. Now she does her first cover for STFBULLETIN.

"Past Tense, a short story of a science fiction writer who was a has-been...but he had been before. And if you think that is puzzling you should see the other angles of this time-puzzle story by someone new to stf—one of the ex-Quiz Kids, Lonny Lune!

"Aftermath, part 2, from the woman's angle we view the Second Annual Midwest Convention. Late, but spicy, by Associate Editor Honey Wood. A million laughs.

"The second chapter of Tales of Cotton Thorne by Mike Frazier, which sends Mitch Thorne into the sanctum of Corpor, for what purpose and what results we are yet to find out. Don't miss chapter two: Enigma of the Brain...

"Plus lots of other fine material we are adding every day..."

If Harlan hasn't sold you on the idea of sending for a copy, I can't do any better!

\* \* \*

**TLMA:** 25c; August issue; Lynn A. Hickman, 239 E. Broad, Statesville, North Carolina. With the assistance of his wife, Carole. TLMA is The Little Monsters of America, one of the most active groups. The fanzine is developing into Lynn's hobby, and he is rapidly making it into something that will be hard to equal.

Lead story is "Draftee", by Basil Wells, which Lynn says was written in 1943 and was considered too off-trail then, but very timely now. After reading it I add, "And how!" It concerns World War III, where the front is the factory, and the armed forces are the women and sissies.

"Assumption Unjustified", by Rich Elsberry, is a type of story that I like to write myself, but seldom get an idea for. One where one type of intelligent being tries to understand something simple about another and alien race.

On page 22 is a list of new "Little Monsters", and heading the list is Melvin Kinder, 143 Wabash, San Bernardino, Calif. He must be the brother of Sylvia Kinder whose letter preceeds the reviews. She wants to start a fan club in San Bernardino. And that's one of the main activities of TLMA—starting local groups.

On page nineteen Lynn wonders if Rena M. Vale (author of Shasta Book "Beyond These Walls") is a pen name. The answer, Lynn, is no. Mrs. Vale is a housewife, according to Korshak. Her hobby was writing a book. She didn't even know there was such a thing as science fiction. It wasn't until she had finished her novel that she discovered there might be a market for it.

Front cover is by Alan Hunter, and back cover by Ralph Rayburn Phillips. A nice fanzine. Send for a copy, and ask about joining the Little Monsters.

\* \* \*

**SCIENCE FICTION ADVERTISER:** 20c; Roy Squires, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. An almost professional magazine in many respects. Photo-offset, devoted largely to advertisements of sfantasy books and magazines, it caters partly to the fan and partly to the professional bookseller, and has a large circulation outside of fandom as well as in fandom.

It pays for material, and consequently has articles of far higher quality than it could otherwise get. The September lead article, "Philosophy: from Fancy to Fact," is by Clyde Beck. It is the type of article you will read slowly, with many pauses for thought as you digest its carefully thought out and carefully expressed statements. It once again bears out my contention that SFA is worth 20c for its lead article alone.

But there are more articles. There are also many book reviews, each by a person who read the book and took pains to make his review worth reading.



The covers on *SFA* are each a work of art by Morris S. O. Dollens, who specializes in somewhat the same type a Bonestell, and in my opinion surpasses him.

\* \* \*

**MICROCOSM:** vol. 1, no. 1; Sept. issue, Ronald D. Rentz, 130 Vera St., W. Hartford 7, Conn. This seems to be the organ for something patterned after the big book-of-the-month clubs. It's called Fantasy & Science-Fiction Book Club. A letter accompanying it states that it is being sent to six hundred names in the first mailing.

Here's what is offered: (1) a free sub to *Microcosm*. (2) the privilege of obtaining what they think is the best stf book each month at a sizable saving. (3) a chance to order any current stf book from them at a saving of one sixth the regular price. And, like the large book clubs, they want your promise to purchase at least three club selections a year.

Their September title is "Player Piano", by Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Scribner's, regular price \$3.00. Book club price \$2.50.

I wasn't sure whether to include this item in the reviews or not. Even if Mr. Rentz is a fan, this would have to be a strictly commercial enterprise. However, I decided to include it this once, so you can know it has come into existence.

The zine itself is three pages, devoted entirely to book reviews. And I will say this: Mr. Rentz's choice for September is a good choice.

\* \* \*

**PACIFIC ROCKET SOCIETY BULLETIN:** sample copy free to those interested in joining the PRS; Pacific Rocket Society, 428 S. Verdugo Road, Glendale 5, California. With a club such as this the meetings and activities are far more interesting than the club bulletin. But the bulletin has much of interest in it. The analysis of the standing broad jump transferred to the Moon, for example. By Donald H. Cronquist. His conclusion is that a man could jump ten times as far as on Earth.

And here's something that will interest you. PRS has an actual rocket under construction, and has a testing range.

\* \* \*

**FANTASY-TIMES:** 10c; twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave., Flushing 54, N.Y. The newszine of fandom. Mr. Taurasi has been publishing this zine for many years, and during that time has built up a know-how of getting the news almost before it happens. What's coming in future issues of your favorite prozine, what

new magazines will be on the stands in a few weeks or months, and when to look for them, and the thousand items of news that will interest you if you are a fan.

One of the features I find most valuable in *F-T* is its reporting on stf and fantasy stories in the many magazines such as the *Post* and *Collier's*, etc., where I would miss them unless it were brought to my attention.

This fanzine meets a very popular demand, and therefore has one of the largest subscriber lists in the history of fandom. It well deserves it. Send a dime for a sample copy, and you will then send a dollar for a full subscription.

\* \* \*

**COSMAG:** 25c; Ian T. Macauléy, 57 East Park Lane, N.E., Atlanta 5, Ga. Slick paper, the most legible type of any in this month's stack, top-quality artwork.

Most interesting item in this issue is Bob Silverberg's "Lewis Carroll's Greatest Fantasy." According to him it isn't "Alice in Wonderland", but an unknown title, "Sylvia and Bruno." I'll admit I never heard of it. But from what Bob says of it I would like to read it.

"The Immortal Idiocy" by Lee Hoffman, No. 1 femme fan, is a delightful bit of idiocy indeed. Mari and I met Lee at the convention in Chicago, and is she beautiful!

\* \* \*

That winds up the reviews for this month. The summer months are over now. Next month will see a resurgence of fan publishing, with more fanzines than I can review properly. I get a panoramic view of fan publishing that you can't get unless you subscribe to them all. I'm continually amazed at the work done on them. Black ink, gold ink, silk-screen artwork, and a thousand other things. Dozens of fans working into the small hours of the night to write, stencil, draw, staple, address the fanzines.

Each month I ask myself the same question. When will it end? When will the last issue of the stf fanzine be mailed to its subscribers? Or will it ever end? The possible futures of stf fandom are an intriguing subject.

—ROG PHILLIPS



# THE



The horror had been waiting with the patience of evil itself



# CURSE



By Ivar Jorgensen

**The terror had to be dealt with. But the only method of blocking it, meant a trip into living hell for a tortured man**

I MET THE man in Chicago. I was on an overnight stop with the choice of two time-killers near my hotel: the gaudy, rather overdone cocktail lounge or a recital hall I'd noticed on the boulevard while coming from the station. I chose the music—a pianist named Roger Godfrey according to the outside billing—bought my ticket and went in to hear some very good Bach.

I had a loge seat and, as the intermission lights bloomed up, I looked around to find only one other occupied seat in the loge.

He was a small, wispy man with a goatee, very bright, black eyes, and a smile filled with warmth. He lost no time in breaking the ice. "I see you, too, are alone."

"Just passing through with an evening to fill."

"An admirable way to fill it. Would you care to join forces with me at the bar?"

"It would be a pleasure."

As we moved down the stairs toward the foyer, he turned on me suddenly with that quick disarming smile. "An advertising man?"

"No, a writer. Pretty much of a hack, I'm afraid—as writers go."

We got elbow room at the bar and ordered old-fashioned. "Ah—you writing fellows! A typewriter, a sheet of paper, a fact. You start weaving—building—and presto! Out comes the salable property."

I smiled. "I never heard it expressed quite like that before—"



He had a way of throwing one off-balance with a quick movement of his head. "Tell me—what do you think of Roger Godfrey?"

"Why—quite accomplished I'd say, but I'm not much of a musical critic."

"Did you notice anything extraordinary about him?"

I considered. "Frankly, no."

The man sobered. "A remarkable man, Godfrey. One of my dearest friends. A remarkable man who went in and out of hell—and I mean that literally—with a courage seldom seen on this earth. But a modest man. Close-mouthed."

A peculiar intensity had come on my drinking friend. He sipped his old-fashioned, tapped a handkerchief to his lips, and said, "Roger Godfrey's story is an appalling thing. It is a stark revelation of how close we dwell—all of us—to brain-searing horror. I'd like to tell you that story."

"I'd be delighted to listen."

He glanced at his watch. "It won't take long. We have fully ten minutes. It began on the day Roger Godfrey became convinced he was—"

"—going *blind*. Oh Roger! Don't say a thing like that!"

Godfrey lowered his hands from his eyes, got up from the piano bench and stood for a moment, swaying. Margaret got swiftly up from her chair and came toward him. His smile was a weak attempt to cover anxiety. "Maybe—maybe it's just overwork, darling. I don't know."

"But you never mentioned it, Roger. I didn't dream there was anything wrong with your eyes."

"It's come on rather suddenly."

"But what is it? What do you feel?"

"Maybe it's just foolishness—"

"Roger!"

"Oh, I don't know. It's as though

my eyes were turning hard—hard as marbles. Terrific shooting pains and moments when I can't see! Not black-outs. It isn't black or white or anything else. Suddenly looking through my eyes is like trying to look with my fingers—or my teeth. Sight just isn't there. Then it comes back, but the pain doesn't go."

"And you haven't been to a specialist? Roger, you're insane!"

Roger Godfrey took Margaret by the shoulders and drank her in as though he had to get a lifetime's seeing into the next few moments. "No, darling," he said. "I'm afraid. Deathly afraid. I love you. I can't bear to think of looking at you only—with my hands!"

He was an artist and not a man of strong will. She took him in her arms and strove to comfort him. "It's probably overwork, as you say. Nothing to worry over. Fifty years ago perhaps, but not now. Science has made tremendous strides. They understand such things."

He felt a little ashamed of himself. He kissed her and smiled. "Science? It doesn't even know how to get rid of the common cold."

But he was only joking, and together they sought out one of the great eye specialists: Dr. Michael Wellington.

Margaret sat in an anteroom while Roger went through minute and exhaustive checks and tests. When she was called in Wellington gave them both a smile of encouragement.

"There is no great cause for worry," he said. "The case is—well, not exactly routine, but it should certainly respond to surgery."

"An operation?"

"Yes. As soon as possible. Fortunately we've caught it in time. Mr. Godfrey will be as good as ever in a couple of months."



THE OPERATION was performed and, a week later, Roger was released from the hospital. When he and Margaret thanked the great surgeon, their attitude was little short of worship. He accepted it gracefully and accepted also a wedding invitation for a month hence.

But only two weeks had passed before Roger Godfrey returned to Wellington's office. Wellington was startled at the musician's appearance. "Godfrey! What on earth?"

Roger Godfrey was pale and worn. He'd lost weight and his eyes shone with the brightness of fever. He moved with a studied deliberation like a man making a visible effort to hold himself together. He sat down opposite Wellington and asked, "Doctor—what did you do to my eyes?"

Wellington was caught somewhat off guard by the tense, urgent tone. "Why—why I operated in order to correct—"

"What was wrong with my eyes, Doctor?"

"The technical terms are rather hard for a layman to understand."

"At the time you mentioned glaucoma, but you said that wasn't exactly it."

"That's true. You were the victim of a disease which, as I said at the time, could easily have been mistaken for glaucoma. The symptoms and appearances were much the same. But—"

"Doctor—was the disease a rare one?"

"As a matter of fact—yes. I've only seen three cases like it in all my professional life."

"Did you operate on them?"

"Upon only one."

"And what happened?"

"The operation was a success."

"That's not what I mean. What happened later?"

"I really can't say. It was a clinical case. In Alexandria, Egypt. The hospital there wired me and I went there because I was greatly interested. The patient was an Arab. Frankly I don't know what happened to him."

Godfrey was trembling. He laughed now and there was a touch of hysteria in the laugh. "I think I can tell you what happened to him, Doctor."

Wellington got up from his chair and quickly approached the pianist. But the latter waved him away. "I'm all right. I'm all right. Just listen to me. There's something I've got to tell you."

"Very well. I'm listening."

"When you operated on my eyes, Doctor, you opened the windows to hell!"

Slowly, Wellington took off his glasses. "What are you saying, man? I don't understand you."

Godfrey had now gotten some semblance of a grip on himself. He leaned back, wan, beaten, weary to the bone. When he spoke, his near-hysteria had vanished. "I can't give it to you in a word, Doctor. It will take a little telling. Be patient with me and listen."

"Certainly, but first I'll get you something to steady your nerves."

Godfrey waved an impatient hand. "At first," he said, "I noticed nothing. There was only the elation at my escape from blindness. I was walking on air. I began practicing again and never played so brilliantly. Then something happened."

"Tell me."

"It was a little over a week ago when Margaret and I were having a cocktail in my apartment before going to the recital hall. I had just kissed her and drawn away when a voice said, *'We've got to kill her.'*"

"A voice. Whose voice?"



"A voice inside me."

"I see."

Godfrey sat up sharply. "Now, Doctor. Don't start jumping to conclusions. You don't even begin to see. That voice was real, although only I myself could hear it. It was not an unspoken thought and it did not come from me. It came from the beast!"

**Q**UICKLY Wellington weighed the thing and decided on a course of action. Let Godfrey talk it out. Help him talk it out. "I'm afraid you'll have to clarify that."

"I'll do my best. And don't send for the straight-jacket until I've finished." Godfrey smiled weakly. "Will you promise?"

"You have no worry on that score."

"When a man is afflicted with the curse visited upon me, Doctor, nature furnishes a small compensation. This comes in the form of understanding. It's not the same as a purely physical affliction such as the one I brought to you. When man is called upon to look into the depths of hell, complete knowledge of that hell comes along with it."

"You were saying something about a beast—and a voice."

"Yes. There is a beast in every human being, Doctor Wellington."

The surgeon made a show of considering. "I know that Man, in a sense, has two natures—"

"Man has more than that! He is two separate beings. The talk of dualism is merely a symbol of the true state of man. Inside of you and me and every one of us, there is a demon—a thing out of hell trapped behind our will power—and other restraints."

"Very well. I'll grant you that—"

"You're not granting me that at all!"

Wellington frowned. His voice took on an edge. "You'll do me the courtesy of believing the statements I make. Now what has this demon got to do with the operation I performed on you?"

"The eyes, Doctor Wellington, have been called the windows of the soul. That's a little flowery but it doesn't go far enough. The eyes are the windows—the barred windows to all that man really is—his brain. The demon dwells in there and looks out through the bars—"

"Now really!"

"Wait a minute. Maybe I can explain it this way. All the baser desires and impulses are reflected through the eyes. You look at a beautiful woman and you desire her. And in your eyes are the things you would not want revealed. You look at an enemy, and in your eyes is reflected the urge to kill—to rend—to cause agony. But these things are seldom done because the demon—the beast—is trapped. It can only suggest. It cannot come forth and do these things itself."

"You're suggesting that I—"

"I'm not suggesting. I'm telling you. That operation may have saved my sight but it opened the windows to the beast! You cut the bars. Now I hold it back only by vigilance—only by will power. I tell you the windows through which the beast can escape are open."

**R**OGER GODFREY sank back on his chair and closed his eyes. As Wellington regarded him silently, he went on speaking. "I'm sure the Bible refers to this in a symbolic manner. When Christ went with Satan up to the mountain. There Christ wrestled with his demon."

Wellington tapped his glasses



thoughtfully on the arm of his chair. Godfrey spoke with infinite weariness. "Christ had the divine strength to vanquish His demon. I haven't."

The surgeon regarded the pianist with a clinical interest. A full minute of silence passed. Then Wellington spoke. "You said this demon suggested killing your fiancée. Is she the sole object of its hatred?"

Roger answered indirectly. "Poets and artists," he said, "have a way of sensing truth that less highly attuned people overlook. No doubt you've read Wilde's classic—*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*? 'Each man kills the thing he loves.' The beast will concentrate upon Margaret. Then—when it is finally free—" Rodger shrugged. "Only God knows."

"Have you told Margaret about this?"

"No."

"Then let's go and tell her. You are certainly going to need the help of the one closest to you."

Roger Godfrey had turned listless. Wellington called the cab and they crossed town to Godfrey's apartment. Once inside, Godfrey looked at his watch. "Margaret will be here in half an hour."

A bright fire was crackling in the grate. In order to be occupied, he seized the poker and began working the fire. Then he dropped the poker and straightened.

"This is wrong. I mustn't see Margaret. I must never see her again."

"On the contrary," Wellington said, as he took a cigar from his case. "You love the girl. This beast of yours will drag you to her sooner or later. It's better that she knows."

Godfrey leaned suddenly toward the surgeon. There was an eagerness in his manner. "You believe me! You *do* believe me, don't you?"

"Let's assume that I do," Wellington replied quietly.

Margaret arrived soon after that. When the bell rang, Wellington got quickly to his feet. "Let me."

He crossed to the door and opened it. The girl got halfway in, then reacted to the surgeon's unexpected presence. A look of fear came. "Doctor? Is anything wrong?"

"Of course not, my dear. Just a friendly visit. I wanted to see how my prize patient is coming along."

Margaret laughed with obvious relief. She shrugged out of her coat before Wellington could help her and moved swiftly to where Roger was standing with his back to the fire. She said, "Darling, you should be resting for the recital," and raised her mouth for a kiss.

Then Wellington saw it. The hideous monster crowding suddenly between the two lovers—coming as in a mist from Roger's eyes to form into solid substance. The black bestial face—the scaly hands of shining ebony grasping Margaret's throat.

He heard Roger's scream—Margaret's scream—against the background of a slobbering snarl of hatred.

Then Roger Godfrey bent and snatched up the poker still extended into the bright fire.

**M**Y NEW-FOUND friend had continued his story as we made our way up the stairs. He was interrupted by the dimming of the house lights, the bright spotlight settling on the stage entrance.

Roger Godfrey walked from the wings onto the stage and toward the concert grand.

Under the cover of applause, my friend leaned close to me and said, "Don't you notice it now? The stiff walk. The head held high. He's stone



blind, you know. Been that way since the moment he seized the red-hot poker and—"

The applause crescendoed, annoying me. I leaned closer.

"And what?"

"—closed the windows."

Godfrey began playing but I couldn't get my mind in it. My interest lay in the man by my side. I leaned close enough to whisper. "That doctor—that Wellington. He'd had such a case before and he'd have stayed to study it. So he must have known. He must have gotten some diabolical personal pleasure out of—"

The man turned to me. "I assure you he did not know. Pray let me correct an oversight and introduce myself. I am Michael Wellington, surgeon and eye specialist."

I was somewhat flustered. "Sorry," I muttered, and sank back into my seat.

Godfrey's brilliant music welled up from the stage and after a few moments, Wellington again leaned toward me. "They are always together," he said. "She brings him to the recital halls; waits for him in the wings during the performance. If you ever catch sight of the pair, notice the scarf she wears close about her throat. She is never without it. The scarf covers the livid scars on her throat."

I kept my eyes on Wellington, entirely fascinated. And as I watched him, I was mortally certain a change came over his features. A frightening change—and he sat there like some

fiend looking with satisfaction upon a finished and diabolical handiwork.

**B**UT THAT was not the end of it. I couldn't get Wellington out of my mind, so when chance held me in town another day, I called at the hotel he'd mentioned during the recital. I asked the clerk for Dr. Michael Wellington.

He looked at the register and replied, "There is no Doctor Wellington registered."

"Then he must have checked out. He was here last night."

"The register shows no such name. I'm sorry."

I was somewhat annoyed. "A small, dark man—with black eyes and a black goatee."

The clerk's face cleared. "Oh, yes. A man of that description checked out this morning. We know him quite well. You must be referring to Frank Gorman, a fur salesman, who stops here quite regularly."

I remembered snatches of conversation. And I understood. *Ah—you writing fellows. A typewriter....a fact. You start weaving—building....*

Fact: A pianist named Roger Godfrey was blind.

I should have known better because I've met them before—people who enjoy showing you they can do your job much better than you can do it yourself.

And sometimes they can.

THE END

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**THE IMPOSTER BY PAUL LOHRMAN**  
**IN THE MARCH ISSUE** **AMAZING STORIES**



# MARS in the PARLOR

By L. A. Burt

ASTRONOMERS may worry about the diameter of the universe, they may probe into the depths of interstellar space, and the stars may be the only things that matter; but, to amateurs, to science-fictionists, to most people (and perhaps, secretly, the astronomers, too) the mysteries of the Solar System are no less engaging than the remote happenings in outer space. In particular, one problem more than any other attracts speculation and wonder. That is the problem of the Martian canals (or *canali*—"channels"—as Schiaparelli called them).

Except for the craters which dot the Lunar surface, probably no single astronomical phenomenon has engaged the attention and curiosity of more people than the so-called "canals" of Mars. These mysterious markings, vague lines, shadowy traces which cannot be resolved under present conditions, have been explained in terms of waterways, goods passages, even linear cities—but all that is pure speculation.

Fortunately the answer to the canals of Mars is going to be found in this coming year!

Mars will come this year to its "nearest distance" from the Earth. Naturally it's done this before. And every eye and telescope has been focussed on it—thus far to no avail. But this year it will be different because of one reason. Now there is a 200-inch telescope waiting to trap the planet. Mars will be forced to disgorge the secret of the markings!

Astronomers are certain that the terrific strength of the two-hundred-incher, coupled with its resolving power, and its light-collecting ability, aided by even a few nights of decent "seeing" when the atmosphere is fairly quiet, will be able to determine just what are the strange, fuzzy, blurred suggestions of canals or roads or channels or whatever they are that so captivate every observer who at any time stares at the red planet.

In addition to answering the mystery of the canals, the two-hundred-incher will also give a great deal more information on the gigantic polar ice caps which appear and disappear with seasonal regularity. Furthermore, the almost certain existence of the changes in greenish vegetation will be assured, and possibly lots more will be found out about it.

In a phrase, Mars is going to get a good going-over this time when the might of the two-hundred-inch telescope is directed upon it. No other Solar object with the exception of the Moon has offered more captivating and engaging and tantalizing glimpses than the Red Planet.

# Lethal Synthesis

CHEMOTHERAPY, the art and science of treating disease with chemicals, has advanced at an astonishing rate since the introduction of the so-called "wonder drugs." Preventive medicine also has made use of chemical treatments. In fact the tendency of the last twenty years has been to look upon the body as a chemical factory, one which can produce its own agencies with which to combat disease. The success of this attitude has led to its being pushed to greater and greater lengths. The latest approach in this chemical warfare is called "lethal synthesis".

Lethal synthesis is a profound name for a profound reaction but in essence it is simple in results. Lethal synthesis refers to the ability of the human body to take a harmless chemical, react upon it, and turn it into a deadly agency against disease germs.

Professor Peters, an English biochemist, is stressing this unusual mode of disease elimination. He came upon the whole idea almost accidentally. He noticed that a well-known poison, extracted from a familiar plant, fluoroacetic acid, which is ordinarily quite deadly, in test tube reactions with human enzymes exhibited no toxic properties whatever! Yet, when fed to men and animals, fluoroacetic acid is quite deadly.

This paradox called for further investigation. A thorough analysis of the test-tube reactions showed no evidences of poison apart from the fluoracetic acid itself. Peters had a hunch. He examined the bodies of numerous sheep which had been killed by fluoroacetic acid and discovered that, along with the fluoroacetic acid, were great quantities of citric acid, and in some subtle way this actually was the agency which did the killing by affecting the kidneys. Obviously the fluoroacetic acid was being reacted upon by some unfamiliar operators within human tissues to produce the overwhelming citric acid molecules.

The ability of the human body to change harmless chemicals into powerful destructive ones against disease of course constitutes an exceedingly forceful and significant discovery. The mechanics of chemotherapy are going to require reconsideration in the light of this new evidence of their basic action. Hitherto it has been a matter of trying a chemical and hoping for the best; now perhaps chemical agents may be tailored to the job they're supposed to do.

—Merrit Linn



# YOU CAN'T STAY HERE

By Walt Crain



Ann cringed from the threat she read in their eyes





**Steve didn't know whether they were friends or enemies. Meeting them with open arms or smoking guns could prove equally dangerous**

**"H**URRY, Steve," Ann said, her voice breathless over the wire.

"I'd much rather just sit here at the phone, darling, listening to you. And anyway I have a headache."

"Nonsense."

"Exactly," Steve said, with the air of having made a point. "It's nonsense to even think of attending that old ladies' literary club. They'd...they'd discover how unliterary I really am!"

"You've promised, and in half an hour they'll be expecting you to show up and make a speech."

"I don't have one. Haven't given it a thought, in fact. So you see, it wouldn't be exactly a lie to tell them I have a headache."

"If you aren't there on time I'll

never speak to you again."

"Do you really mean that, Ann?" Steve said softly.

There was a long silence, then an almost inaudible, "No."

"I'll come," Steve said. "Be there in twenty minutes. What should I talk about? What impresses them the most? My stories of future civilizations, or my down-to-earth stuff? Or are they after top-secret scientific stuff?"

"Anything, Steve. They won't even listen. They'll just be looking at you and thinking that at last they're in the presence of the fabulous Steve Wilson, author, scientist—"

A knock sounded at the door.

"Someone's knocking at the door, darling. I'll see you at the hen party."



It's probably the boy with another drink. Bye now."

Steve hung up and went to the door of his hotel room, and opened it. He lifted his eyebrows. "Well, well," he said. "Do come in, officers. I hadn't expected you so soon."

The two policemen came into the room. One of them said, "Expected us?"

"Not for another hour yet," Steve said. "My victim won't arrive until eight. I plan to kill him as soon as he arrives."

"Oh," the policeman said. "You're Dr. Steven Wilson? We've come to take you down to—"

"I'm under arrest?" Steve interrupted him, grinning.

"Let me tell him," the other one said. "Something's happened. We can't tell you what it is. The department doesn't know what to do about it. The D. A. read in the paper that you were in town. He wants you to come down."

"Right now?" Steve said. "You're just the men I'm looking for. I'm going to make a phone call. At the other end of the line will be a very irate young lady. I want you to tell her what you just told me."

The two men suddenly looked grimly stubborn. One of them said, "Huh-uh. Our orders are to bring you down now, and without your talking to anyone. You'll see why when we get there."

"But..." Steve objected, then gave in.

Ten minutes later Steve shook hands with a florid-faced man who introduced himself as Carter Wright, District Attorney. The two police officers remained in the room.

"I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you like this, Dr. Wilson," Carter Wright said.

"That's all right," Steve said. "I

only had a speech I was to make, with a hall full of women waiting for me. What's it all about?"

"I could explain," Carter said, "but it will be just as quick for you to get the story first hand." He flicked the toggle on the intercom and said, "Bring Orville Jones into my office."

ORVILLE JONES, Steve saw, was a man in his late fifties, lanky and angular. He wore trousers and coat that didn't match and had been worn a long time. On his coat front was a metal badge that wasn't regulation police. Around his waist was a wide belt. An empty holster dangled at his side under the coat.

"This is Dr. Wilson, Orville," Carter said. "Tell him what you have told me."

"Glad to know you, Dr. Wilson. I'm nightwatchman down at the Bensen warehouse on Sixth and Water. I go on duty at five o'clock and work until one in the morning. I was making my six o'clock rounds up on the third floor—that's the top floor—when I came around this pile of boxes of stuff and saw them. It's kind of gloomy up there. The windows are dirty, and anyway the stuff stored there is piled up and shuts out most of the light so they have to keep electric lights burning all the time, and they don't give enough light. There were these three figures. Well, in a spot like that you shoot first and ask questions afterwards. Especially when they start for you. I got the first one right between the eyes. Before I could shoot again I got hit on the jaw, I guess." He rubbed his chin tenderly. "When I woke up I was still there, but I didn't have any clothes on. The one I shot was still there, too. I got a good look at it."

"It?" Steve said, startled.

"It was a he, but it wasn't human.



I left it there and went downstairs and called the police."

"You interested now?" Carter Wright said, smirking.

"I don't know," Steve said. "What do you mean, it wasn't human? An ape?"

"I've never seen anything like it," the nightwatchman said. "I've been to the zoo, too."

"We have the body down in the morgue," Carter Wright said. "Want to see it?"

**I**TS SKIN was leathery in texture and a ripe olive in color. Or rather, Steve decided, a mixture of ripe and green olive. It was human and yet it wasn't. It was about five feet ten in height. Its shoulders were narrow and its hips rather wide. Its arms were pipestems with incredibly long hands, with six long fingers on each hand. Its legs were very much like its arms. Pipestems, with long feet consisting mostly of six long toes or fingers. Its face was the most human thing about it. Aside from the unhuman color it was almost normal in shape. A face that was neither oriental nor occidental, foreign to both yet strangely the same. It was a male.

"What do you think?" the D.A. asked.

Steve looked at the dark hole in the center of the high forehead. He pushed open an eyelid and was startled to see white with a blue iris.

"I'd rather not say," he said. "Did you look on the roof of the warehouse?"

The district attorney nodded. "I was saving that. We found three parachutes and three suits that look like futuristic diving suits."

"What about the two that got away?" Steve asked.

"We're looking for them. One of them's wearing the clothes taken from

the nightwatchman. The other's wearing some coveralls missing from a hook on the wall downstairs in the warehouse. They have the nightwatchman's gun. The entire police force is alerted."

"Why did you get me?" Steve asked.

"Well, now," Carter said, "I'm a fan of yours, in a way. I thought this would be more in your line than mine. Extraterrestrials. They get a bad reception, go into hiding thinking everybody's against them. Quite a problem. I thought maybe you could study the situation and maybe come up with something. We don't want to make it public just yet. We'd like to find the other two and take them without hurting them, and have them safely in custody before making the thing public. Even then, maybe we'd better call in the Government and let them decide what to do."

"I'd like to see those spacesuits and parachutes," Steve said. He glanced at his watch. "Where's a phone?" he groaned. "I've got to make a phone call."

The D.A. led him to the morgue office. Steve looked up the number of the ladies' club in the book and dialed it. It rang a long time before someone answered.

"Ann Parker, please," Steve said. "It's very important."

It was over five minutes before he heard her cold "Hello."

"This is Steve, Ann," he said. "I'm sorry. Terribly sorry. That knock on the door was the police. I'm down at—"

"Don't tell her," the D.A. said. "Not one word must leak out."

"I can't tell you where I am," Steve said. "It's very secret. Later on I can tell you all about..." He was talking to a dead phone. He looked at it, smiled weakly at the D.A., and



hung up. "See what you got me into?" he said.

"Sorry," Carter Wright said.

Steve sighed, "Oh, well... Now let's get down to business. I want to see those spacesuits. But first, we have to map some strategy. Those aliens may have been inclined to be friendly. They aren't now. Not when one of them got shot before they could say hello—not that I blame the watchman. The last thing he would think of was that three beings from outer space had landed on the roof of the warehouse. And certainly the aliens wouldn't realize, even now, that he was shooting what he thought to be thieves. They have his gun. What caliber is it? Thirty-eight? They may do some more shooting. Have your men ready to close in on any area the moment a shot is heard or a murder takes place. Instruct them to use tear gas rather than bullets, if possible."

THE PHONE was ringing. Steve opened his eyes and glanced at his watch. It was eleven o'clock. He was just able to reach the phone without getting out of bed. "Hello," he yawned.

"Steve?" Ann's voice sounded. "Where've you been? I called you several times last night, the last time at four a.m."

"I was in the police lab," he said. "Didn't get to the hotel until seven-thirty this morning."

"What's it about, darling?" Ann asked.

"How'd the biddies take my not showing up?" he countered.

"Never mind them," Ann said. "What's going on? Something must be."

"Can't tell you," Steve said. "You'll just have to trust me. Can you do that?"

"Well..." Ann's voice was reluctant.

"I'll tell you what," Steve said. "Meet me in the lobby at one. You can have lunch while I have breakfast."

"All right, Steve," Ann said.

Steve hung up and started to sink back in bed. The phone rang urgently. He groaned and picked it up again. "Hello?" he said.

"Carter Wright. There's been a shooting. You in bed? Get dressed. We'll pick you up in ten minutes."

It was only seven minutes later that Steve emerged from the elevator into the lobby and hurried across it to the street door. A young lady sitting over in one corner watched him, her lips set in a grim line. The young lady was Ann.

She rose to follow him. When she reached the revolving doors she saw him standing on the curb. The next instant a police car was stopped at the curb and Steve was climbing in. By the time she was through the doors the police car was almost a block away, its siren wailing. She ran the twenty yards to her car. Seconds later she had pulled into traffic. Her radio, turned to the police band, was warming up. It exploded into life suddenly. An address was being blared at her.

She turned the volume down to a whisper and concentrated on searching for holes in traffic to slip through. A puzzled frown creased her smooth forehead. It seemed that every police car in the city was being directed to that address—and plan T was a new code to her. What did it mean?

It took her twenty minutes to reach the blocked off streets.

"Sorry, lady," a policeman told her. "If you're going through, better go down to Vermont to do it."

"But I'm not going through," she



said. "I'm Ann Parker, Dr. Steve Wilson's fiancée. He told me to join him here." It wasn't exactly a lie. He had promised to meet her at one, and he would in all probability still be here then.

"You must be mistaken, Miss," the cop said. "This neighborhood is extremely dangerous right now."

"Are you calling me a liar?" she said heatedly. "What's your name?"

"I'm John Fremond, Miss, and I have a daughter your age. I wouldn't let her in here, and I won't let you."

"I—" Ann began. She bit her lip. It was no use. She backed her car a few feet and turned to the right. At the first alley she slowed down, but it was blocked by police cars. So was the next street.

At the next alley she smiled triumphantly. It was unguarded. She turned into it, coming to a stop just out of sight. Ahead in the next block was a police car. A policeman saw her and shouted, waving her back.

*"Don't move!"*

**T**HE VOICE was deep, bullfrogish. She turned her head. Standing between garages on a concrete walk were two people. Each of them held a gun pointed at her.

"If you wish to live, do as we tell you," the bullfrog voice said. "Open the doors. Yours, to hide us as we enter; the back one, so we can enter."

Ann obeyed. She knew she must be facing the killers, and from the size of the cordon they must be very dangerous ones. She studied their faces. They seemed to be wearing some kind of makeup. Heavy powder on a thick cream base. The right cheek on one of them had a thin streak of something the color of ripe olives.

*"Enlu pboal."* The larger of the two had said this in his deep voice.

*"Memem."* It was a very melodious

voice. Ann looked sharply at the smaller of the two. The face was, in a way, pretty. It could be a girl.

Seconds later they were in the back seat, their guns still threatening her. The larger one had entered last, and closed the rear door.

"Close your door and back out slowly," Bullfrog voice ordered. "If we are caught you die."

**S**TEVE FOLLOWED Carter into the house. It was a small two-bedroom bungalow. In the middle of the living room rug lay the body of a woman in her early thirties, a housedress and apron stained with blood from a still damp wound under her left breast. Over near the open kitchen door was a ten-year-old boy, a dark hole just under his ear.

The crying of a baby came from one of the bedrooms. Steve and the D.A. lifted their eyebrows at each other and went to the door. Inside a burly policeman was holding the baby, patting it clumsily in an attempt to comfort it.

"Poor kid," Carter grunted. "Let's go next door. The woman over there is the one who called us. Bring the baby with you, Calahan. Mrs. Baker can take care of it better than you can."

Mrs. Baker was in her late forties, dark hair, her face pasty with fright.

"I'm the District Attorney," Carter said. "Tell us exactly what you saw."

"I was in the kitchen, baking. My kitchen windows open out so I can see into Mrs. Green's kitchen. I heard Randy shouting and crying. I wondered why he wasn't at school, and glanced over. A man I'd never seen before was standing in the middle of the kitchen. He had a gun, and just as I looked he fired. Then I heard Mrs. Green scream. This man fired again, and her scream stopped. I



ducked back and ran into the living room and called the police."

"Can you describe this man you saw?" Carter asked.

"Yes, I can. I saw him very plainly. He was wearing a tan hat. He looked like some kind of foreigner. Not Chinese. He was a white man all right, but—"

"White? Are you sure?" Steve asked. When she nodded he said, "That was to be expected. He found Mrs. Green's cosmetics. Foundation cream and powder would do it."

"Anything else?" Carter asked.

"After I called the police I went to the side window and peeked out. I saw this man and another, smaller, go out the back door and out to the alley. About a minute later I heard the sirens, and then police were all over the neighborhood."

Carter turned to Steve. "We'll just have to wait," he said. "A house-to-house search should uncover them."

But four hours later nothing had turned up.

"No one else even saw them!" Carter groaned. "We might as well go back down town. Something will turn up. I'm sure of that."

"Good Lord!" Steve exclaimed. "I had an appointment with Ann for lunch."

"You can call her if you wish," Mrs. Baker said.

"Thanks," Steve said gratefully. First he dialed the hotel and asked if Ann Parker had called or left a message.

"There's no record of any call, nor any message," the phone girl said.

Steve dialed her apartment phone. It rang several times. He was about to hang up when he heard her voice. "Hello?" she said.

"Oh!" Steve said with relief. "I'm sorry, Ann. Something came up so I

couldn't keep that lunch date. Please forgive me."

"Of course I forgive you, Steve," she said.

"Hey!" he said. "You gave in too easily. It worries me. How about dinner this evening. And I give my solemn promise I won't let anything interfere."

"I—I'm sorry, Steve. I—I have a headache. You go ahead and work on your mystery or whatever it is. Call me in a few days."

"Ann!" Steve said sharply. "I'm coming right over."

"No!" she said. "Wait a minute, Steve." There was a long silence. "Steve," she said. "I'll take an aspirin. I'll be all right. I'll have dinner with you. On one condition. Don't come before eight, and bring some groceries with you. I'll fix dinner in the apartment."

"Swell!" Steve said.

When he hung up he looked at the long list, frowning.

"She's making you pay for your neglect," Carter chuckled.

"I guess so," Steve said ruefully.

"Get used to it. All husbands get treated that way."

"Guess you're right," Steve said, smiling weakly. "Let's go. And don't make me miss my dinner date to-night."

THEY WENT out to the D. A.'s car, made a U turn, and drove the three blocks to the barricade. One of the policemen waved them through, recognizing the D. A. He looked at Steve as the car started, then held up his hand for them to stop.

"Are you Dr. Steve Wilson?" he asked. Steve nodded. "Well," the man said, "a girl tried to get past me. She said her name was Ann Parker and she was your fiancee."

"When was this?" Steve said.



"Right after you two arrived this noon. About ten minutes afterwards. I told her nothing doing."

"What did she do then?" Steve asked.

"Oh, she drove over a block or two, turned into the alley and saw it was blocked no doubt, because she backed out a minute later and drove away."

"Which alley?" Steve demanded.

"That way in the next block," John Fremond said, pointing.

Carter turned the car in that direction. At the alley he turned in, stopping the car.

It took a half hour to find a policeman that had seen her. He was Jack Voigt.

"Yes, sir," he said. "We were a block away in the alley. I saw her turn in, and shouted for her to get out. She did."

"Right away?" Carter asked.

"Oh sure."

"Think carefully," Steve said. "Did she open a door?"

"Yeah. She opened a door, but she didn't get out."

"Which door?" Steve persisted.

"Her door. The driver's side. Just for a second, though."

Carter opened the door beside him. It swung wide, almost touching the garage front. "So that's how it was done," he said. "What time did you say you're supposed to show up, Steve?"

"Eight o'clock," Steve said, his face pale. His face muscles cramped. "Damn it! Get going. She's alone with them. I've got to get to her!"

"Take it easy, Steve," Carter said. "You can't show up before you're supposed to. And we've got to get set. We know where they are now, and we can't let them get away this time."

"I'M GOING up there armed," Steve said. "I don't give a damn

about the extraterrestrials. Ann's all I care about."

"I'm telling you if you go up there armed you'll be signing your death warrant," Carter said.

Steve's shoulders sagged. "You're right, I know. But the very thought of Ann in their hands. That thing in the morgue. They may be intelligent, but they aren't human—and they won't think of it as murder to kill her. They were there when she talked with me on the phone—" He clenched his fists in helpless frustration.

"There's only one way to do it," Carter said patiently. "Go up there as though you didn't suspect anything. They'll probably be in hiding. What's the layout in her apartment?"

"One bedroom and a living room and kitchen, with the bath through the bedroom."

"Closets?"

"A closet by the front door. A bigger one in the bedroom." Steve turned away, groaning. "There isn't any way. One of them can hide in the bedroom, the other in the closet by the door."

"It doesn't make any difference," Carter said. "They'll either grab you the minute you're inside, or they'll try to keep out of sight in the hope you eat and leave without getting suspicious. That's what I'm hoping they'll do. Then all you have to do is watch your chance to get Ann out of there before they can fire a shot."

Steve glanced at his watch. It was seven thirty. Compressing his lips, he put on his suit coat. He and Carter left the hotel room and rode the elevator in silence. In the D.A.'s car they sped silently to the apartment house. The sidewalk was deserted. Parked cars lined the curb. The parked cars had had to remain where they were in the evacuation of the neighborhood to keep the extraterrestrials from getting suspicious.



In the small lobby a police captain met them. "The entire block is evacuated," he said. "The building is full of our men, in street clothes so they won't look like cops. They've been going from floor to floor in the elevators so that from Miss Parker's apartment it will sound like everything is going along as usual."

"Good enough," Carter said. "Take your groceries and go on up, Steve. You're five minutes early, but that won't be suspicious." He patted Steve's shoulder. "Good luck," he said. "All you have to do is get out of there alive with her, and we'll take it from there."

STEVE took the carton of groceries from the policeman who had carried them in. He stepped into the elevator. The doors closed. He stood by the man in the blue serge suit who operated the controls. At the fourth floor the man brought the elevator to a stop smoothly and opened the doors.

Steve stepped out. The doors closed behind him. He was alone. He looked up and down the hall, wondering where the police were concealing themselves. There were supposed to be plenty of them somewhere, to cover his escape if he could get out of the apartment with Ann.

He walked down the carpeted hall to her door, hesitated, then knocked, hoping she would open the door. If she did he was supposed to grab her by the wrist and jerk her into the hall and run with her. If she didn't...

"Is that you, Steve?" her voice sounded.

"Yes, Ann," he said.

"Come on in," she said. "The door's unlocked."

And of course that was the way it had to be. He hadn't expected it to be any other way. He held the box of groceries under his left arm, ready to

drop them, and opened the door.

Ann stood across the room. She was wearing a long, misty-blue evening dress. "Come in, darling," she said. She smiled.

He looked at her eyes, expecting to see fear and tension there. He wasn't sure what he saw. He stepped in and started toward her, a concerned expression on his face. "I'm sorry about this noon, Ann," he said.

"Close the door, Steve," she said.

"Oh," he grunted. "Guess I forgot. Wait 'till I put down the groceries."

"Close the door, Steve," she repeated.

He looked at her, taking in what he could see of the room without turning his eyes. The bedroom door was open an inch or two.

"Okay," he said. He turned and gave the door a mild shove that closed it.

"THAT'S better," a base fiddle voice sounded behind him.

He jerked around. A man was standing in the open door of the bedroom, a gun held in hands whose fingers were too long and thin.

"Who are you?" Steve said, pretending surprise.

"We are the extraterrestrials," a smooth female voice said behind him.

He jerked his head around. From the coat closet had stepped a girl. He recognized the dress she was wearing. It was one of Ann's. She was wearing one of Ann's hats, too, and the hair that peeked out from under it was the same golden brown.

"Oh, Steve," Ann half sobbed, starting toward him with her arms held out.

Steve took her in his arms and kissed her. "It's all right, darling," he soothed. "I knew they were here. I want to talk with them."

He looked up at the man in the



doorway. "You got off to a bad start," he said. "You didn't know it, but you were in a warehouse and you ran into the watchman, who thought you must be thieves. That's why he shot one of you. Even though you killed that woman and her boy, I'm here to welcome you to Earth and to promise you will be welcome."

Ann stood back from Steve. "You see?" she said. "I told you you would be welcome."

"We'll talk of that later," the frog voiced man said. "First we will eat. Ann!"

"Yes, Manx," Ann said. She took the groceries from Steve, shaking her head and holding him still when he started to carry the box to the kitchen for her.

"Go with her, Lialya," Manx said. "Sit down, Dr. Wilson."

"Sure. Sure," Steve said, sitting. He grinned nervously at the alien. "You learned to speak our language pretty fast."

"We had three months before we landed. Our ship was out of control. We could do nothing but wait for it to strike your planet, and during that time we listened to your broadcasts and familiarized ourselves with sounds and sound combinations, getting the meanings of many of them."

"Where are you from?" Steve asked, relaxing.

"Unfortunately we don't know what you call our star—if you know of it. It doesn't matter."

"Well," Steve said, "you're here. You'll find us a pretty decent planet."

"I think not," Manx said. He smiled, and Steve had the strange feeling that it was not a smile, that expressions were different. "If Oruht had not been killed we would have been content to build another ship and depart."

"That was unfortunate," Steve

said, "but you must understand the watchman didn't know you were from outer space. He can't be blamed, any more than we can blame you for killing the woman and boy."

"You are wrong," Manx said, his voice almost metallic in its very low pitch. "He didn't mistake us for thieves. He saw us clearly. We spoke to him, told him we were from outer space and came in peace. He shot Oruht then and intended to kill all three of us. Why did he shoot us?"

"Without your makeup you look very terrifying to someone who doesn't know what you are," Steve said. "He was afraid."

"Afraid?" Manx said. "He evidenced great pleasure and anticipation." Manx shook his head slowly. "Your planet, Earth, has a great price to pay before we leave. Oruht lived ten thousand of your years, for nothing. We will make sure your planet remembers that—forever."

"Revenge?" Steve said, surprised. "Somehow I thought— But what can you hope to gain by it? We're ready to be your friends, to build you a ship, to give you anything you want. I'm not speaking with authority, of course, but I know the human race. You don't have to be afraid."

"Afraid?" Manx laughed, and it was ghastly, trembling and buzzing in an insane rhythm that made Steve want to shudder. "It isn't fear. We know we can't trust you. You would help us build a ship—to learn its secrets. Then you would destroy us so that we couldn't return to our own planet and let them know where we had been."

"You'll have to trust us," Steve said. "I wasn't going to tell you this. The entire area here is evacuated, and surrounded by police. They know you're in here. If Ann and I don't come out unharmed they are going to kill you two. If you come out with us



and surrender, you will be welcomed by our government and helped to build your ship and go back home."

Manx stared at Steve for several long seconds, then got to his feet. "Lialya!" he called.

ANN CAME through the kitchen doorway, followed by the alien girl. They stood there while Manx and Lialya spoke in their own tongue. They seemed to be disagreeing about something, Steve decided.

Finally they seemed to reach agreement. They stopped talking. Manx looked at Steve, blinking his eyes slowly.

"Dr. Wilson," Manx said, "we're of the opinion that you are too dangerous. Place yourself in our position. We have seen in each contact with your race a common characteristic. We saw it in the face of the watchman before he shot Oruht. We saw it in the face of the woman. We have seen it in Ann's face, and in yours."

"What are you going to do?" Steve asked, his eyes on the slim finger curled over the trigger of the gun in Manx's hand.

"There is only one course for us, Dr. Wilson," Manx said. "We know much about your species now. We must hide, and slowly gather into our control the things necessary to build our ship and exact our revenge for Oruht, and leave, without having given your species the knowledge of physics we possess. Or we must destroy ourselves."

"You can trust us. Believe us, you can," Steve pleaded.

"Take off your clothes, Dr. Wilson," Manx said. "We have one chance to escape."

"It won't work," Steve said.

"Take off your coat, Dr. Wilson," Manx said, his voice buzzing.

Steve hesitated. He was sure Manx

intended to kill them, then, with his and Ann's clothes and maybe some more makeup, try to pass themselves off as human. It might work, too.

Ann was near the kitchen door, but Lialya was beyond her. If they could reach the door to the hall and escape...

"Okay, Manx," he said.

He slipped out of his coat and started the natural motion to hand it to Manx, changing it to a swift toss that sent the coat over Manx's face. The instant the coat left his fingers he ran toward Lialya.

Her gun, which had been pointed at Ann, started to turn toward him. He saw her finger constrict. A shot sounded at his side. Manx had fired blindly.

The shot caused Lialya to jerk as she pulled the trigger. Her shot blasted almost in Steve's face. He felt something tug at his sleeve.

The next instant he had seized her gun. He jerked. His fingers came loose from it just as she let go. The gun dropped to the floor.

Steve seized her and sent her spinning against Manx. The next instant he had Ann's hand and was running toward the door. It was a long chance. Manx still had his gun.

A shot sounded behind him as he twisted the knob. The bullet went through the door. The next instant he had it open and was jerking cruelly at Ann, sending her spinning into the hall ahead of him.

Another shot sounded deafeningly behind him. It struck him with hammer-like force somewhere in the back. He stumbled through the door, fell forward, and rolled onto his back.

A gun exploded down the hall. Men were running toward them from both ends of the hall, and spilling in tumbled confusion out of doorways.

A huge man pounded on the door to



Ann's apartment and shouted, "Open up and come out with your hands up."

A muffled shot sounded. The huge man coughed. A surprised look came on his face. He toppled to the floor.

"Damn it," Steve groaned. "If only..."

"Be quiet, darling," Ann said. "You're hurt. We've got to get you to the hospital."

"Hurt?" Steve said, looking up at her in surprise. "Nonsense. I'm..." Her face swam out of focus.

"HELLO, Steve." Ann's tremulous smile greeted him as he looked up at her. Then he looked down and saw the sheets, the hospital bed. Memory flooded back.

"So I was hit!" he exclaimed.

"You almost didn't make it," a voice sounded from the corner of the room. Steve glanced over and saw the D. A. Carter grinned. "The bullet just missed your right kidney. By the time we got you to the hospital you were practically dead."

"Manx and Lialya?" Steve said.

"Never mind about them, Steve," Ann said. "You have to rest."

He grinned at her and fought the weakness that made him want to close his eyes and blank out. "I won't rest until I know," he said.

"Dead," Carter said.

Steve stared at him, feeling a great disappointment.

"They got what revenge they could before they died, though," Carter said. "After Ingraham got killed by that shot fired through the door we decided to play a waiting game. It was a poor idea. Your extraterrestrials blew out the pilot light on the kitchen range and turned on all the burners. Before we knew it we were collapsing in the hall from escaping gas. We retreated downstairs." He made a wry face. "We can be pretty stupid at

times. It was fifteen minutes before anyone thought of shutting off the gas in the basement. It was too late. The whole fourth floor blew up, tearing out walls and almost causing the upper three stories to fall off the building. The fire spread to the rest of the building. Before the fire department got it out there wasn't much left."

"You found their bodies?"

"Not yet," Carter said. "We're still looking. Of course they didn't get away. The gas must have killed them. They didn't get out of the apartment."

"I—I almost wish they had," Ann said. "I feel sorry for them. Millions of miles from home, on a planet where the people try to kill them. And all they wanted was to build a ship and go away."

"Not a chance," Carter said.

Steve groped until he found Ann's hand. He kept his eyes closed. It was too much to hope for, that Manx and Lialya had escaped.

And maybe it was better this way. With them perished so much. The secret of space travel. Science that the human race wouldn't attain for centuries, perhaps. But the human race would eventually get all those things by itself.

Then—maybe some day humans would land on the planet Manx and Lialya had come from. And in that meeting of man with—whatever Manx and Lialya were—things could start right instead of wrong.

"I hope they're alive!" Steve said.

"Relax, Steve," Carter growled. "They can't be. It's impossible."

"It was just a wish," Steve said. "It *could* have worked out, some way, if only..."

"Yes, I know. If only they hadn't landed on the roof of a warehouse. It's just one of those things."

THE END



# THE HEAT'S ON

By Clyde Woodruff



They stared, in mute horror, at the body





**In the future, men will still hate and will  
still do murder. New ways will be invented.  
Like burning a man to death over the phone**

Dear George:

Well, it's practically over now, the legalities, anyway. The county coroner left shortly after midnight, about an hour ago, and Wechsman and I returned to the inn. Dr. Baumes is spending the night on the hill. We're to meet again at ten this morning, and I suppose I ought to get some sleep before then, but I'm so wound up now I think I'll try to get this letter off. I hope it will approximate the detailed, accurate account you asked for. By the time I left the laboratory, some of the thermopiles were registering wild heat radiations from my brain, so if this reads a little exhausted, please remember my delicate condition.

Of course, I wasn't prepared for

what I found here. You were so vague and excited the first time we spoke that, in spite of the fact that I soon began to understand why, my initial reaction was to doubt whether anything had happened that would be worth making the effort to get here.

In your golden clime they see weather like this only on movie sets. It was snowing for the sixth consecutive day when I came up yesterday, and I still don't know how I made it. There must have been fifty abandoned cars in huge drifts along the stretch from Montpelier to Oakville. When I hit Fannersburg the highway patrol stopped me, and I spent an hour trying to think of something to say that would conform to the few facts I had—I was told they were checking—and



still sound sufficiently urgent for troopers on snowshoes to let me go on. Finally I decided to telephone the hill, hoping there'd be someone at the place who knew me and could maybe put in a word with the patrol. Well, Sheriff Latham answered and that did it. That was also the first I knew that Germaine was dead. When I told Latham you'd called from the coast to make certain I'd get to see Germaine, he said, "Hell, he should've called three days ago. The professor's been dead that long, at least."

All the way from Fannersburg I wondered why you hadn't told me. All you'd said, remember, was that Germaine had had a serious accident at the laboratory. It never occurred to me that you didn't know. It just became part of a developing mystery.

Oakville was so deep in snow that I expected to be greeted by dogs with brandy, but as a matter of fact I was hardly greeted at all when I got to the inn. Latham had said he'd meet me there because I'd never make the hill in my car. He wasn't there, but half the people in town were—naturally enough, I thought, with almost every other place in town closed, including McCord's—and it wasn't until I started to talk to one or two I knew well enough to shake hands with that I began to feel the frost had followed me in.

Later, when I came down to the inn for dinner, old man Haines confided he was mighty glad to see I hadn't been taken by the police. It turned out Latham had left word of my coming, and all and sundry at the inn were officially advised against any mention of the events on the hill. I suppose his motive was simple enough, but the result was a hardship for all concerned. Hardly a soul dared talk to me for fear that the conversation might take an unmanageable turn, and

I, aware not only of this widespread reluctance, but of a conspiratorial undertone that would have been ridiculous if it had not already un-nerved me, retired to a lonesome beer at the bar. Even when Latham appeared soon afterward—soon enough to make me think someone had phoned him the moment I arrived—he just sounded his siren briefly outside instead of coming in.

I WENT out, we shook hands and exchanged howdy's, I climbed into his winterized jeep and off we went. There was plenty of weather to talk about, but after a few minutes of it I asked him if I'd heard him correctly over the phone.

"Can't say," said Latham. "I was at the other end."

"I mean about Professor Germaine's being dead," I said.

"Oh, he's dead, all right."

"Three days?" I said.

"Coroner's got to decide that," said Latham, "and he ain't been yet. Body wasn't discovered until yesterday."

"Why was that?"

"I didn't look until yesterday," said Latham.

"You discovered it?"

"Hell, yes."

"Where was it?"

"Home."

"Well, what did he die from?"

"Coroner's got to decide that too."

"But surely there were indications of something?"

"Hell, yes," said Latham, and that ended it.

We were twenty minutes reaching the bridge. Long before we'd come to it there had been snatches of shouting and laughter in the wind, but it wasn't until we started across that I realized, quite suddenly, that there were kids skating the river at Nordersen's bend



—the one that turns wide around the hill and makes it almost an island. If I hadn't already known Germaine was dead, I think perhaps I'd have known it then. No one had skated there in the four winters since his laboratory tower had appeared on the summit of that hill to command the countryside.

Presently the tower itself was visible, as granitic and forbidding as a tombstone.

The old house was beautiful. Surrounded by frost-heavy evergreens, with icicles like dragon's teeth hanging from the leaded windows, its wind-swept northern side traced with bare vines and the south lost in snow to its eaves—more winter-bound than I had ever seen it—it was as warm and cheerful as the sound of sleigh-bells. One might have thought this house had known no changes but those tenderly bestowed by the slow passage of time, and yet a slight difference—so slight it was remarkable it made a difference—was already apparent: it amounted to the fact that there were cars parked in the driveway. One was Doc Berringer's and another was Bev Williams' taxi, but the third was a stranger's, with a bronze Federal shield and a D.C. license plate. The Doc and Williams were both waiting on the porch with Mrs. Howe as we drove up, and they met me with a fair approximation of the cordiality I'd always known as an old neighbor. Mrs. Howe kissed me and asked for you.

"He's fine," I said. "He sent his love."

"Did George really ask you to come?" she asked.

"Last night. I spoke to him."

Latham cleared his throat and said, "Now, then."

"It's a perfectly innocent question, Samuel," said Mrs. Howe.

"Didn't say it wasn't," said Latham.

"You won't be offended, Clyde," said Mrs. Howe. "It isn't Mr. Latham's doing. There's someone here from the F. B. I. who doesn't want us to discuss—"

"Heck, no," said Latham. "Mr. Woodruff understands."

"Of course," I said, though of course I didn't.

WE TURNED to go into the house then, and I found myself wondering what there was about our conversation that had somehow sounded so wrong to me. It felt wrong, but after all, what had I expected? Profound mourning? Hardly. Mrs. Howe seemed very well composed, perhaps, but this was not unusual for her, as I knew, even under the most bitter circumstances. A lesser soul might have found life as housekeeper to Germaine an unbearable trial, but she had a quality that was beyond his reach on his most iron days. Or almost beyond—which made it almost unpainful.

Thinking about it as I followed Latham inside, I forgot about the front door and lunged back to catch it. I missed and it slammed shut with an enormous wham! that bounced off the walls and went echoing through the quiet house.

Mrs. Howe called back: "It doesn't matter any more, Clyde."

And there it was, you see. It wasn't alone the fact that Germaine's name had not yet been mentioned—Latham's presence might have accounted for that—but the truth was that Germaine had figured only inferentially in what we'd said, until the slamming of the door had provoked a direct reference to him. Understanding it didn't make it seem any the less wrong; I regretted it but I agreed it didn't matter any more.



Latham had meanwhile dispatched Bev Williams to the tower, and he hustled back with a message that we were awaited. Only Latham and I went. The others returned to the library, where an unfinished chess game waited on the large desk.

The door from the back of the house to the tower was open. Its lock had been forced and the heavy oak paneling was badly splintered. We climbed the stairs to the laboratory door, and after Latham rapped a couple of times without getting any response, he pushed open the door and we went in.

The laboratory seemed as immense and desolate and bound in vast silences as ever. All of Germaine's equipment stood in good order, the metal and bakelite surfaces dusted and spotless, every dial gleaming. I tried to see if I could find anything added since I'd last been there, but the mysterious array of machines and bright gadgets had never been sufficiently meaningful to provide a present basis for comparison. At the far end of the lab, where the horizontal bar of its *L* shape leads to the inner office, however, there was something even I could be sure was new. This was the booth—or chamber, as Wechsman insists it be called—I tried to describe over the phone. It looked like nothing so much as a huge, well-constructed box, six by six by ten feet high, of polished pale wood, with a foot-square window of thick glass on the side facing us.

As soon as we saw it, and spotted Wechsman inside, a reverse-hinged flush door opened soundlessly and he came out. I didn't remember him until he reminded me, "Wechsman, Alexander Wechsman, from the Peerless Precision Instrument Company." "Why, of course," I said, "it's the man from the vox-popper!" "Audivox," said Wechsman, with that little pained

smile of his. "I'm sorry we're meeting again under such tragic circumstances."

At this point, Ferrari, the F. B. I. man came out of the inner office, nodded pleasantly in lieu of an introduction because he didn't want to interrupt Wechsman, and joined us.

"How is Dr. Purcell these days?" Wechsman was saying.

"Fine," I said. "Very busy."

"Teaching, isn't he?" said Wechsman.

"Yes, at U. C. L. A."

"How does he like it?"

"Oh, fine."

"That's good. Well, remember me to him, will you, Mr. Woodruff?"

I SAID I would and turned to Ferrari.

He smiled and stuck out his hand. "Mr. Woodruff, I'm Anthony Ferrari—Federal Bureau of Investigation, as you may have heard," he smiled again. "I understand Dr. Purcell asked you to come here."

"Yes, he telephoned late last night."

"About how late, may I ask, Mr. Woodruff?"

"Just past three A. M."

"Hell of an hour," Ferrari sympathized. "Still, come to think, that would be only eleven on the West Coast—he called from the Coast, you say?"

"From Los Angeles."

"Badly upset by the news, I imagine."

"Naturally."

Ferrari smiled interestedly. "Why the hesitation, Mr. Woodruff?"

"The truth is," I said, "I'm beginning to wonder if Dr. Purcell knows the professor is dead. At least, I can't recall that he said anything about it."

"That's odd," remarked Ferrari. "What did he say?"

"That Germaine had had an accident in his laboratory."

"Just an accident?"



"I believe he said it was a serious accident."

"And he asked you to come...."

"To find out what had happened and call him back."

"The details of the accident, you mean?"

"I suppose so."

"Rather a roundabout way to find out, isn't it?" Ferrari said, looking politely quizzical. "You'd think he might have called here directly."

"As a matter of fact, I assumed he had."

"Assumed? Didn't he say?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't remember?"

"Frankly, Mr. Ferrari, it was a difficult conversation in many ways. For one thing, Dr. Purcell wasn't altogether coherent, and for another, I was hardly very alert at that hour." After a pause in which Ferrari silently frowned and shook his head, it occurred to me to ask, "But if he didn't speak to anyone here, how did he know something had happened to the professor?"

"It seems to be a mystery, doesn't it, Mr. Woodruff?"

"Apparently," I said.

Ferrari smiled faintly. "You sound annoyed."

"I don't like mysteries particularly."

"Mr. Woodruff, I assure you I like them even less."

"Then perhaps you'll tell me what this is all about?"

"I'm sorry. Will you follow me, please?"

Without another word he turned and led the way into Germaine's inner office. The huge west window was blazing with the afternoon sun, and for a few moments I was blinded by the sudden brilliance. I felt a warmth in that small room that the laboratory

itself had been unable to provide, and gradually, as I made out the white-sheeted form on the long conference table across the room, I had a fleeting impression that it was really a snow-bank that had somehow managed to come through the plate glass window. It was as if the semi-wilderness outside, from which Germaine had accepted nothing but stillness and seclusion, had now, with his death, found a way to enter the house, if only through an illusion compounded of sunlight.

I followed Ferrari to the table. He raised the sheet and held it until I turned away.

Germaine had been burned to a crisp. His features were almost unrecognizable, and his gaunt, narrow-boned frame had been reduced to blackened and brittle scoria, but even the shocked, perfunctory glance that was all I could give to that fearful sight was enough to tell me that no ordinary fire or flame had caused it. I wanted to look but the faint odor of stale ashes burned into my eyes and I let them close and turned away.

Presently I said, "How did it happen?"

"We don't know, Mr. Woodruff."

"But you must know something?"

Ferrari nodded. "I'll show you."

WE WENT out and found Latham leaning against the chamber, his head poked inside its door, talking to Wechsman, who had evidently gone back in to resume whatever he'd been doing. "—like them bunkers they used flame-throwers on," Latham was saying. "Seen 'em in newsreels, ain't you?" Wechsman mumbled something and a moment later he appeared at the door.

Ferrari said, "Mr. Woodruff would like to have a look."

"By all means," said Wechsman, backing in again.



There wasn't room enough for both of us, in spite of the chamber's size, because most of its interior was filled with equipment, but I didn't have to go in to see what had happened there. Latham's remark of the previous moment was all too clear after I'd had a look. An inferno seemed to have raged inside. The heavy-fibred walls were horribly stained and scorched. Most of the glass from the numerous dials and meters had cracked, and some of them had been subjected to such heat that the glass had liquefied and run over the twisted metal rims of the instruments, and then, cooling, had congealed into hair-thin spears that looked, ironically enough, like minute icicles. But as I kept examining the interior, I perceived—and this was perhaps even more incredible—that not everything had suffered, and indeed, some of the things in it seemed to have escaped virtually untouched. Among these was a high, upholstered stool that stood near the blackest wall. The edges of its stuffed seat-cushion had burned, and the lower parts of its legs and rungs were flaked with ashes, but the rest of it was intact. When I realized that the four little circles chalked on the chamber floor marked the original position of the stool, I began to see there was a focus to what had happened in there, and I remarked on it to Wechsman.

Wechsman nodded somberly. "It was a blast."

"From what?"

"It's impossible to say at this point, Mr. Woodruff. You know, we constructed this chamber for Professor Germaine less than six months ago, and I was here for a few days to help install its apparatus, but I'll be darned if I ever laid eyes on maybe a third of it. Naturally, in this condition it's hard to tell much about it, but there's

no doubt in my mind that the professor built a lot of it himself. I imagine you know he used to pride himself on that? Last year—Dr. Purcell was still here, I recall—we sent up a new type of calorimeter and a couple of weeks later in comes a short note from the professor, accompanied by an amazing sheaf of diagrams. He'd rebuilt it and got it hooked up in a way that had our engineers writing him for months afterward." He shook his head sadly. "No question, this tragedy took a genius from our midst."

"What about the stool?" I said.

"He was sitting on it. I'd say sitting, wouldn't you, Sheriff?"

Latham cleared his throat and nodded.

"That accounts for the way it looks," said Wechsman. "Part of it was shielded by the professor's body. That, of course, indicates it was a blast—and just one blast, mind you, because we've tested the ashes and some of this fused glass. Now, you'll notice this back wall was also partly shielded. If we had more light in here, I could show you how clearly the professor's silhouette stands away from the rest of the wall and traces the position he was found in. He was sitting with one leg on the low rung of the stool, both arms over his head—nine or ten inches, I'd say—and his elbows thrusting away from his body. Since this is quite apparently a protective gesture, possibly it signifies the professor's final realization of what was coming. Poor man, it was over in an instant."

"It seems incredible," I said.

Wechsman blinked at me. "Why so?"

"That Germaine's end should have come about through an accident involving his own carelessness."



"I'm not sure I understand, Mr. Woodruff."

"Well, if he could anticipate—"

"Let's save it for the library?" Ferrari broke in, touching my arm by way of apology. "I think Mrs. Howe deserves a place in this discussion, and I'm sure," he smiled, "she'd prefer to tell you her own end herself."

WE SAVED it. Mrs. Howe came out of the kitchen to join us as we entered the library—Latham and Wechsman were along, of course—and we found Doc Berringer and Williams deep in a chess game that went on uninterrupted through most of what followed. I mention this to demonstrate the informal atmosphere Ferrari fostered. Discussion was the word he'd used, and that was what it appeared to be. Writing it down in detail like this makes his direction seem less obscure, but at the time my feeling was that I was being filled in on the background rather painstakingly. If I sensed any hostility in Mrs. Howe's manner when she acquiesced to Ferrari's suggestion to tell her story again, it was soon dissipated.

This, more or less, was her account:

Germaine was in the lab early on Saturday. When he did not appear for lunch at noon, she prepared a tray and left it outside the lab door, as always. But this being the first Saturday of the month, storm or no storm, Mrs. Howe was leaving for her sister's in Twin Falls until Monday morning. Thinking Germaine had forgotten, and that he might very well require something further before she left, Mrs. Howe decided to chance knocking on the lab door. Of course, it was a terrible mistake. She didn't dwell on it, but she didn't have to for me. I'd had my own experiences with Germaine,

and I remembered the time he had told me: "Mr. Woodruff, the first rule of this establishment is silence!" There had almost been froth on his lips. At any rate, Mrs. Howe left shortly afterward.

Monday morning the downstairs tower door was locked. Mrs. Howe assumed Germaine was already in the lab and interpreted the locked door as a continuing rebuke. It made it impossible to take his lunch up to him, but when he didn't come down she merely thought it another of the not infrequent occasions when Germaine's absorption in work made everything else unimportant. When Wechsman arrived during the afternoon, in response to a wire from Germaine last Friday, Mrs. Howe advised him to wait. Hours passed and, naturally, nothing happened. By nine o'clock that night, Wechsman's misgivings were serious enough for him to take it upon himself to rap on the downstairs door. Finally he was making so much noise that it was impossible to doubt Germaine couldn't hear him, and Mrs. Howe called Latham.

And that was all from Mrs. Howe.

Ferrari went on from there. The sheriff, he told me, had used an ax on the door, and the discovery of Germaine's body followed within a few minutes. The county coroner was immediately telephoned. It turned out he was at a convention in Boston. Latham had reached him at his hotel, told him what had happened, and the coroner was presently making his way back to Oakville.

"Of course," Ferrari concluded, "the final disposition of this case will have to wait on the coroner. However, I don't see why our discussion can't undertake to clear up a few details and maybe simplify matters for all concerned."



"But isn't this your investigation?" I said.

"You think I'd get here this fast?" Ferrari smiled. "No, as it happens, I expected to see the professor today on government business. The first I heard of this was late last night when I checked into the Hearthstone Inn. Still," he smiled again, "you might say that I am an interested party—and that I am not acting in any way that exceeds my authority."

"Then you do think it calls for investigation?"

"That's routine."

"Nothing aside from routine?"

"You said yourself it seems incredible it was an accident."

"I was referring to Germaine's habitual great caution."

"Well, sir, when a man of habitual great caution loses his life in an accident, it's worth a look to see that it *was* an accident. Common sense, isn't it? Now, I take it you were familiar with the professor's ways?"

"More or less."

"More?" Ferrari smiled. "Or less?"

"I USED to visit Dr. Purcell," I said. "I've a place of my own near Stowe. Sometimes, summer especially, I'd be around fairly often. By the time Dr. Purcell left here, I'd learned quite a bit about the professor's ways."

"You don't sound as if you liked them particularly?"

"That's not the word," I said. "Does one like a machine?—or not like it? I'd say that Germaine had no understanding, no humor, no pity—but he was also selfless. His existence was only a condition necessary for his work. He was a remarkably efficient machine; one had to understand that. I don't think any of us thought of him as a human being at all."

"Mmmmmmm," said Ferrari. "Not even Dr. Purcell?"

"I don't see the point of that question," I said.

"Then don't answer it." Ferrari smiled.

"Unless perhaps you're not sure I'm qualified to make that sort of generalization," I said, "and I think I am. I considered the three years that George Purcell stuck it out here a monument to his endurance and devotion."

"Devotion," Ferrari repeated. "To the professor?"

"Yes, but more to their work. When Germaine drafted him—"

"Pardon—you said drafted, Mr. Woodruff?"

"Yes. This was in '45. George was in the Naval Reserve but he had been allowed to complete his doctorate and was due to be called in June. Months earlier, Germaine was already with the Navy in Washington, setting up a special research project. He'd been after George to come in, and George had been ducking. Not that he didn't want to—he was actually enthusiastic about it, in spite of the fact that he'd been a student of Germaine's in the graduate school at M. I. T. and knew what to expect—but he'd hoped for at least a short tour of sea duty first. He tried to tell Germaine that a few months of more distant horizons than his notebooks would do him good; that he felt technicians owed the men who used their techniques some first-hand knowledge of their problems. Of course, it was useless on any basis. Germaine filed a bale of requests, the tower went up and George went in. With the war on, he had no alternative. By the time it ended, the work had progressed to a point where he felt he couldn't quit."

"I see," Ferrari nodded. "Still, he did quit. Why?"



"Oh, a million things."

"I'll settle for two or three. Maybe less. Got one?"

"They weren't that significant to me, really."

"Quarrels, I suppose?"

"I see you've been asking," I said.

"A little. What did they quarrel about, say?"

"Anything—who was getting credit for what in certain scientific circles, or whose name was to appear where on an abstract, or that one and not the other had been invited to speak somewhere, or responsibility for publication. One way or another, they managed to be involved a good deal."

"Sort of cog versus the machine?"

"How do you mean that?"

"Dr. Purcell didn't like being pushed into the background," said Ferrari, adding: "Perfectly natural. Don't you agree?"

"I heard it was the other way round," I said. "Only I'd put it that Germaine felt George was altogether too prominently sharing in the foreground."

"You don't think that's the same thing?"

"NO. IT IGNORES the question of intent. George was far from unknown in his field when he joined Germaine, and as it became apparent that Germaine's experiments paralleled some of George's earlier work, of course there were inquiries. It was a minor problem during the war, what with the necessity for secrecy, but afterward, when it all got out in a rush, George drew attention and offers from everywhere. Even then he reported them all, until he realized that Germaine interpreted these confidences as taunts. The last argument they had—not that it was more important than a dozen similar ones—

turned on that. Germaine wanted to publish a paper on one phase of their work, and George felt he disagreed enough with what it said not to want his name on it. But as Germaine saw it, George was trying to appear martyred. He accused him of advertising his discontent, to draw more offers to choose among when he got ready to quit."

"And as a result," said Ferrari, "he finally quit. Is that it?"

"Frankly, I don't know what you're after," I said.

"A motive," said Ferrari. "I thought it was clear."

"A motive for what?"

"Murder, possibly. What else?"

"I can't believe you're serious."

"I'm serious," Ferrari nodded. He took a folded sheet of yellow paper from his coat pocket and handed it to me. "I think something like this is serious."

It was the telegram you sent Germaine last week.

"What about it?" I said and gave it back.

He read it out loud: "*Have Just Read Paper Number Eleven Stop Consider It Dangerous Trespass Of My Work Stop Warn You Cease Adiabatic Experiments Immediately Or Risk Grave Consequences.*" He refolded the sheet and put it away. "According to Mr. Wechsman here," he then went on, "the word adiabatic describes the sort of processes the professor's most recent work concerned—processes that occur without gain or loss of heat. Apparently Dr. Purcell felt that his own work was being trespassed upon. That almost sounds like a motive, and it's followed by a fairly obvious threat."

I said: "I repeat—what about it?"

"You don't think it's important?"

"I think you've got something that



almost sounds like a motive, and something that might be a threat. I never heard of either being fatal to someone three thousand miles away."

The telephone broke in. Ferrari took the desk extension, spoke his name, listened briefly then said, "Right away, thank you," and hung up. He walked out of the room, nodding to Latham on the way, and Latham took his coat and followed.

They disappeared down the hallway toward the porch. Presently both front doors slammed, and a moment later Latham's jeep came to life outside. We listened to the motor fade down the road as if somehow the sound alone might reveal the errand on which Latham had been dispatched. Ferrari returned to wait in the doorway to the library, and it wasn't until the last echoes of the jeep were gone, and our attention returned to him, that he spoke. But he had made the interval too suspenseful; I felt it had been staged, and that Ferrari's manner was that of someone with a carefully planned exit speech to manage. It probably helped me contain my reaction.

Would we, he asked, excuse him for half an hour? And would Mr. Wechsman accompany him, please? And might he prevail upon Mrs. Howe to switch incoming calls to the tower?

Then, as if with an afterthought, he turned to me.

"Mr. Woodruff," he said, "my information places Dr. Purcell in New York Friday night. He arrived on the nine P. M. nonstop Constellation. He registered at the Plaza, stayed overnight, and checked out at ten the next morning. He returned to L. A. on the Sunday midnight flight. That leaves an interim of some thirty-eight hours for which his whereabouts are unknown."

I said: "Well, that's your information."

That ended it. Ferrari looked at me, shrugged and walked out of the room with Wechsman.

I DON'T suppose I have to tell you what it was like to be on the receiving end of that "information". I couldn't remain in the library. Williams and Doc Berringer, with their display of elaborate disinterest in everything but their chessboard, gave me the jitters, and Mrs. Howe—who looked at me as if she had plenty to say but was waiting for me to ask—didn't help matters. The snow was coming down again in tentative flurries, but I had to go out. I walked some of it off, but what could I do with the possibility that Ferrari had told the truth? The idea had no handle. I tried to work on what Ferrari and Wechsman were doing in the tower, and got nowhere—except down to the main road in time to see Latham's jeep returning with a passenger.

The passenger was Dr. Baumes.

He had already gone to the tower when I got back. The sheriff, Berringer and Williams were in the kitchen, where Mrs. Howe was pouring coffee. I joined them silently and listened to Latham's report on Emma Clark's latest matrimonial prospect. A quarter of an hour went by before Wechsman popped his head past the downstairs tower door and nodded to me.

"Stop worrying," he said as we went up. "It's working out."

"I knew it would," I said.

Baumes and Ferrari were standing just beyond the wrecked chamber, and coming towards them I involuntarily glanced through its open door. I saw what Ferrari and Wechsman had been up to. They had carried Germaine's



corpse to the chamber and re-seated it on the high stool inside. The stiff form was still shrouded in its white sheet, and all it required to balance the forward thrust of its upraised arms was provided by a thin wooden lathe stuck between the chamber's front wall and the corpse's chest. I looked away and shook hands with Baumes, and Ferrari took over.

"Mr. Woodruff, it seems that Dr. Purcell left the Plaza to go to Dr. Baumes' home. He was there until he made the return plane." He nodded soberly. "Apparently he didn't know about the weather up here until he got to New York. He'd come to see Germaine, but that changed his plans. He had to be back in L. A. Monday without fail, Dr. Baumes tells me, and with the railroad schedules up here suspended—as they were until late Sunday night—he couldn't risk getting stranded somewhere along the highway. Besides, he had no confidence Germaine would see him if he did make it," said Ferrari, turning to Baumes for endorsement. "He'd phoned from the coast twice, and both calls were refused." At this Baumes gravely wagged his head, and Ferrari went on: "So all Saturday and Sunday, Dr. Purcell called here from Dr. Baumes' home. Of course, there was no answer. Finally he had to leave. Dr. Baumes promised to keep trying to reach the professor.

"Yesterday morning, Mrs. Howe answered. She told Dr. Baumes that the professor was in the laboratory and that she'd tell him of the call at her first opportunity. Dr. Baumes went on trying, however—in the afternoon, again shortly before the tower door was forced—and by the time he made his fourth call, I was here to take it. As I remember it," Ferrari said thoughtfully, looking to Baumes

again, "I didn't tell Dr. Baumes very much. Just a few words that there had been some sort of accident...."

"A very few," Baumes nodded.

"With no details," said Ferrari.

"Correct," said Baumes.

"So that actually," said Ferrari, "the call established nothing beyond the fact that Dr. Baumes was coming as fast as he could. Yet he was so disturbed that he'd no sooner finished talking to me than he put in a call to Dr. Purcell to tell him what he knew. This in spite of the fact that I had identified myself to Dr. Baumes and requested him to say nothing to anyone."

"I have told you there was no alternative," said Baumes.

"But for all you knew, Doctor—"

"My dear sir, for all I knew, Germaine was dead or dying. Surely you do not suppose I had no access to this idea simply because you did not mention it? This is a mistake. Dr. Purcell had already informed me of the dangerous potential in Germaine's experiments. When I heard the word accident, for me it was quite settled that I had to call Purcell immediately. To expect otherwise, my dear sir, is to expect that a man will not spring from a hot stove. A reflex is also authority. One does what one must do."

"**V**ERY INTERESTING," observed Ferrari dryly. "Dr. Baumes has elevated a moral question to a physiological plane. However, this seems to take care of Dr. Purcell's otherwise unaccountable knowledge of the accident here."

"Are you disappointed?" I said.

"On the contrary," said Ferrari, "I'm impressed by Dr. Purcell's foreboding. For someone who hadn't been around in more than a year, he seems to have known a specific hell of a lot



about what was going on up here."

"Have I not made this clear?" Baumes asked politely.

"No, Doctor. You say Dr. Purcell told you he'd worked along a similar line. You say his telegram to Germaine indicates—as he also told you—how he learned of it, that is, by reading Germaine's Paper Number Eleven, published three weeks ago in *Maillol's Journal*. Is that right, Doctor?"

"Quite right."

"Well, there are several copies of the issue on Germaine's desk. You may have noticed that the Paper itself is dated almost five months ago? Surely Germaine had gone on from there? I think one might reasonably assume as much, but Dr. Purcell's assumption, oddly enough, was that he could still be certain of Germaine's direction—even after five months. As a matter of fact, his urgency would seem to suggest he could almost predict the very week when the danger point would be reached. Strange?" He paused for a possible comment, but there was none. "Perhaps," he resumed, "there was a closer connection between Germaine and Dr. Purcell than we know? Perhaps they corresponded occasionally, exchanged data, and so forth?"

"No, my dear sir," said Baumes, shaking his head.

"What if they did?" I asked.

"Ah," Ferrari brightened, "in that case, you see, Dr. Purcell's apparent clairvoyance has a simple explanation—he knew because Germaine had written him. Reasonable, isn't it? And, quite possibly, Dr. Purcell wrote to the professor about his own progress? Thus, he might have passed on certain information about some of his past experiments that unfortunately—"

I said: "You mean he might purposely have misled—"

"This is really too much," said Dr. Baumes. "Such idle, fantastic speculation offends me. It was I who kept George Purcell advised of Germaine's progress."

"Why?" said Ferrari.

"Because it was clear to me that Germaine was stealing George's work. So you see, my dear sir, how impossible your ideas are. I spent several weekends here during the winter at Germaine's invitation. The professor was freer in his conversation than he would have been had he known I had kept in close touch with George Purcell. It was not long before I was aware the impending great discovery that Germaine slyly hinted at from time to time was largely based on George Purcell's unpublished work. I considered it robbery, an outrage, and I wrote to George. He responded at once. He was immediately alarmed. In this and several following letters he unfolded the experiment's very dangerous potential. During subsequent visits here, I tried again and again to maneuver the conversation so that I could perhaps manage to warn him, but with no success. The one time I seized a rare opportunity, as it seemed, the result was most unfortunate. Germaine acted as if he had caught me trying to open his safe. He broke the conversation off abruptly and I did not see him again until the next day."

Baumes shrugged. "What was I to do? With any other man I would have spoken out plainly—with Germaine it was a worse alternative than silence."

Ferrari said, "You don't think he would have believed you?"

**B**AUMES slowly shook his head. "My dear sir, I believe that after one minute of such discussion, Ger-



maine could not have been made to listen without resort to physical violence. Your idea, Mr. Ferrari, that George might have been misleading Germaine through correspondence, therefore has some importance, but only because the reverse is true. The danger to Germaine derived from the fact that there was absolutely no means of communication between these two. I was very inadequate as a spy, though," said Baumes with a smile, "I prefer to use the word 'pipeline', which is rather less prejudiced, for I was as prepared to help Germaine in his danger as I was to see that George was not dealt with unjustly. But as matters stood, if I spoke up, even this small usefulness would be at an end. The result, as I said, was that when George read Germaine's paper in *Maillol's* three weeks ago, he made every human effort to warn Germaine and this past weekend flew in from California." Here Baumes paused for a moment, then said, "Yet I will tell you this, Mr. Ferrari. If George had known how imminent Germaine's danger was, I say that somehow he would have managed to get to Germaine in time. George knew that it was close but not so close."

"Stealing," said Ferrari, "it's different when you put it that way."

"I have said it," said Baumes, "and I say now that the only way to understand what has happened here is to telephone Dr. Purcell."

"And do what?" said Ferrari.

"Tell him frankly what has happened. Ask him some questions—there are a half a dozen that have occurred to me. We could go on from there."

"Do you think he would be helpful?" said Ferrari.

"Most helpful," said Baumes.

"All right," said Ferrari, nodding, "except for one thing—I don't want

Dr. Purcell told that Germaine is dead."

"This condition is impossible," said Baumes. "If I cannot describe to him faithfully the state of affairs here, the call is useless."

"You can be as faithful as you like," said Ferrari, "and you can describe anything. Even Germaine."

"But if I tell him of the conditions we have found in the chamber," said Baumes, "he will at once understand that Germaine could not possibly have lived through it."

"Let him understand what he understands," said Ferrari. "Just you don't mention it."

"If he asks me?"

"Then tell him you have been requested not to discuss the subject."

"And if he asks why?" said Baumes. "Shall I tell him about you, too?"

"Suit yourself," said Ferrari. "My being here is no secret."

"And if I do not agree to your condition?"

"Then," said Ferrari, "I will have to forbid the call. Understand me, I have no right to forbid such a call but I will forbid it."

I said, "What you really mean, Mr. Ferrari, is that you will get Sheriff Latham to enforce your decisions."

"Why," said Ferrari, "the Sheriff is free to take advice from any quarter."

Baumes frowned, looked at me and made a futile gesture with his hands. "I will do what I can," he said. "Now if I may have some minutes alone with Mr. Wechsman to assist in the formulation of my question?"

"Take as much time as you need, Doctor," said Ferrari.

**W**ECHSMAN, who had stood by in complete silence, his head moving from side to side during the conversation like a spectator at a tennis



game, now cleared his throat and stated: "I consider it a privilege to be able to help." Then dutifully he followed Baumes farther down the laboratory.

Ferrari and I went into the office. The snow had stopped and it was beginning to grow dark. Far off in the twilight we could see little figures flitting back and forth in front of a bonfire along the shore near the bend.

We talked a little and then Ferrari asked me what I planned to do for dinner. I told him I was sure Mrs. Howe had made all necessary arrangements to take care of the lot of us.

"Is Mrs. Howe a good cook?"

"The best," I said.

Ferrari looked unhappy. "And how is the food at the inn?" he asked.

"Fair," I said. "Just what you'd expect in New England."

"You mean pretty bad, don't you?" said Ferrari with a sigh. "The sacrifices my cultivated palate has to endure, and the requests I sometimes must make really are distressing. Nevertheless, Mr. Woodruff, I would very much like you to have dinner with me this evening at the inn. I want to talk to you about something."

"Something?" I said.

"Something I think you would rather talk about in private than the semi-public audience this house affords."

"We can talk privately and still stay here," I said.

Ferrari hesitated a moment. "Frankly, it's this house," he said. "I'd like to get away from it for a little while. You know the silence here is uncanny. Instead of promoting privacy it destroys it completely. You don't get a feeling like this except in the most public places, museums, auditoriums—you know what I mean?"

I knew what he meant, and I said I'd go to dinner with him.

Soon Wechsman and Baumes came in. They had the questions ready, written by Dr. Baumes on the back of an envelope.

Ferrari didn't ask to see them. He picked up the telephone and spoke official mumbo-jumbo to the operator. Then when he had given your number, he said to us with a smile, "There's another advantage this way, you see. This call is on Uncle Sam."

So if you're trying to correlate what happened here with the calls we made to you, this was it up to our first call.

I wondered what you were thinking when Baumes told you he'd been requested by him not to discuss Germaine, but after that the talking stuck to business and I knew Baumes had been right predicting you'd understand soon enough. I don't know how long the call seemed to you. In the tower it was endless. When it was over, I was surprised to learn it had lasted only twenty-five minutes.

**L**ISTENING to Baumes talk technical jargon, trying to follow what he said, or to understand in some small way the reasons for his occasional moments of excitement, we had created an unbearable tension in the room; I was glad when Baumes finally put the receiver down. Then he said to Ferrari, "It is as I thought—Dr. Purcell understands the tragedy here very well. I have several excellent leads, but to pursue them I am afraid I must have access to Professor Germaine's files." Ferrari said yes at once. By then I knew him well enough to understand that when he made a decision this fast it was because he had thought it out beforehand. Baumes was gratified, but he could not keep from asking, "Then you do trust me, Mr. Ferrari?"

"Yes", said Ferrari, seriously, "and it's all right for Mr. Wechsman too,



as I suppose you're about to ask."

Baumes inclined his head politely. "I was about to ask," he said. "Thank you." Then he added, "I don't quite know what to make of you, Mr. Ferrari."

"With this exchange of compliments," said Ferrari with a smile, "Mr. Woodruff and I will take leave of you gentlemen. We're going down to the inn for dinner."

Baumes looked at me with great surprise, "You, my dear Clyde?" he said. "You are going to miss one of Sarah Howe's dinners?"

"I'm afraid I must," I said.

"It's my doing," said Ferrari gravely. "We have something to talk about."

"But this is the goose in wine sauce," said Baumes. "And a special salad!"

The answer, of course, was still no. Looking beyond Wechsman and out of the office, I could see inside the open chamber where Germaine's shrouded form had tilted on his high stool, leaning forward as if to catch our words. I wondered what he'd have thought if he could hear us now, with his death still a mystery, with the impact of its horrible form still fresh, discussing the goose in wine sauce and the special salad. But Germaine had always leaned away from people. He didn't want to hear them—he didn't want to hear anything.

It would have been more expeditious to do as Ferrari suggested and leave by the tower exit; of course, it was unthinkable and I had to go into the kitchen and make my apologies to Mrs. Howe and the goose. I noticed that Doc Berringer and the Sheriff and Williams were still very much around, with Berringer busily polishing silverware, while Latham and Williams hopped around as nimbly as any chef's assistants. They mourned

our impending absence as little as they did Germaine's.

When we were riding into town in Ferrari's car, he said, "Friendly people here."

"Aren't there everywhere?" I said.

"Yes," said Ferrari, "but it's comforting to keep finding it out." After a while he added, "That Germaine was a strange one, though."

I didn't think the remark called for comment and I didn't say anything. I was greatly relieved. It had begun to look as if Ferrari was over the worst of his suspicions, and the danger of publicity that lay just beneath his probing had passed. I found out how wrong I was during dinner.

UNFORTUNATELY, the inn was hardly the place for privacy tonight. A lot of people from the surrounding countryside came to town just to see if they could make it. McCord's was doing business again, but with the bowling alley and the movie house closed, both McCord's and the inn had an overflow. In addition, if Ferrari's face was not already indelibly etched on the minds of those villagers who made it their business to know who was who and what was what, the federal shield on his car identified him beyond any doubt. Those who had not yet heard of Germaine's death were now so informed, with Ferrari's presence at the inn adding poignancy and drama to the tale. In short, nothing else was discussed while we sat there, and the first half of our meal, cold cuts and warm cider, was consumed in silence at a small table near the crowded bar. But eventually Ferrari had to start talking, and then we more than made up for it.

Ferrari said, "You know, a while back we were speaking of people being the same everywhere? Well,



there're unfriendly ones, too. It seems a pity that in my work one is often as useful as the other, and that the confidences of both must be equally respected. I say this by way of introduction to bring Mrs. Purcell into the discussion," he finished.

"I gathered as much," I said.

"Remember when I told you I was searching for a motive?" said Ferrari. "I didn't want to mention Mrs. Purcell then. Of course, now it seems pointless—because one also needs the means, and from what Dr. Baumes says, Dr. Purcell must be eliminated—but to satisfy my curiosity about motives, I did want to talk to you about it."

"All right," I said.

"I'll tell you what I'm curious about," he said. "It's the relationship between the professor and Dr. Purcell. I heard a good deal about it at the house, but something that never quite came out was the extent of the hostility that existed between them. Nowhere have any of you suggested that at least once they almost came to blows."

"Really?" I said. "If it happened, it's quite possible none of us knows about it. That sort of thing, if it existed, would have been the smallest element in their relationship."

"I don't care how large an element it was," said Ferrari. "I just wanted to know if it existed. After all, dynamite only has to blow up once."

"In other words," I said, "you want to know if there was dynamite in their relationship, and you think the dynamite in this case was Mrs. Purcell?"

"Was she?" said Ferrari. "Now this incident I mentioned where they almost came to blows—I believe that was about Mrs. Purcell? It was about her turning on the radio full blast one day. Does that bring back anything?"

I said, "No one would have done what you say. The entire house had to be in complete silence during the day when the lab was occupied. That went not only for the radio but the telephone, the piano, the doorbell and all but subdued conversations and footfalls. It was never violated."

"I see," said Ferrari.

"But you've reminded me of an argument I did hear something about that concerned Mrs. Purcell and the radio. It was the radio in her car. She had just driven in from town where she'd been shopping for Mrs. Howe. She parked the car in the driveway a moment to run in the back door with her bundles, and forgot to turn off the car radio. It was playing very low and it couldn't be heard two feet—but this was something Germaine happened to see."

"That's an odd way to put it," said Ferrari.

"It was an odd business," I said. "Odd enough, you see, for me to have heard about it. Germaine was standing at the tower window at the time. He looked down into the car and saw the radio dial glowing."

Ferrari shook his head. "And because of that the professor kicked up a fuss?"

"From what I heard," I said, "it was Dr. Purcell who kicked up the fuss. He was absolutely furious when he finally understood what the complaint was about. However, if that's the episode in which they almost came to blows, it's news to me. George would've been ashamed to tell me something like that even if it had happened."

"Wasn't he ashamed to tell you what you do know?" said Ferrari.

"Yes," I said. "I know about it from Mrs. Purcell."

"Mrs. Purcell confided in you?"



"Infrequently. This time she did."

After a moment Ferrari said, "Well that isn't particularly the way I heard it. It's rather too sorrowful a picture of Mrs. Purcell's deprivations in this house. Things weren't always that bad, were they? I mean, not on a seven-day basis?"

"Well, there were the weekends they had visitors," I said.

"I may as well tell you the rest of it," said Ferrari. "I hear Mrs. Purcell used to fill the place with weekend guests who staged minor riots, and that when Germaine objected she took to going to New York—sometimes staying away weeks at a time."

SO I TOLD him about the riotous parties at the house—about how few people had ever come to visit you at all, and never more than three for a weekend; and that Germaine's idea of a debauch was any occasion at which anything stronger than ginger ale was served; and how his further objections had eventually driven away most of your friends—and then I had to tell him why Martha had made those visits to New York, and why she had once remained away for two weeks. It wasn't easy, but I told him.

"Didn't Germaine know?" he asked incredulously.

"Her own husband didn't know," I said. "She never breathed a word of it because she was so afraid of Germaine's reaction. That was why she went all the way to New York for a doctor. She understood what George's work meant to him, and the thought of a baby in this house had frightened her out of her wits. In time it made her so ill that the problem was solved for her. She was in a hospital for two weeks after she lost the baby and she concealed even that. As a matter of fact, she never did tell George and he

found out about it only because of Germaine and his private detectives."

"Germaine and his private detectives?" Ferrari repeated.

"You haven't heard about that, have you?" I said.

"No, Mr. Woodruff, I haven't."

"Then let me add to your store of facts. Germaine hired detectives to follow Mrs. Purcell. After she'd been away those two weeks, he got a report on it. Apparently he was incapable of understanding how a woman could be unselfish enough, or foolish enough, to keep something like that from her husband because she was determined never to interfere with his work. When the report came, Germaine gave it to George without a word of explanation. It all seemed very clear to him. The child wasn't her husband's, and this revelation was to be the end of her and of her marriage that had been a constant thorn in his side."

"And what happened?"

"What do you think happened? You wanted to know what finally broke up the great team of Germaine and Purcell, didn't you? Well, they were out of the same day, and I'll tell you this, Mr. Ferrari—if George Purcell had any murder in him, that was the time for it."

It was the end of our talking. A few minutes later two horse-drawn sleds filled with girls from a nearby college stopped at the inn, and after that it was impossible to hear anything.

When we drove back to the house, Ferrari and I discussed the comparative merits of winter and summer vacations and I congratulated myself on how lightly I'd gotten off, that it could have been far worse.

OF COURSE, reading this letter now, George, you do it knowing that everything has come out right. If



you wonder what there was for me to be afraid of, remember that at the time I really didn't know what was true. The one thing I did know was that Ferrari, in spite of his friendliness and undoubted sincerity, had not for a moment given up on his theory about you, nor would he unless there was another and indisputable solution. I had no faith that there was such a solution. It seemed to me that no matter what was found out about Germaine's death, one could always go on wondering why the accident had happened. Ferrari's tenacity frightened me. It was going to be hard to satisfy him; I hadn't wanted anything to come up that would have made that more difficult.

So there I was congratulating myself as we drove up to the tower, where I found further grounds for optimism. For the coroner had come at last, and he turned out to be a very pleasant and competent and matter-of-fact little man named Doc Sprague. I addressed him as Doctor once and he corrected me. "I don't know if Dr. Baumes knows," he said with a twinkle, "but around here when people call you 'Doctor' it means they don't like you. Now Berringer and I, we're 'Docs'—and up here, so is Baumes. Have you got that straight now, young feller?" I said, "Yes, thank you very much, Dr. Sprague," and everybody laughed.

The coroner's coming had changed things. He had taken over immediately and he was up to his ears in papers with Baumes when we arrived. Baumes and Wechsman's work, he told us, was proceeding with great promise. From what you told Baumes over the phone about the recorder and where it was likely to be, they had not only soon found it, but had been able to remove it.

The big break was the discovery that the inner works were still intact. It was very exciting news. When the coroner, who knew nothing of what Ferrari had been up to, chose to remark that he felt as thrilled as if he were a character in a murder mystery, Ferrari smiled warmly.

Sometime after that, Baumes decided it was too risky to keep working on the recorder without calling you again, and the question arose who, if anyone, was to sanction this call. Ferrari handled it gracefully. He let Doc Sprague make the decision and then he put through the call; meanwhile, of course, he managed to get a thorough explanation of why it was necessary to call you again. The idea of Germaine's having had a wire recorder in the chamber seemed to intrigue him. Baumes had explained that Germaine customarily kept the recorder in operation during the course of an experiment because it preserved his notes and left both his hands free to work. "Was it possible that Germaine had been talking into his recorder during his last experiment?" Ferrari wanted to know. Baumes said both you and he were sure this was the case. It was why he wanted to take no chance of injuring the sealed mechanism.

Well, that was the second call. It sounded like dull stuff, listening to Baumes, but for me there was the added spice of knowing that Ferrari—who had excused himself just before the call went through—was on the extension in the library, listening for something to support a notion that possibly what Baumes and you wanted was to destroy the message.

That was why you were able to talk to me after you had finished with Baumes. When you asked for me, it was up to Doc Sprague to say whether it was all right. Ferrari probably



wouldn't have okayed it, but happening as it did, with him on the extension, he must have been well pleased—which should also explain why I was so noncommittal and why I hastily promised to send a detailed account as soon as I could.

Soon after I put the receiver down, Ferrari returned to the laboratory and stayed there until the end. That was about eleven-thirty, our time.

THERE WERE five of us—Baumes, Wechsman, Ferrari, Doc Sprague and I—in Germaine's office when the first words on the wire became audible. It sent a chill through me to hear Germaine's voice. There was nothing unusual about it. He was whispering as always, making his precise little sounds—words that were often disconnected, the thought joined somewhere in his brain—whispering away, remote and dispassionate. In more ways than one, it did not seem like the voice of a living man.

I wonder how long it will be that whispering will remind me of death.

And yet I know that Germaine had to whisper—while he was in the chamber, at any rate. Dr. Baumes explained it in several ways, so that finally all of us understood it. What I got was the bare outline, but it was enough. I know that the problem both you and Germaine were working on was the conversion of sound waves to heat. I know that Germaine's chamber had already had the experimental successes he published in his Paper Number Eleven. In that paper, Baumes told us, Germaine had shown how he had converted certain sonic wave-lengths to as much as 40 degrees of Fahrenheit. So that Germaine had to whisper, said Baumes, because now that he was working well within the human vocal range, louder sounds would have a ten-

dency to heat the chamber beyond any necessity.

We knew it wasn't just Baumes' reconstruction we were hearing, because there was more than enough on Germaine's wire to substantiate him. Some parts were indistinct, and others garbled, but then there would be long passages of whispering that showed exactly what he had been thinking. Baumes said it leaves no doubt how correct your fears were. When Germaine mentioned the possibility of an enormous acceleration in the process—exactly what you wanted to warn him about—he discounted it completely.

But when it happened, he must have seen the acceleration starting to register from his whispering alone. Since we know the heat generator was on, even the slight rise in his voice at this point must have made the inside of the chamber extremely warm. But he had gone on. The slight rise in his voice turned to subdued, but unmistakable excitement. His words were really broken now, punctuated by very rapid breathing. Over and over we could hear him saying, "Yes, this is right... this is it..." Once, toward the end—I could hardly believe hearing it—he actually commented on the high temperature within the chamber...but certain all the time that he was right...never realizing how fantastic the acceleration of that process was.

The record ends there with a faint ringing sound. Baumes says that ringing is Germaine's last uttered sound. Whatever it was, it must have been quite loud, for it was instantaneously converted into the fearful blast of heat responsible for the blackened corpse that now sat upright again in the chamber.

It was a little past twelve when the coroner finished shaking hands with everyone, announced his complete sat-



isfaction with the findings, and promised to return in the morning to help expedite all legal matters. He gave Wechsman and me a lift down to the inn and after a drink I went up to my room and began writing you this letter.

If I had finished five minutes sooner, this letter would have ended here. It would be sealed and I'd have been lost in sleep four minutes ago. I wouldn't have been able to hear Ferrari's cautious knocking at the door, and this postscript would not have been included.

You see, Ferrari is also staying at the inn, but since he has his own car, it was unnecessary for him to accept Doc Sprague's offer of a lift. I knew he intended to remain at the house as long as Baumes was working on the recorder. He told me so himself, quite frankly, just a few minutes ago when he knocked at my door and came in. If there was any chance that Baumes could get those last words off the wire, he said, he wanted to be there when it happened.

**P**ART OF the point of this postscript is that *it did happen*. There were just two words more. "They were shouted, and that was the end," said Ferrari. "They changed nothing of what we already know."

As far as he was concerned, he would now wait for instructions from Washington pertaining to the disposition of Germaine's papers. He was satisfied, he said.

I laughed and told him *satisfied* was one word I had not expected to hear him use tonight, and I showed him where in this letter I had already written as much to you. "Mr. Ferrari," I said, "this must be a rare occasion in your life. You're a difficult man to satisfy."

"Not unreasonably so, I trust," said Ferrari. "You see, while in some

ways I was at the mercy of scientists and technicians and friends of the deceased—all of whom were more familiar than I with various aspects of the case—I knew a few things too. You can laugh if you like, but to me they kept adding up to a plot. Under the circumstances, my only safe assumption was that in dealing with Dr. Baumes and you, I was dealing with the actual perpetrators of the crime. When you didn't mention that Dr. Purcell's wife, Martha, was known before her marriage as Martha Baumes, the daughter of Dr. Baumes, I thought possibly that was significant. And while I hadn't known about the detectives Germaine hired, I did hear there was another man involved—and that you were the man." I didn't say anything and Ferrari looked at me and shook his head. "It was one reason why I never bothered about your connection with the Purcells. It didn't seem wise to undertake subjects that might make a murderer realize that I was aware he had a motive."

He smiled as he finished, but there wasn't much fun in it for me.

"You know," I said, "I keep wondering who it was told you these things and why."

"Well," said Ferrari, "take a look at me and avoid the fate of a detective."

With that he almost left, but I stopped him at the door. "By the way," I said, "what were those last two words Germaine said?"

"They weren't said," Ferrari corrected me. "It was a shout—'*Got it!*'"

So there's the second part of the point to this postscript. Now we know that the last words uttered by Germaine were not whispered but shouted, and that this—his cry of exultation and triumph—was the very agent of his destruction.



In a few days, he will have a burial at which there will probably be a lot of people present, but there will be no mourners. In time the tower windows will be opened, and the house will grow human again, with unexplained noises and unafraid laughter. How truly ironic it seems to me that for Germaine, who lived unwarmed by human friendship, as emotionless as a machine, the mere kindling of enthusiasm—surely among the happy experi-

ences of most people—was a blaze sufficient to destroy him. He had no experience with warmth either in others or in himself. In this brief exploration of an area of human feeling when warmth finally came to him, it was too much.

With love to Martha,  
Your friend,  
Clyde

THE END

## PICK THE WINNER

FOR THOSE of you who like racing, there's a magnificent race going on up in the ninth magnitude, and all you need to watch it with is a strong telescope.

Twin stars, in the constellation of Cygnus, are racing around each other at 1,500,000 miles an hour. The stars are almost 11,500,000 miles apart, and they completely circle each other in a little less than two days.

Of tremendous size, it is estimated that one star is about 691 times the size of our sun, while the other is 630 times larger. The mass of one is 37.3 that of our own sun, the mass of the other 32.7 times as great. Yet the density of each is only 0.05 that of our sun.

Advice: don't get too close. The temperature is in the hundreds of degrees Fahrenheit. —Sid Seeman

## NEW FACE FOR TERRA

By Dee Arlen

ONE DAY in the very far future—a billion years or so—it is very possible that new continents will appear on Earth's surface, dividing the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans into a series of small seas.

The state of Earth at present may well be just a transient step in the evolution from an oceanic stage to one in which the water has been absorbed by the Earth's crust thus turning the planet into a desert, similar to what we believe Mars to be at present.

If the oceans should dry up and their surface levels sink perhaps 20,000 feet, the Atlantic Ocean would probably still retain its S-shape, but a new continent would appear along its whole length, dividing it into two Atlantic seas.

## Hot And Cold Bats By Omar Booth

NATURE DID much better for the bat than she did for man. At least in one respect. While the human being is dependent on outside sources for his temperature comfort, the bat carries his own automatic heating and cooling system right with him, as part of his body.

This nocturnal flying mammal is sensitive to cold. He becomes lethargic when he gets cold, and eventually will die. By shivering, he is able to raise his body temperature to a point sufficiently high for him to gain enough momentum for locomotion. This is like the motor of a car warming up before it starts.

When flying in hot weather, the bat produces a great excess of heat. But there's a radiator-like mechanism in the wings which acts as a cooling device.

## No Two Alike

AS FINGERPRINTS are never the same, so no two faces ever duplicate each other, even those of identical twins. There is always some slight characteristic in which they differ.

And the ugly little towhead will never grow into the glamorous beauty queen. Never, that is if she is really strictly ugly. Because while it grows in size, the human face carries the same proportions throughout the lifetime. An overdeveloped nose or jaw will stop growing while the rest of the face catches up with it, but that's the only way in which the appearance of the face will change. Unless, of course, the plastic surgeon steps in.

—Roy Small



# THE READER'S FORUM



## LETTER OF THE MONTH

Dear Howard:

I hope I'm not too late to get in my opinions on the November-December 1952 issue of FANTASTIC. It was splendid, and that is an understatement. I particularly liked Mickey Spillane's work. It was the first time I had ever read a story by him. I think if I hadn't read an article on him in a recent issue of LIFE Magazine, I wouldn't have liked this story, but more or less "knowing" him from the article, I could fully appreciate his talents, which are vast and many. It (the story) may have been rather "goosey" in places, but otherwise it was a fine piece of work. Don't let Mickey get away, this can turn into a new field for him, a splendid idea indeed.

I would like to ask, or have you asked, Paul Fairman why he left his little baby IF so suddenly. I hated to see him go, although he is doing good at Ziff-Davis, too. But after starting IF, then to leave it was rather a letdown to the loyal IF readers, of whom there are many. This incident reminds me of when Palmer started IMAGINATION and then left it to Hamling, another very capable man. It's rather a tight little group, from Hamling on. They all worked for Ziff-Davis. Now they're on their own, happy, and still getting along as well as if they were under the Ziff-Davis banner.

Are you going to keep running Poe stories in FANTASTIC? I like Poe and all, but he can get boring after three or four consecutive issues and stories. If you want to print the old Classics in FANTASTIC, why not try for Wells, Merritt, Lovecraft, and some of those who were just as good as, if not better than, Poe.

I have for sale (now comes the commercial) some pulp magazines, in case pulp enthusiasts are reading this. I'm selling them at reasonable prices, that is, most of them. I have a couple of old ones that I will take bids on and sell to the highest bidders. They are SCIENCE WONDER STORIES, December 1929; WONDER STORIES (same thing with a crew cut) January 1943 (coverless, making it cheaper); May 1933 (also coverless) and August 1933. Also some old AMAZINGs, the older ones (June 1943 and December 1944 being coverless, but May 1944 with no back cover and all the others, on and off to date in

good to mint condition). If any pulp fans read this, contact me at the given address.

I was just looking over the "Letter of the Month" in the November 1952 AMAZING and, on the subject of saucers, I would like to say that the scientists and even the air-force brass handling the saucer stories are just too narrow-minded to consider them as extraterrestrial. Their pride, or I should say conceit, that Earthman is the highest creature in the Universe. That doesn't mean that the saucers are extraterrestrial, but it does show that the "more intelligent" men won't consider a different form of life outside their earthly bounds. Enough said for that.

I'm afraid I didn't appreciate the Michael Flannigan series, as the first "Land Beyond the Lens" was quite like a plot I had, once upon a time. Due to my inability to place such ideas on paper to make good reading for anyone, it flopped in my cranium, but apparently not in Mr. Bloodstone's mind. Glad to see that the "idea" at least was successful. It shows that my thoughts are on the right track, just going the wrong direction.

I've said enough, except that in case there aren't any better letters in the FORUM and you can squeeze me in, I'd appreciate it. Thank you. Best wishes for a coming new year of science-fantising.

V. Paul Nowell  
6528 Gentry Avenue  
North Hollywood, California

*Fairman is a very unpredictable person. We can't say why he left IF. We suspect he came to work for us because our offices are close to a good restaurant.* —Ed.

## DISAPPOINTED

Dear Editor:

Doggone it anyway. AMAZING STORIES used to be my favorite mag; now it has gone to pot. Stories and illos are perfectly awful. Ashman and Emsler especially.

Either AS has gotten worse or my taste has gotten better, to borrow an expression from another fan that I think feels the same way. Even if you are going slick, can't you do any better?

One sad fan,

Mona Rhines  
Alger, Route 1  
Michigan



## HE'LL BE WATCHING

Dear Ed:

Just a note on the change of AMAZING to digest, 35c bimonthly schedule. Words fail me. AMAZING will truly be the "Aristocrat of Science Fiction". But—I've heard evil rumors to the effect that Rog Phillips' superb Club House might be dropped. IF THAT HAPPENS, FANDOM (OR SOME OF IT) WILL NEVER FORGIVE YOU. Dying curses, and all that. CLUB HOUSE MUST STAY. AMAZING may become the top mag in the field—but let's wait till Feb. 10, 1953... You'll be hearing from me!

Dave Van Arman  
1740-34th Avenue North  
St. Petersburg, Florida

## BLOODSTONE IS WILLING

Dear Editor:

I finally got around to writing you and telling you how much I like AMAZING STORIES. I first started to read Science Fiction about five years ago, and in my opinion AS is the best.

Let's have more stories by John Bloodstone, he's tops. His "Land Beyond the Lens" and "Return of Michael Flannigan" can't be beat as far as I'm concerned. I sure like the illustrations that Virgil Finlay does.

Now I shall put in my two bits about November's issue. "Too Many Worlds" came first with me, "The Mad Monster of Mogo" had imagination if nothing else, "Scratch One Asteroid" was good, and "Stacked Deck" and "And Goal to Go" weren't so hot.

Merrie Carter  
4838 San Rafael Avenue  
Los Angeles 42, California

## NO GRIPER, SHE

Dear Mr. Browne:

I have just finished the December issue of AMAZING, and just had to write and tell you how much I enjoyed it. A lot of people write to you just to gripe about the stories; in the four years since I started reading stf, I have found only about six that I have not liked.

In the December issue, I think "Too Many Worlds" takes first place. "Visitor from Darkness" should take second place, and "The Martian Cross" should take third place.

When I started reading stf, most of my friends thought I had lost my marbles. By now fully half of them are over at my house two days after each issue comes out, to borrow them.

Well, guess I had better close for now, before my boss comes in and finds me writing letters on his time. Keep up the

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good work, and thanks for letting me take up your time.

Norma Lovette  
3628 Palmetto Street  
Tampa, Florida

### A LONG ONE

Dear Mr. Browne:

A couple of letters, commenting sensibly on flying saucers, jacked up my interest in the November 1952 issue of *AMAZING STORIES*, and aroused in me the urge to have my say on this vastly intriguing subject. So....

Arthur C. Clarke has written a book which I consider a "must" for every science-fiction fan, namely: "The Exploration of Space". Nontechnical, liberally sprinkled with diagrams, photographs and attractive plates—some beautifully colored—it makes absorbing reading. The three concluding chapters, dealing with interstellar space, are alone worth the price of the book.

Clarke feels that among the 100,000,000,000 stars of our own galaxy, there must be myriads with Solar Systems. Many astronomers hold similar beliefs. Simon Newcomb, W.W. Campbell, T.J.J. See, among others.

That it is just a matter of time before Man severs the chains that bind him to Earth, and begins to spread out among the stars, seems certain. The inevitable question, then, arises: Granting the possibilities of space travel and alien intel-

ligence, why has our world never been visited?

Unvisited? Who can answer authoritatively that this has not happened? History abounds with competent sightings of mysterious objects in the heavens, from ancient China's legends of aerial fire-spouting dragons, to present-day flying saucers. Those familiar with the works of Charles Fort will be impressed with his massive collection of strange objects to invade Earthly skies.

So we are agreed that flying saucers do exist, acknowledging the fact that weather balloons, meteorites, aeroplanes, etc., are accountable for a certain percentage of the sightings, but only a certain percentage. The behavior of other objects indicates a nonterrestrial origin to anyone but the most obstinate. Then are flying saucers native to our Solar System, or did the evolution of the owners occur under some unthinkable distant sun?

Clarke believes it unlikely that beings endowed with reason will be encountered in our Solar System. But outer space—Well, that's a different matter. Assuming, as he does, that only one sun in a thousand has planets—and this may well be a gross underestimate—we are given a total of perhaps a hundred million Solar Systems in our Galaxy alone. Undoubtedly, the possibility of many of the planets' harboring life of some kind would be strong. And who could deny the large number possessing physical conditions similar to Earth?

Now, about the alien occupants of flying saucers who, as far as is known, have never attempted landings. Are they friendly or hostile? Has curiosity brought them here, or have they global conquest in mind? If the latter, surely their intentions by now would have been made clear. No threatening act on their part has yet been made toward us humans. Technically speaking, they are obviously centuries ahead of us. Interplanetary warfare with a scientifically superior race is considered by Clarke to be highly improbable. To quote:

"It seems unlikely that any culture can advance, for more than a few centuries at a time, on a technological front alone. Morals and ethics must not lag behind science, otherwise (as our own recent history has shown), the social system will breed poisons which will cause its certain destruction. With superhuman knowledge there must go equally great compassion and tolerance. When we meet our peers among the stars, we need have nothing to fear save our own shortcomings.

In conclusion, may I again recommend, strongly, to all readers of science fiction, "The Exploration of Space", by Arthur C. Clarke."

Alex Saunders  
34 Hillsdale Avenue, W.  
Toronto 12, Ontario, Canada

You've sold us, Mr. Saunders. We'll get a copy tomorrow.  
—Ed.

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF *Amazing Stories*, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1952.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; Editor, Howard Browne, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Managing editor, L. E. Shaffer, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Business manager, G. E. Carney, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.) Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; William B. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; B. G. Davis, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; A. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; S. Davis, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) Modern Woodmen of America, Rock Island, Illinois

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

G. E. Carney  
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 22nd day of September, 1952.  
(SEAL) Irving L. Jacobson

Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1958)



an M.S. in physics. I worked part time for one of those outfits that turns out the other fellow's novel, autobiography, thesis, or what have you. It was good fun and good experience. Yet, ironically, when I emerged from the academic cocoon and began to submit work under my own name to the self-same editors who had been buying it under others, I found myself hard put to it to make a sale. After the first bitterness passed, I realized that it was not because editors are concerned solely with the prestige value of big names, but rather because I had long been obsessed with the notion that, given free rein, I would write, not the commercial claptrap I felt I had been manufacturing, but really "good"—even "great"—stuff. So I was writing stories that were erudite, labored, "intellectual"—and altogether dull, unreadable and unsaleable.

My wife put me straight. She read me the riot act on snobbery. I pulled myself together and realized that literature, whatever its nature, must entertain before it can pretend to accomplish any other objective. Any author who is striving self-consciously to elevate the tastes of his readers is in reality patronizing them just as much as the author who tries to write down to them.

A moral dressed up as a story isn't worth the paper it's written on. An idea that sticks out of a story like a sore thumb instead of being implicit in the behavior of its characters, where the reader can discover it for himself, belongs in a lecture hall, not in a piece of fiction.

I've made a kind of peace treaty with myself. When I'm feeling factful, I write a straight piece, such as the science-fillers I've done for AS and FA, or the articles I've written for the professional science journals. When I'm feeling idea-ful, —a fiction piece.

\* \* \*

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## BOON TO THE BLIND

By Omar Booth

OF ALL THE cruel blows that Fate can deal a person, none is more severe, most people will agree, than blindness. And yet, when you see what monumental things the blind have done in spite of their handicap, you wonder. You might think for example, that no field would be more closed to a blind person than science, particularly a physical science, like electronics, which is so subtle depending entirely on the readings of instruments and the studying of graphs and charts. Such a conclusion would be completely wrong, for blind people are doing astounding things in the radio field. They make use of the fact that in almost any situation a visual indication of anything can be converted into an audible sound or variation in sound!

Radio and electronics is ninety per cent measuring, measuring with dial, calibrated instruments. How then, you ask, can a blind person use such instruments? He can't use them in the form of a braille clock where he can feel the indicator, for that would destroy the delicate sensitivity of the measuring device. He overcomes that by using what is known in science as the "bridge method"—and which incidentally is the most accurate system, the final reference point for even sighted technicians. The bridge method, which involves variations on the familiar "Wheatstone bridge" of high school physics, means that you balance an unknown something, be it voltage, resistance, current, etc. against known values of the same thing and when a "null" or zero is reached you read the value of the balancing element. Thus, to measure resistance you measure the length of known wire it takes to neutralize the unknown resistor. That's all there is to it. A sighted technician reads the zero or null from a meter—a blind person does the same thing except that a buzzer supplies him with his knowledge of the balance point! He turns a knob or slides a wire until the buzzer stops or changes in pitch or frequency. He knows then he's at balance.

By varying this system to suit the occasion, the blind person can do literally everything a sighted person can. At first he may be slow, but later his handicap gives him the advantage of ultimate concentration which no sighted person can attain. The result is that he can do anything—even repairing and maintaining electronic equipment.

The future is even going to be better for the blind. They—as well as sighted technicians—are working madly to perfect prosthetic devices relying on sound on the radar or "bat-probe" principle.



# Astronomical Jargon

By Joe Coons

IT IS UNFORTUNATE that astronomical nomenclature is not more precise. A perfect case in point is the confusing appellation *nebula* for two distinct stellar objects. But since this is a matter of astronomical history it is not likely that the mistake will be corrected. The general classification *nebulae* is too broad and inclusive for a pair of celestial objects rather unrelated to each other.

The first type of nebula is the gaseous or diffuse nebula. Pictures of this are common—and awe-inspiring, although these diffuse nebulae are essentially nothing more than vast empty clouds of gas which have taken on extraordinarily beautiful shapes. Orion and the Horse's Head are two superb examples of these gaseous clouds which exist within the galaxy. Note that these gaseous nebulae are a part of our stellar system, the galaxy itself. Before modern spectroscopic analysis, and the use of powerful reflectors, this distinction was not clearly understood.

The *planetary* nebulae on the other hand while physically like the gaseous nebulae, are in reality utterly different. Planetary nebulae are outside galactic systems, complete universes in themselves. Their gaseous appearance results merely from their remote distance. They are galactic lens systems not very different from our own, consisting of millions and millions of stars. Their remoteness is so fantastic that the stars are not individually discernible but appear as particles and atoms of a gas. Naturally the spectroscope distinguishes this without question.

Probably, though, the gaseous nebulae mean more to astronomy as a working tool, for they are within reach of analysis and it is realized that they play a very important part in the information which is conveyed to us by starlight. Gaseous nebulae are really concentrated portions of space! That is, it is as if a sweeper had gathered stardust, literally atomic debris, and piled it in random heaps throughout our galactic system. This has the effect of interfering with light from stars and other stellar systems, so seriously that scientists are regarding more and more astronomical information as suspect because they do not know how much information in the form of light has been filtered out by the gaseous nebulae. It is believed that many a cosmological theory will have to change in view of this. Furthermore, radio telescopes have shown that there is quite a bit of information taken out by galactic clouds which does not show in a light telescope.

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# DRIED-UP WORLD

By Sid Overman

INCREASING concern is shown by many scientists who are aware that in many areas the water-supply is decreasing and the water-shelf—the level of the underground-water—is decreasing because of the enormous rate of consumption. The famous New York water shortage of a year or so ago is indicative of the problem that can be created by this sort of thing. And it is getting worse. The future, in terms of generous water supply, doesn't look promising unless technology steps in and helps.

There are a number of solutions to this problem of water shortage in America. The obvious one requires the construction of pipelines similar to those handling oil and gas, and thus distributing gigantic quantities of water from inexhaustible sources like the Great Lakes region. Creating and stocking artificial reservoirs with this type of supply might serve in many cases.

There are isolated communities, however, which lack water—fresh water—but are near the ocean. It seems almost criminal to ignore the sea-water, yet obtaining fresh water from it is a major undertaking. A great deal of research is being done on this problem. The ordinary way of obtaining fresh water from sea-water is by distillation. This uses, even with the most efficient operation, gigantic quantities of fuel, and at best, even in vacuum evaporators, is not efficient nor economically feasible except in the case of military necessity, emergency conditions, or for moderately small communities.

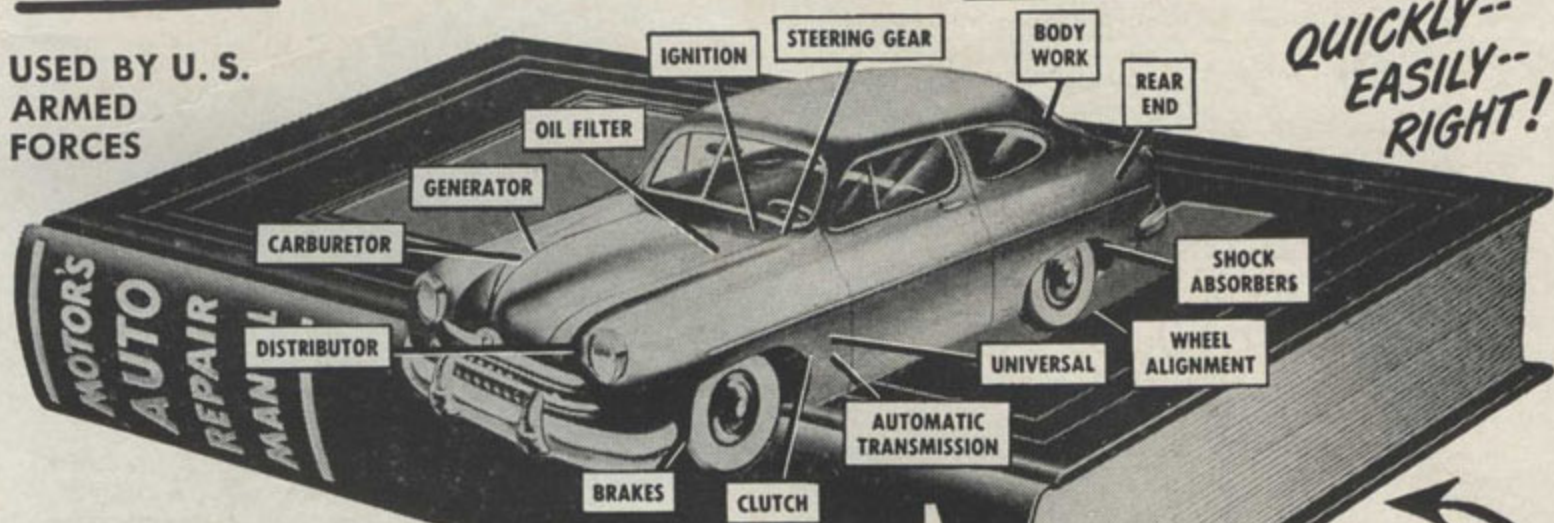
The most hopeful solution to obtaining limitless quantities of fresh water from sea-water involves the use of chemical "ion-exchangers" which work something like water-softeners. These ingenious and efficient devices take sea-water into a chemical chamber, remove the salt, produce fresh water, and they are recycled to reproduce the fresh chemical re-freshener indefinitely. The chemicals do not wear out, no fuel is needed, and the only mechanisms are pumps for transporting the water.

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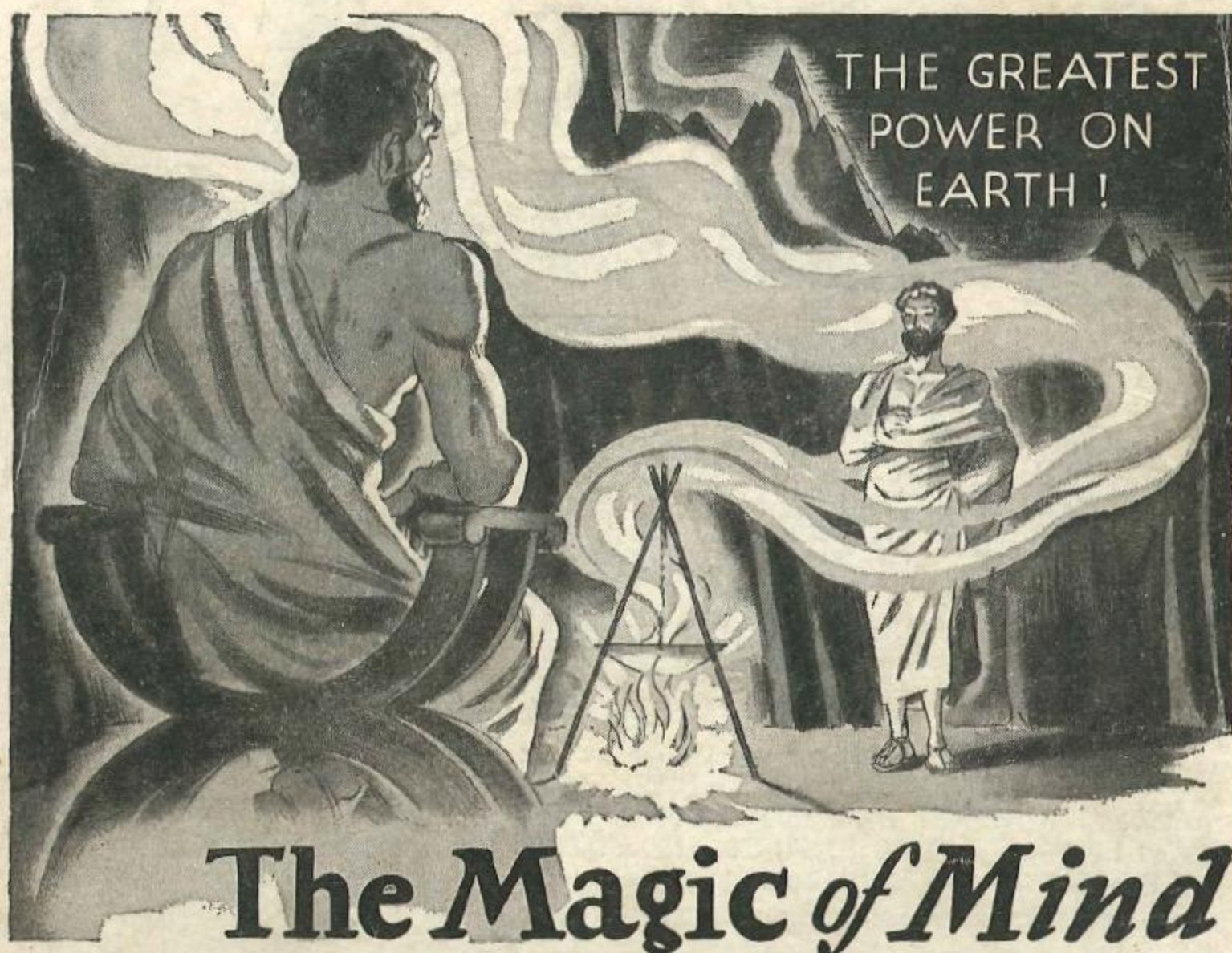
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