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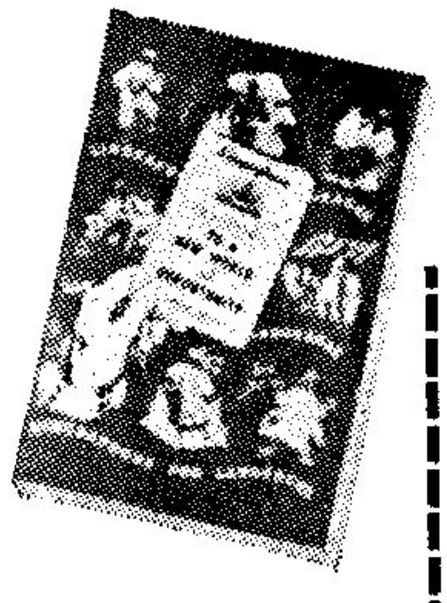

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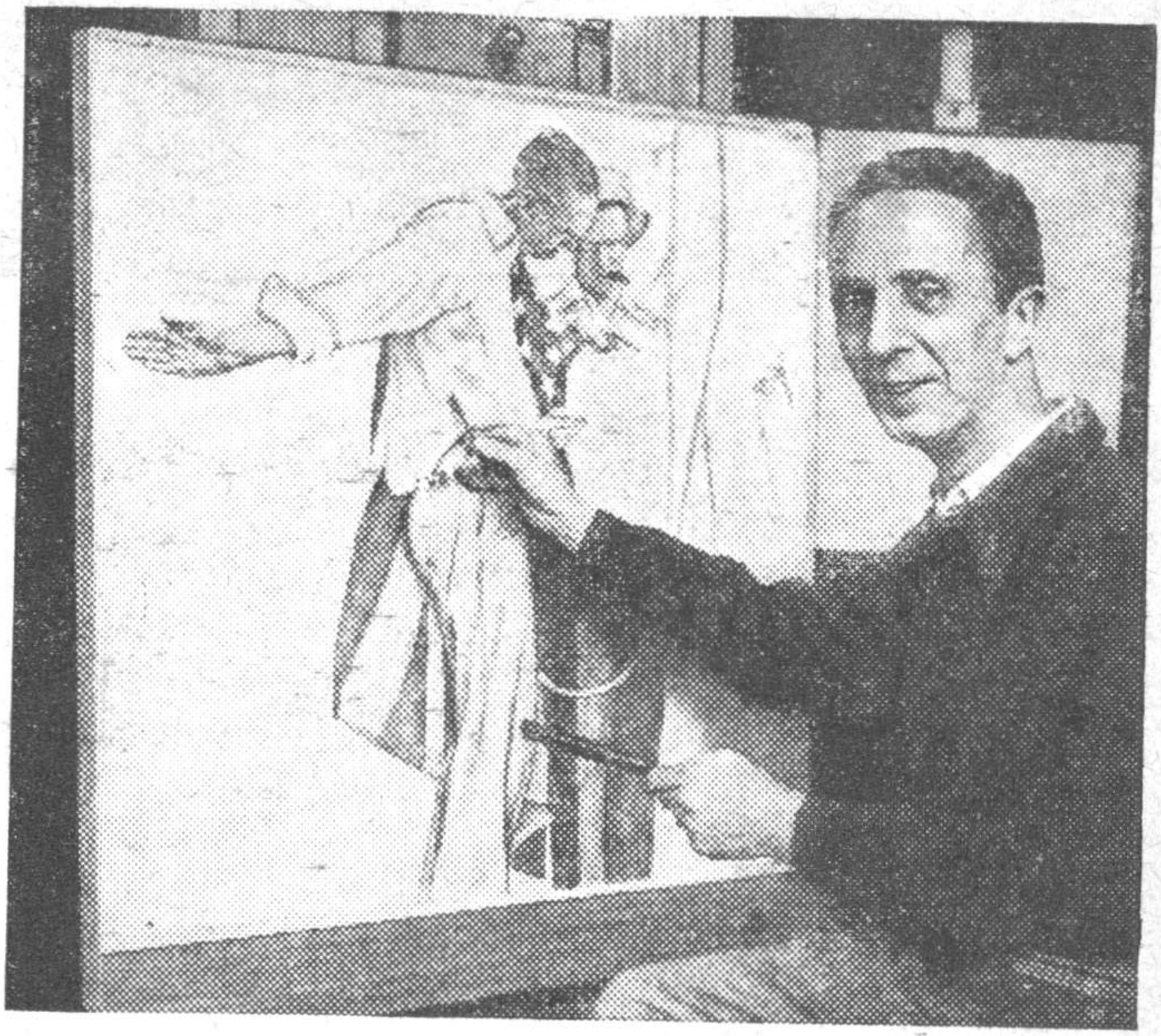

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Astounding
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VOLUME LV • NUMBER 6 **August 1955**

Serial

Call Him Dead . . . . . *Eric Frank Russell* 8
(Part One of Three Parts)

Novelette

Victory . . . . . *Lester del Rey* 74

Short Stories

Judgment Day . . . . . *L. Sprague de Camp* 57
Pagan . . . . . *Algis Budrys* 114
One-Shot . . . . . *James Blish* 127
Feeding Time . . . . . *James E. Gunn* 138

Readers' Departments

The Editor's Page 5
In Times to Come 73
The Analytical Laboratory 143
The Reference Library . . . . . *P. Schuyler Miller* 144
Brass Tacks 154

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EDITORIAL

PHILOSOPHY DOESN'T PAY

Currently, various spokesmen are discussing the vital need for new basic research. The billions being spent on engineering-level research are, obviously, essential, and richly productive. The trouble is that that type of work is comparable to mining operations—a necessary, and highly productive type of work. But eventually the miners, if their methods are good, and their equipment efficient, will exhaust the ore body they're working on. And that will be that.

Prospectors are an essential part of the business, then. Of course, few mining companies actually employ prospectors; most prospecting is done by individuals on what amounts to an amateur basis. The exception to that is, of course, the oil industry—probably because oil "mining" is so efficient an operation that oil "ore bodies" can be exhausted quickly.

In the old days, it might take half a century or more to exhaust the possibilities of one great pioneer thinker's discovery. Today, with tens of thousands of brilliant men, with exceedingly powerful analytical tools such as computer machines, nuclear reactors, and automatic data-gathering-and-processing systems, an idea can be run down in a hurry.

But who's going into basic research? A man who's competent to do high-level, high-intensity thinking of real originality—the true, creative thinker—is also, necessarily, a man who can acutely analyze the data of his environment, and think about that cogently and anything but stupidly. If he can't do those things, he's no good as a basic researcher anyway, so we needn't discuss his case.

The comment "That's what you *say,* but that's not what you *do!*" is old and familiar; the man capable of doing genuine basic research is precisely the type to observe both what people say, and what they do—and act accordingly. He's not apt to be fool enough to stick his neck out

by doing what people *say* they want, when it is quite clear that, actually, they are waiting to clobber any so-and-so who actually does it.

Now nobody objects to what another man thinks; we have a high degree of freedom of thought. Nobody objects at all to any ideas you may come up with . . . so long as you don't *do* anything with them. You're perfectly free to think clairvoyance is possible, for example, and even to spend your own time, effort, and money working on the problem. They won't even mind if you work out a mathematical-logical theory of how it could be accomplished.

But demonstrate that you can *do* it . . .! Who do you suppose would get to you first, a professional criminal, a fanatical bigot, or a Russian agent? I rather suspect a fanatical bigot would be the one to reach and murder you first; you're apt to have one of them near you already. The one thing that's sure is that all three types would be after you; neither type can endure the thought of having all of his actions, wherever, whenever he might be, subject to observation.

People would welcome many discoveries—it says here. But let's check the records on what happens with the truly great creative initiators.

Einstein is perhaps the best modern example; he has remade the world's whole concept of the Universe. All of modern electronics rests on his concepts with respect to the release of electrons from solid matter—his photoelectric equation, and its consequences. The atomic bomb was a result of the development of theoretical avenues first opened by his work. These achievements represent immense creative labors, lifting himself mentally by his own bootstraps. He was, however, fortunate in that the general public press decided to give him publicity, make him a symbol of science. Other men have done equal, or greater work, and not been so fortunate.

Very few indeed can be Einsteins —individuals of great creative power, lucky enough to be given massive recognition in their own lifetimes. That, be it noted, is a far smaller class than the class of men capable of doing great creative work. Just as the class of men who become President of the United States is, necessarily, not larger than the class of men capable of the office.

A highly competent individual, in planning a life career, would not be unaware of this. Not long before he died, Einstein remarked that it would be a good idea to be a plumber. He had considerable reason—reason that any top-level mind can spot before getting stuck in that unrewarding business of philosophy. After all, it is not necessary to actually try sticking your hand in a buzz saw to form an adequately sound conclusion that doing so would be unrewarding. You don't have to try some things to be able to figure out that "it makes nonsense."

Copernicus, who was an exceptionally brilliant man, was not a professional philosopher; he was a doctor of canon law. That was, in his time, a most highly respected profession—but one that, unlike the priesthood, was not so frustratingly all-demanding. Wherefore, he was a large number of other things on the side; his cosmological researches were a hobby. And, being a highly intelligent and thoroughly wise man, he most carefully refrained from publishing his original and creative work until he was through with his position in the world. Nobody ever attacked Copernicus himself; he was comfortably retired in death before they got mad at his contribution to the world. Galileo was the not-quite-so-bright gentleman who stuck his neck out announcing the ideas. And got it in the neck for doing so.

Einstein got wonderful publicity; everybody loved the white-haired, kindly old man. He had enormous respect—so long as he didn't try to use his immensely competent mind in practical affairs, that is. When he made some statements suggesting that social concepts were due for some major alterations, in view of the nuclear weapons, the sociologists hastened to assure the world that he didn't know what he was talking about, so nobody paid much attention. Creative thinkers are all very well in physics—but not in any field that touches *me*. That's practical; I don't want any new ideas there—do your thinking in somebody else's field, but not around where it will make *me* learn a new way of thinking and living!

But generally, Einstein got a tremendously favorable press. He was a beloved legend. He founded the basic theoretical structure of electronics, and of nucleonics.

Wonderful, ain't it?

He lived in a tiny, shabby house in Princeton, New Jersey, and wished he was a plumber, too. Plumbers make more money. His funeral was *very* small. No gangster would ever be buried with so little pomp or ceremony. I do not, of course, know what his salary was, but I'll unhesitatingly bet that it wouldn't attract a junior assistant vice-president of a third-line advertising firm.

He had an immense reputation in the world—but I'll bet I could borrow more cash at the bank than Einstein could. Which I personally, consider a hell of a way to run a civilization.

So now the government is beginning to wonder why there aren't any good, basic research men coming along.

One reason is that many of them have followed Einstein's career with the greatest interest and sympathy—and followed his astute, and experienced advice. They've gone in for plumbing. Not engineering science, either, incidentally; the creative mind wants freedom to follow the unorthodox lines of development that mean creativity. The professional

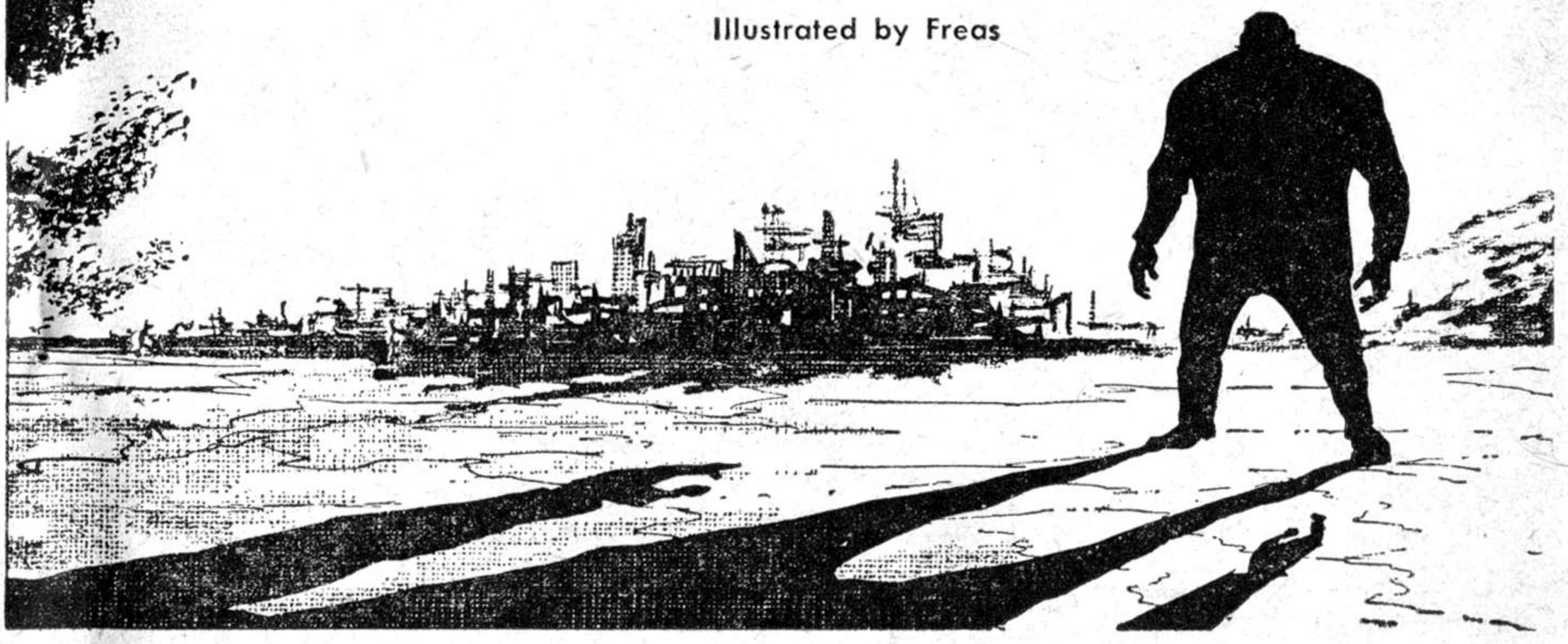
(*Continued on page* 161)

CALL HIM DEAD

BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

First of Three Parts. *Wade Harper was a forger —his business card said so—which made the police a little suspicious when they found him with a murdered state policeman in his arms! But that, really, was the least confusing part of the whole thing. . . .*

Illustrated by Freas



I

He was a squat man with immense breadth of shoulder, hairy hands, bushy eyebrows. He maintained constant, unblinking attention on the road as he drove into trouble at sixty miles an hour.

It was April 1, 1980. All Fools' Day, he thought wryly. They had two or three moving roadways in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. Also six air-tight stations up there on the Moon. But, except for rear engines and doped-alcohol fuel, motor cars were little different from those of thirty years ago. Helicopters remained beyond reach of the average pocket. Taxpayers still skinned themselves month after month—and brooded over it every All Fools' Day.

For the past ten years there had been talk of mass-produced helicopters at two thousand dollars apiece. Nothing had ever come of it. Maybe it was just as well considering the likely death-roll when drunks, half-wits and hot-rod enthusiasts took to the skies.

For the same ten years the scientific write-up boys had been forecasting a landing upon Mars within the next five. Nothing had come of that either. Sometimes he doubted whether anything ever would come of it. A minimum of sixty million miles is a terrible distance to cover for a gadget that squirts itself along.

His train of thought snapped when an unknown voice sounded within his peculiar mind saying, *"It hurts! Oh, God, it . . . hurts!"*

The road was wide and straight and thickly wooded on both sides. The only other vehicle in sight was a lumbering tanker mounting a slight slope two miles ahead. A glance in the rearview mirror confirmed that there was nothing behind. Despite this, the squat man registered no surprise.

"Hurts!" repeated the voice, weakening rapidly. *"Didn't give me a chance."*

The squat man slowed until his speedometer needle trembled under twenty. He made a dexterous U-turn, drove back to a rutted dirt road leading into the woods. He nosed the car up the road knowing full well that the voice had come from that direction.

In the first five hundred yards there were two sharp bends, one to the right, one to the left. Around the second bend a car stood squarely in the middle of the road, effectively blocking it to all comers. The squat man braked hard, slewed his bonnet over the grass verge to avoid a collision.

He got out, leaving his door open. Speculatively he eyed the other car while he stood still and listened with his mind rather than with his ears.

"Betty—" whispered the eerie voice. *"Three fellows and a pain in the guts. Darkness. Can't get up. Ought to tell Forst. Where are you, Forst?"*

Turning, the squat man ran heavily along the verge, clambered down

a short bank, found the man in the ditch. He did not look long, not more than two seconds. Mounting the bank with furious haste, he dug a flask out of his car-pocket, took it down the ditch.

Raising the other's head he poured a thin trickle of spirit between pale lips. He did not say anything, asked no questions, uttered no words of comfort and encouragement. Cradling the head on his forearm he tried only to maintain the fading spark of life. And while he did it, he listened. Not with his ears.

"Tall, blond guy," murmured the other's mind, coming from a vast distance. *"Blasted at me . . . others got out . . . slung me off the road. Betty, I'm—"*

The mental stream cut off. The squat man dropped his flask, lowered the other's head, examined him without touching. Dead beyond doubt. He made note of the number on the badge fixed to the uniform jacket.

Leaving the body in the ditch he went to the stalled car, sat in the driver's seat, found a hand-microphone, held it while he fiddled tentatively with switches. He was far from sure how the thing operated but intended to find out.

"Hello!" he called, working a likely lever. "Hello!"

Immediately a voice responded, "State police barracks. Sergeant Forst."

"My name is Wade Harper. Can you hear me?"

"Barracks," repeated the voice, a trifle impatiently. "Forst speaking."

Evidently he couldn't hear. Harper tried again, got something adjusted. "Hello! Can you hear me?"

"Yes. What goes on there?"

"I'm calling from Car Seventeen. One of your officers is dead in a ditch nearby." He gave the badge number.

There sounded a quick intake of breath, then, "That's Bob Alderson. Where are you now?"

Harper gave it in detail, added, "He's been shot twice, once in the belly and once through the neck. It must have happened recently because he was still living when I got to him. He died in my arms."

"Did he tell anything?"

"Yes, a tall, fair-haired fellow did it. There were others with him, no number stated, no descriptions."

"Were they in a car?"

"He didn't say but you can bet on that."

"Stay where you are, Mr. Harper. We'll be right out."

There sounded a sharp click and a new voice broke in with, "Car Nine, Lee and Bates. We picked that up, sarge, and are on our way. We're two miles off."

Replacing the microphone and switching off, Harper returned to the top of the bank, gazed moodily down upon the body. Somebody named Betty was going to know heartbreak this night.

Within a few minutes heavy tires squealed on the main artery, a car came into the dirt road. Harper raced

round the bend, signaled it down lest it hit the block. Two state troopers piled out. They had the bitter air of men who owed somebody plenty and intended to pay it with interest.

They went down into the ditch, came up, said, "He's gone all right. Someone is going to be sorry."

"I hope so," said Harper.

The taller of the two surveyed him curiously and asked, "How did you happen to find him way up here?"

Harper was prepared for that. He had practiced the art of concealment since childhood. At the ripe age of nine he had learned that knowledge can be resented, that the means of acquiring it can be feared.

"I wanted to pay dog-respects to a tree. Found this car planted in the road. First thing I thought was that somebody else had the same idea. Then I heard him moan in the ditch."

"Five hundred yards is a heck of a long way to come just for that," observed the tall one, sharp-eyed and shrewd. "Fifty would have been enough, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe."

"How much farther would you have gone if the road hadn't been blocked?"

"Couldn't say." He shrugged indifferently. "A fellow just looks for a spot that strikes his fancy and stops there, doesn't he?"

"I wouldn't know," said the trooper.

"You ought to," said Harper. "Unless you are physically unique."

"What d'you mean by that?" asked the trooper, showing sudden toughness.

The second trooper chipped in with, "Lay off, Bert. Ledsom will be here any minute. Let him handle this. It's what he's paid for."

Bert grunted, went silent. The pair started hunting around for evidence. In short time they found fresh tire tracks across a soft patch twenty yards higher up the road. Soon afterward they discovered a shell in the grass. They were examining the shell when three more cars arrived.

A man with a bag got down into the ditch, came up after a while, said wearily, "Two bullets about .32 caliber. Either could have caused death. No burn marks. Fired from range of a few yards. The slugs aren't in him."

Another with captain's chevrons spoke to the two nearest troopers. "Here's the ambulance—lift him out of there." To several others, "You boys look for those slugs. We've *got* to find them." To Lee and Bates he said, "Put a plank over those tracks. We'll make moulage casts of them. See if you can pick up the other shell. Work up the road for the gun as well: the punk may have thrown it away."

He joined Harper, informed, "I'm Captain Ledsom. It was smart of you to use Alderson's radio to get us."

"Seemed the sensible thing to do."

"People don't always do the sensible thing, especially if they're anxious not to be involved." Ledsom sur-

veyed him with cool authority. "How did you find Alderson?"

"I trundled up here to answer the call of nature. And there he was."

"Came up quite a piece, didn't you?"

"You know how it is. On a narrow track like this you tend to look for a spot where you can turn the car to go back."

"Yes, I guess so. You wouldn't want to park on a bend either." He appeared satisfied with the explanation but Harper could see with complete clarity that his mind suspected everyone within fifty miles radius. "Exactly what did Alderson say before he passed out?"

"He mumbled about Betty and—"

"His wife," interjected Ledsom, frowning. "I hate having to tell her about this."

"He mentioned a big, blond fellow blasting at him. Also that there were others who tossed him into the ditch. He gave no more details unfortunately. He was on his last lap and his mind was rambling."

"Too bad he couldn't give more." Ledsom shifted attention as a trooper came up. "Well?"

"Cap, the tracks show that a car came up here with Alderson following. The car stopped by the verge. Alderson pulled up behind but in the middle of the road. He got out, went toward the first car, was shot down. At least two men picked him up and dumped him out of sight." He held out his hand. "Here's the other shell." He pointed. "It was lying right there."

".32 automatic," said Ledsom, studying the small brass cylinders. "Any sign of Alderson's car having been edged off the road and put back again?"

"No."

"Then they must have pushed straight ahead. They couldn't get out this way with that car stuck across the road." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and went on, "This track meanders seventeen miles through forest, loops back and joins the main artery about ten miles farther along. So by now they've either got back on the main road or they've holed up some place in the woods."

"Seventeen miles would take at least twenty minutes on a route like this one," ventured Harper. "Even if they're driving like crazy they can't be far off it yet."

"Yes, I know. I'll call the boys to put up road blocks along the main run. We'll search the loop, too. It's used almost entirely by loggers. If those bums are familiar with it, the chances are they work or once worked for the logging outfits. We'll follow that line later."

Entering his car, Ledsom spoke a while on the radio. He came back, said, "That's fixed. Blocks will be established pretty soon. Local sheriff is on his way here with four deputies." He gazed moodily at surrounding woods: "Just as well they're coming. The fugitives may dump that car and take to their feet, in which case we'll need an army to go through this lot."

"Any way I can help?" asked Harper.

Ledsom looked him over for the third time, carefully, calculatingly, while his mind said to itself, *"Some crazy coot might think it incontrovertible proof of innocence to stick his head in the lion's mouth. I'd like to know more about this guy. All we've got to go on so far is his story."*

"Well?" encouraged Harper.

"Finding the murder weapon could give us a lead," remarked Ledsom in the manner of one idly musing. "And we can't afford to overlook any possibility no matter how remote." Then his eyes stared straight into Harper's and his voice became sharp, imperative. "Therefore we must search you and your car."

"Naturally," responded Harper with bland indifference.

"Wrong diagnosis," decided Ledsom's mind. *"He's clean. We'll frisk him all the same."*

They raked the car from end to end, ran hands over Harper, extracted a tiny blued automatic from his right-hand pocket. Ledsom grabbed the gun eagerly, ejected the magazine from the hand-grip, examined it, jerked his eyebrows a bit.

"Holy smoke! What sort of a rod is this supposed to be? Twenty in the mag with slugs the size of match-heads. Where did you get it?"

"Made it myself. Up to fifty yards it is very effective."

"I can imagine. You got a permit for it?"

"Yes." Harper produced it, handed it over.

Ledsom glanced at it, registered more surprise. "Are you a Federal agent?"

"No, captain. The F.B.I. issued that for reasons of their own. If you want the reasons, you'll have to ask them."

"No business of mine," said Ledsom, a little baffled. He handed back the permit and the gun. "That toy isn't the weapon we want, anyway. Did you see or hear anything suspicious before or after finding Alderson?"

"Not a thing."

"No sound of a car beating it, for instance?"

"No sound whatever."

"You didn't hear the shots before you arrived?"

"No."

"Umph!" Ledsom was dissatisfied. "So they had at least two or three minutes headstart. You're a material witness and we want a statement from you at the office. Sorry to put you to more trouble and delay but—"

"Only too glad to assist," said Harper.

Ledsom directed two crews to explore the loop road then led the way back to barracks. Reaching his office he slumped behind his desk, sighed deeply.

"It's a lousy business. I've yet to tell his wife. They hadn't been married long, either. God knows how she'll take it." He sighed again, dug

an official form out of a drawer. "Have to do some clerking myself seeing all the boys are busy. You got a card on you, Mr. Harper?"

Harper slid one across to him.

It read: WADE HARPER—FORGER.

"So help me Mike," said Ledsom, blinking at it. "That's what I call advertising one's sins. Next thing one of them will write me on a business sheet headed: *Baldy O'Brien—Heistman.*"

"I'm a microforger."

"What sort of animal is that?"

"I make surgical and manipulatory instruments so tiny they can be used to operate on a bacillus."

"Oh, now, don't give me that!" said Ledsom. "A fellow couldn't see enough to use them."

"He can—under a powerful microscope."

"Every year they think up something new," marveled Ledsom. "You can't keep up with it."

"There's nothing new about this," Harper assured. "It started back in 1899 with a Dutchman named Dr. Schouten. Since then the only considerable improvement on his technique has been gained by de Fonbrune's one-hand pneumatic micromanipulator. I make variations on that gadget, too."

"You must be kept pretty busy," remarked Ledsom, wondering how many or how few people wanted to dissect a germ.

"I get by. There aren't more than a couple of dozen competent microforgers in the world. The demand is just enough to keep pace with the supply."

"So the F.B.I. think they can't afford to lose you?"

"You're making guesses," said Harper.

"This bacteriological warfare business, maybe?"

"You're still guessing."

"O. K. I know when to mind my own business."

He got to work on the official form, put down the witness' name, address and occupation, followed it with a dictated account of what had occurred, shoved it across for the other to read and sign.

When Harper had gone, Ledsom grabbed the phone, made a long-distance call. He'd just finished talking when Sergeant Forst entered the office, eyed him curiously.

"Something broken, cap?"

"That Harper guy fed me a line that would do credit to the best con man in the biz. So I just called his home town to see if he has a record."

"And he has?"

"Yes."

"Jumping Judas!" said Forst, dropping a couple of books on the desk and making for the door. "I'll put out a pick-up call for him."

"No." Ledsom looked pensive. "His home-town cops send him love and kisses. He's helped them solve several tough cases and he's shot down three culprits for good measure."

"What is he, a private dick?"

"Nothing like that. They say he

has a habit of falling headlong over something everybody else is looking for. They say he's done it time and again and it's uncanny." He sought for a satisfactory theory, found it, ended, "Reckon he suffers from beginner's luck and makes a hobby of exploiting it."

If the subject of conversation had been within half a mile, he'd have picked up that notion and smiled.

Driving at fast pace along the main road Harper passed through three successive road-blocks without incident. His mind was working as he tooled along. If, he argued, a chased car switched into a sidetrack, the odds would be at least fifty to one on the driver choosing a turn-off on his own side rather than one across the artery and on the far side. The choice would be automatic or instinctive.

Since he was now running with the loop-road somewhere ahead and on his wrong side it was very likely that Alderson and the chased car had come from the opposite direction, or towards him.

He glanced at his watch. It said six-twenty. He had found Alderson at four-ten, a little over two hours ago. That could put the murderers best part of a hundred miles away if they'd kept going non-stop. Probably the police had road-blocks farther out than that. Probably police had been alerted over a huge area by an eight-state alarm.

It wouldn't do much good. There was no adequate description of the fugitives, none at all of their car. A tall, blond fellow just wasn't enough to go upon. About the only chance the police had of making a quick pinch lay in the possibility that the escapees were using a stolen vehicle that some sharp-witted officer might recognize as a wanted number.

He let a few miles go by until he saw a service-station on the opposite side, the side that in his theory Alderson and the killers had used. He crossed, pulled up near the pumps. Two attendants came over.

"Were you fellows on duty around four o'clock?"

Both nodded.

"See anything of a prowl car driven by a trooper named Alderson? Car Seventeen, it was."

"I know Bob Alderson," said one. "He was around a couple of times this morning."

"Not between three and four?"

"No." He thought a bit. "Or if he was I didn't see him."

"Me neither," said the other.

Their minds told that they spoke truth. Harper knew it with absolute sureness. So far as he was concerned they need not have opened their mouths.

"Anyone else here who might have noticed him around that time?"

"Only Satterthwaite. Want me to ask him?"

"I'd appreciate it."

The attendant went out of sight around the back of the building. It made no difference. Harper could hear them mentally though their voices were out of reach.

"Hey, Satty, a fellow here wants to know if you saw anything of Bob Alderson two or three hours back."

"Nary a sign."

He came back. "No luck. Satty didn't see him."

"Anyone now off-duty who was here at that time?"

"No." He showed curiosity. "Like me to tell Bob you're looking for him if he happens to come along?"

"He won't be along—ever," said Harper.

"What d'you mean?"

"Some hoodlum shot him down around four. He's dead."

The attendant paled.

"You'll have the police here asking similar questions sooner or later." Harper gazed up the road. "Know of any place on his patrol where Alderson was in the habit of stopping a while?"

"He'd often grab a coffee at the Star Café."

"Where's that?"

"Four miles along, on the crossroads."

"Thanks."

He pulled out, drove fast. Two miles farther on and halfway to the café stood another filling station, this time on his own side of the road. Turning into there, he put the same questions.

"Sure I saw him," said a laconic, sandy-haired youth. "Didn't notice the time but it must have been about three hours back."

"Was he chasing somebody?"

The other considered this, said, "Yes, now that I come to think of it maybe he was."

"What happened?"

"One of those low-slung green Thunderbugs went past in a hell of a hurry and he came half a mile behind like he'd no time to waste either."

"But you aren't positive that he was pursuing the Thunderbug?"

"I didn't think so at the time. Most of the stuff on this road moves good and fast but now that you mention it I guess he may have been after that car."

"Did you notice who was in it?"

"Can't say that I did."

"Did anyone else see this, too? Was anyone with you at the time?"

"No."

Harper thanked him and pushed on. So far he'd gained one item: a green Thunderbug. He didn't congratulate himself on that. He'd shown no especial cleverness in picking up this datum. Of a surety the police would find it themselves before the night was through. He was one jump ahead of them solely because he was concentrating on one specific line of search while they were coping with a hundred.

Harper had great respect for the police.

At the Star Café a pert waitress reported that Alderson had eaten a meal there and left about one-thirty. Yes, he'd been by himself. No, he hadn't shown particular interest in any other customers or departed coincidentally with anyone else. No,

she hadn't seen a tall, blond fellow with a green Thunderbug.

She hadn't noticed which direction Car Seventeen had taken but she'd ask the other girls. She went away, came back, said that one named Dorothy had seen Alderson go up the left-hand crossroad.

Harper took that road, kept the accelerator pedal well down. Fifteen minutes later he found a tavern keeper who had seen Car Seventeen rocketing along at sometime after three. This witness said he had been drawn to the window by the noise of a car going hell for leather. The car had shot past before he could get a view of it but he'd been in time to see Alderson racing by. Yes, he had thought at the time that Alderson was after someone, probably a daft kid in a hot-rod.

Seven miles farther on Harper struck oil. It was at another filling station. An elderly man came out, handed him news worth having.

"Shortly after three a Thunderbug hauled up to the pumps for ten gallons of alk. There were three fellows and a girl in it. The girl was sitting in the back with one of the fellows and she kept giving me funny sort of appealing looks through the window while I stood nearby with the hose in the gas tank. I had an idea that she wanted to scream but didn't dare. The whole setup looked decidedly fishy to me."

"What did you do about it?"

"Nothing at that moment. I was by myself and I'm not as young as I used to be. Those three could have bounced me on my nut until my brains fell out."

"So what then?"

"They paid and pushed off without realizing that they'd given me the fidgets. I'd been acting natural because I didn't want any trouble. But as soon as they'd got up a bit of speed I skipped into the road for a look at their plates."

"Did you get the number?" asked Harper, hoping to be dealt an ace out of the pack.

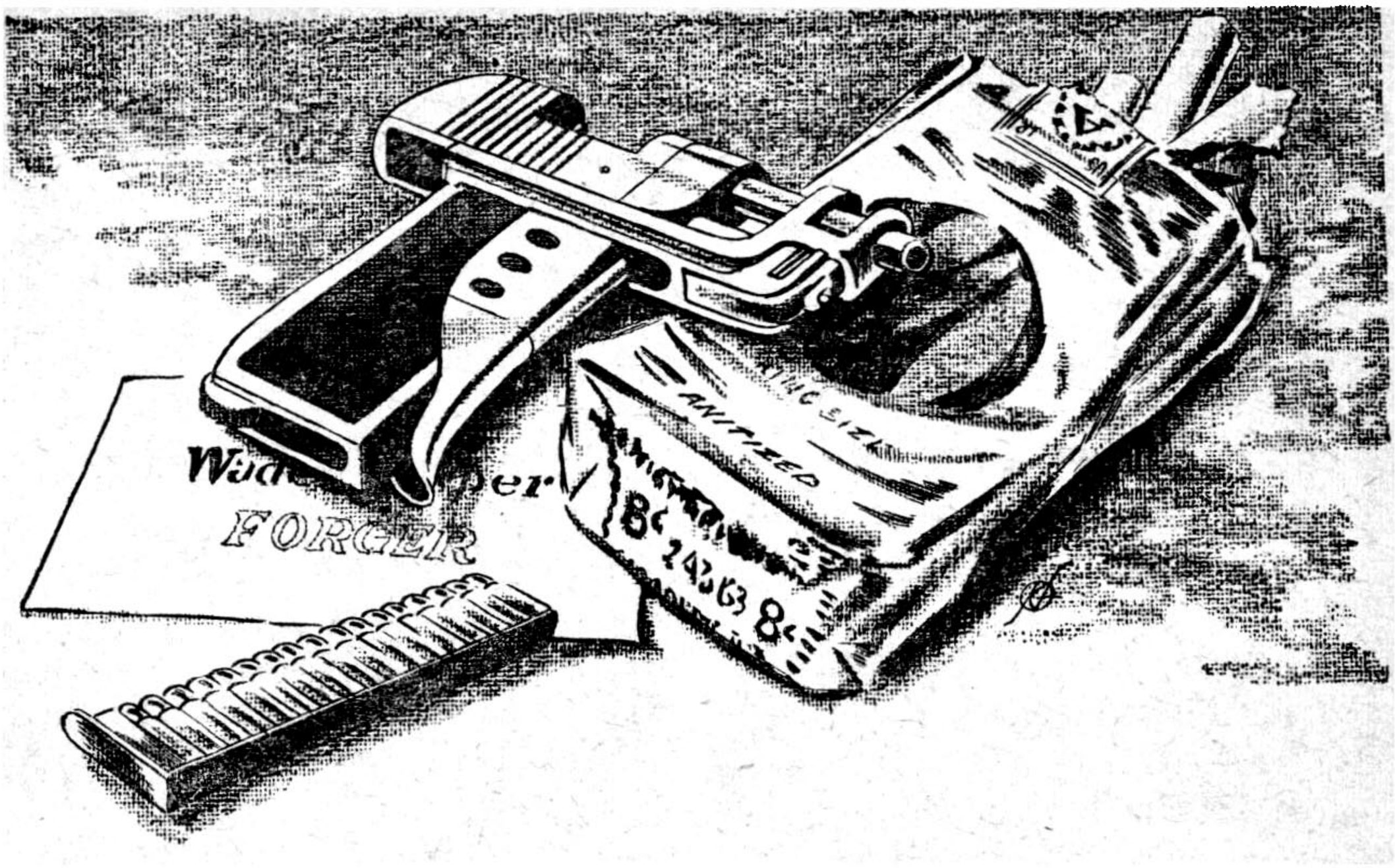
"No. I'd left it a mite too late. I hadn't my glasses on and the figures were too fuzzy to read." The oldster frowned, regretting the lost opportunity. "Couple of minutes later a prowl car came along at easy pace. I flagged it down, told the trooper about this girl. He said he'd look into the matter. He went after the Thunderbug at a good clip." His rheumy eyes quested hopefully. "Did he latch on to something?"

"Yes—a coffin. They plugged him in the neck and belly. He didn't take long to die."

"Good God!" The oldster was visibly shaken. He swallowed hard, said with morbid self-reproach, "And I sent him after them."

"It isn't your fault, Pop. You did the best thing in the circumstances." Harper waited a minute for the other to recover, then asked, "Did those fellows say anything to indicate where they'd come from or where they were going?"

"They spoke exactly one word and no more. The big blond one dropped his window and said, 'Ten!' I asked



about oil and water but he shook his head impatiently. Nobody else made any remark. The girl looked as if she'd talk plenty once she got started but was too scared to begin."

"What did this bunch look like? Give me as complete and detailed a description as you can manage."

The other licked his lips and said, "The blond one was doing the driving. He was a husky guy in his late twenties, yellow hair, blue eyes, strong chin, clean-shaven, good-looking and intelligent. You'd have called him a nice kind of fellow if his eyes hadn't been meaner than a snake's."

"No facial scars or other identifying marks?"

"Not that I noticed. Tell you what, though—he was pale. So were the other two guys. You know, whitish, like they get when they've been bottled up quite a piece." He gave Harper a significant glance. "Seeing what's happened I can think up a reason for that."

"So can I. They've just come out of clink. They've escaped or been paroled, more likely the former judging by the way they're acting."

"That's how it looks to me."

"Had they been hitting the booze?" inquired Harper, sensing a possible lead at wherever the stuff had been bought.

"Far as I could tell they were cold sober."

"What else can you add?"

"The fellow sitting alongside the driver was another husky about the same age. Black hair, gray eyes, clean-shaven. He was just as pale-faced, just as mean-looking. I never got a proper look at the third one in the back."

"How about the girl?"

"Around twenty or twenty-one, brown eyes, brown hair, a bit on the plump side. Attractive without being a stunner. Wearing a mustard-colored overcoat, yellow blouse and a string of amber beads. Her hand was up by the window and she had a birthday ring with an opal in it."

"Somebody born in October. You're doing topnotch, Pop."

"Like I told you, I noticed that girl," said the oldster.

"How were the fellows dressed?"

"All the same, dark green jackets, gray shirts and collars, dark green ties. Looked almost as if they wore uniform with buttons and insignia removed. Never seen anyone wearing that sort of rigout. Have you?"

"No," admitted Harper. "It doesn't resemble prison garb either. Maybe it's sporting togs they've swiped from some store."

He continued his cross-examination a few more minutes and finished with, "Have you a telephone here?"

"Sure. Come round the back." He led the way, pointed. "There you are—help yourself."

The voice in the earpiece growled, "State police barracks. Captain Ledsom."

"My lucky day," remarked Harper, unconsciously confirming theories at the other end. "You're the very man I want."

"Who's speaking?"

"Harper. Remember me?"

"Ah, so you've thought up something you forgot to tell us?"

"I gave you all I had at that time. I've since dug up a bit more."

"Such as what?"

"The car you want is a recent model green Thunderbug carrying three fellows and a girl. I have descriptions of all but one of the men."

Ledsom exploded, "Where did you get all this?"

Grinning to himself, Harper told him where and how.

"Why don't you join the cops and have done with it, instead of fooling around with germ-chivvying gadgets?" Ledsom demanded.

"Because I'm a couple of inches too short, six inches too wide, detest discipline and want to go on living."

Giving a deep grunt, Ledsom said, "I'll send a car out there right away. Maybe the boys will pick up something else. Meanwhile you'd better give me the dirt you've collected."

Harper recited it, finished, "Obviously there are now two leads I couldn't follow even if I wanted. They are properly your work because you have the facilities. Firstly, have any three fellows answering these descriptions been let out of prison or climbed the walls recently? Secondly, has any young girl answering this description been reported missing of late?"

A tolerant chuckle sounded before Ledsom replied, "We'll tend to those and about six more angles you've missed."

"For example?"

"Where did they get the clothes

they're wearing, the money they're spending, the car they're using, the gun they fired?" He was quiet a moment, then continued, "We'll send out a flier that may bring us the answers from some place. With luck we'll learn the tag-numbers on that Thunderbug. Ten to one it's stolen."

"I could push on along this route and perhaps learn more," said Harper. "They may have stopped for beer or a meal and talked out of turn within somebody's hearing. But why should I bother? What do I pay taxes for? I have business of my own to do."

"You're arguing with yourself, not with me," Ledsom pointed out. "Nobody's asking or expecting you to do anything." He hurried on with, "Of course we really do appreciate the part you've played so far. It shows fine public spirit. Things would be easier for us if everyone were as helpful."

Harper removed the phone from his ear, stared at it suspiciously, put it back, said, "Why can't they have visiscreens on these things in rural areas, too?"

"What has that to do with anything?"

"One could watch a guy's expression while he's plastering on the butter." He hooked the phone, turned, said to the oldster, "They're coming straight out. You'd better spend the interim stewing the matter and see if you can recall any item you may have overlooked. They'll need everything you can give them."

Returning to his car he set about his normal affairs confident that so far as he was concerned the episode was finished. He was out of it, no more involved in it, a momentary witness who had paused and passed on.

He could not have been more wrong.

II

He stopped at the next town, found a suitable hotel, booked a room for the night, took in a third-rate show during the evening. He listened to the midnight news before going to bed but it made only brief mention of the killing plus the usual soothing statement that the police hoped to make an early arrest.

The stereoscopic video—called by all and sundry "the pane" since the day a famous cynic had defined the self-styled "window on the world" as "a pane in the neck"—gave the murder a little more attention with pics of troopers and deputies searching the loop-road.

Both radio and video were more interested in vagaries of the weather, sports results, the round-the-globe rocket race, and a complicated legal battle between the government and the Lunar Development Company. According to the latter the government was trying to use its Earth-Moon transport monopoly to bludgeon the L.D.C. into handing itself over complete with fat profits. The L.D.C. was fighting back. It was the decades-old struggle of private enterprise against bureaucratic interference.

Harper sat out this last part in the role of a spectator foreseeing his own fate should he grow too big and become too prosperous. In his line of business he'd had a lot to do with officialdom but fortunately the basis had been coöperative rather than dictatorial. Nevertheless he sympathized with L.D.C.

He had a sound sleep, arose at eight, breakfasted, spent the morning at the Schultz-Masters Research Laboratories where they needed certain special micromanipulators and displayed the flattering attitude that only he could make them. At one o'clock he left with two tough technical problems solved, two more yet to be considered, and a provisional order in his pocket.

After a meal he started homeward and at three-thirty was halted by a prowl car at a point forty miles from the scene of yesterday's shooting. One of the two troopers in the car got out and came toward him.

He watched the approach with surprised interest because the oncomer's mind was warily broadcasting, *"Maybe and maybe not, but if so he won't get away with it this time!"*

"Something wrong?" Harper asked.

"You Wade Harper?"

"Yes."

"A call went out for you half an hour ago. Captain Ledsom wants to see you."

"I saw him yesterday."

"This is today," the trooper reminded.

"Can I talk to him on your shortwave?"

"He wants you in person."

"Any idea why?"

The other shrugged. His mind showed that he did not know the reason but viewed Harper as a major suspect merely because he was wanted. It showed also that he and his companion were ready to cope in effective manner with any refusal.

"Mean to say I've got to take time off and go all the way to the barracks?"

"That's how it is." He made an authoritative gesture with an added touch of impatience. "Turn her around and get going. Make it a steady pace, not too fast, and no monkey tricks. We'll be right behind."

Feeling rather peeved, Harper did as instructed. It wasn't that he was in a great hurry, in fact he had time to spare, but he disliked being given peremptory orders by a wide-open mind devoid of adequate motive.

He had been the same in this respect since he'd worn rompers. Perceptive mind resented dictatorship by non-perceptive mind. To do exactly as he was told smacked of the sighted being led around by the blind.

Occasionally, in introspective moments, he chided himself for his mutinous tendencies lest the fact that he'd been mentally alone, completely without intimate contact with a mind similar to his own, should be giving him a superiority complex born of a sense of uniqueness. He had no desire to be humble, he had less de-

sire to be sat upon. He was a seeker of the middle way.

Tramping unwillingly into Ledsom's office, he thumped himself into a seat that creaked, stared belligerently across the desk and read the other's change of viewpoint as easily as an ordinary person reads a book.

"Well, here I am."

Ledsom said pointedly, "We're having a tape-recording this time." Leaning sidewise, he switched on the apparatus. "Where were you the night before last?"

"At an hotel."

"Which one?"

Harper told him.

"What time did you leave there?" Ledsom inquired.

"At nine-thirty."

"Where did you spend the morning?"

"At the Pest Control Station."

"Until when?"

"Close on one o'clock. I then had dinner."

"Where?"

"At the Cathay, a Chinese restaurant."

"With whom?"

"Nobody. I was by myself. Say, what's behind all this?" The question was pure concealment. He already knew what was behind it because he could watch Ledsom's brains fizzing.

"Never mind, Mr. Harper. Just you answer the questions. You have nothing to fear, have you?"

"Who hasn't? Any minute Gabriel may blow his horn."

"You know what I mean." Ledsom eyed him without the friendliness of yesterday. "At what time did you leave the Cathay?"

"About two o'clock, give or take five minutes."

"And after that?"

"I headed for Hainesboro. I had business to do there today at the Schultz-Masters place."

"You came this way?"

"Of course. It's on the direct route."

"You were passing the loop-road about when?"

"Four o'clock."

"Now tell me exactly what happened from that point onward."

"I gave you the whole story yesterday. You've got it in writing."

"I know. And now we want it again." Ledsom's mind added with mistaken secretiveness, *A liar needs a good memory. This is where we find contradictions in his stories, if any.*

Harper went grimly through the account for the second time while the tape-recorder purred on. It was the same in all details. He knew it and also that Ledsom knew it.

"About that trick gun you've got," said Ledsom. "You wouldn't be in the habit of carrying a second one such as a .32, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"There's a large pond of considerable depth in the woods about fifty yards from where Alderson was killed. Did you notice it?"

"I didn't enter the woods."

"Did you know of the pond's existence?"

"No."

"You told us you went up that road for a certain purpose. Presumably you were balked by what you discovered. Did you achieve that purpose?"

"I did."

"When?"

"After I'd called Forst on the radio."

"You found Alderson, called the police and then went into the woods?"

"It wasn't necessary to go into the woods, there being no ladies present."

Ignoring that point, Ledsom went on, "At what time did you leave your hotel yesterday morning?"

"You've asked that one before. Nine-thirty."

"And you were all morning where?"

"At the Pest Control Station. If you're trying to catch me out, you're wasting time and breath. We can go on this way for a week."

"All right," said Ledsom, changing tactics. "If you had a deal in prospect with Schultz-Masters why didn't you go there until today?"

Harper gave a resigned sigh and said, "Firstly, because my appointment was for today and not for yesterday. Secondly, I reached Hainesboro too late for any business calls, in fact it was already too late when I left here."

"That's what interests us," informed Ledsom, gazing at him steadily. "You'd been badly delayed by the time we finished with you. All the same, you took time off to hunt up four people in a Thunderbug. Why did you do that?"

"Alderson died in my arms. I didn't like it."

Ledsom winced but kept firmly to the issue. "Is that your only reason?"

"It's the major one."

"What's a minor one?"

"My day was messed up. A couple of hours one way or the other couldn't make any difference."

"No other motives whatsoever?"

"One," admitted Harper reluctantly.

"Name it."

"I got some personal satisfaction out of finding a trace on the killers myself."

"*If* they *were* the killers," commented Ledsom. He switched off the recorder, meditated a minute, continued, "Up to a couple of hours ago I didn't doubt it. Now I'm not so sure." He kept his full attention on his listener, watching for reactions. "We're pumping out that pond. Maybe we'll find the gun and learn who used it."

"Meaning me?"

"I haven't said so."

"You're hinting at it with every muscle in your face." Harper made a gesture of disparagement. "I can't blame you in the least for suspecting anyone and everyone. I could have killed Alderson. The time, the place and the opportunity all fit in. Only things lacking are the gun and the

motive. You're going to have a hell of a time tying a motive onto me. I had never seen Alderson in my life until that moment."

"We had a senseless killing near here four years ago," answered Ledsom. "Two brothers fell out over an incredibly trivial matter, got equally stubborn about it, gradually switched from argument to abuse and from there to mutual challenges. Finally the hotter tempered of the two upped and slugged the other, killed him, made a very clever try at concealing his guilt by distracting attention elsewhere. He almost succeeded—but not quite!"

"So I followed Alderson into a lane, stopped behind him, swapped backchat. One word led to another. Being cracked, I shot him twice, threw the gun into a pond, called you to come take a look." Harper pulled a wry face. "Time I had my head examined."

"I can't afford to overlook any possibilities," Ledsom gave back. "I've just asked you a lot of questions. Are you willing to take them again with a lie-detector?"

"Positively not!"

Ledsom breathed deeply and said, "You realize, of course, that we must attach a certain significance to your refusal?"

"You can tie a couple of tin cans onto it for all I care. The polygraph is an outrageous piece of pseudo-scientific bunkum and its needle-wagglings aren't admissible as legal evidence."

"It has helped extract a few confessions," declared Ledsom, on the defensive.

"Yes, from the babes and sucklings. I am a maker of top-grade scientific instruments myself. You drag a polygraph into court and I'll tear it to pieces for all time."

That worried Ledsom. His thoughts revealed that he believed Harper perfectly capable of it and peculiarly competent to do it. He dismissed the lie-detector idea as a blunder and wished he had never mentioned it.

"How about scopomaline?" suggested Harper, for good measure. "I'll talk that right out of usage if you'll give me half a chance." He leaned forward, knowing that their respective positions were reversed even if only momentarily, that for a few seconds he was the inquisitor and Ledsom the culprit. "From the criminal viewpoint what have I got that those punks in the Thunderbug haven't got? Do you regard them as figments of my imagination and think I've bribed witnesses to support my story?"

"They were real enough. We have proof of that."

"Well, then?"

"Two hours ago we picked up the girl. Her story doesn't jibe with yours. Somebody's a liar."

Harper eyed him meditatively, said, "So you've got the girl. Is her version a trade secret?"

Ledsom thought it over, decided that there was nothing to lose. "She missed her bus, thumbed a lift.

Three fellows picked her up in that green Thunderbug. They were in humorous mood, took her a long, roundabout way, kidded her she was being kidnaped. At that filling station she really was scared, but after a bit more fooling around they dumped her where she wanted to go. It was all a rib."

"And what about Alderson?"

"She saw nothing of him, knows nothing about him."

"But he chased that car."

"I know. The girl says the blond fellow drove like a maniac for no reason other than the hell of it, so maybe Alderson never caught up with them."

"You believe that yarn?" Harper asked.

"I don't believe any story without satisfactory evidence in support. But hers casts grave doubt upon yours."

"All right. I know you're going to check on mine. Check on hers, too, and see if it stands up."

"We've already made a partial check on both of you and we're going to finish the job as soon as possible. The girl doesn't know the names of the three fellows or anything else about them other than what we've already got. She didn't notice the number of the car. Having suffered nothing, she had no reason to grab the number."

"That's a big help."

"But the rest looks convincing," said Ledsom. "She is a girl of excellent reputation coming from a highly respected family. She left home when she says she did, missed the bus she says she missed, was seen by two witnesses being offered a lift. She arrived at her destination at the time she states and can prove it."

"Those fellows took her a long way round?"

"Yes. They were feeling their oats."

"Nice way of accounting for lost time such as that involved in stopping, shooting, starting and running every mile of seventeen around a loop-road."

"Look, Mr. Harper, it's almost twenty-four hours since Alderson was shot down. All we've got are you and this girl. All I know is that somebody used a gun and somebody's telling lies."

"If that girl is telling the truth, which I beg leave to doubt," ventured Harper, "there's only one solution. A third party is wandering loose, untraced, unsuspected and laughing up his sleeve."

"There's not the slightest evidence of it." Ledsom hesitated, went on, "I wouldn't dream of chewing the fat with you in this manner if it wasn't that your home-town law gave you a very big hand. That sort of thing counts with me."

"I suppose so."

"Therefore, I'll tell you something more. The three fellows don't tally with any trio released or escaped from prison this year."

"How about the military prisons? That old bird at the filling station thought they might be wearing altered uniforms."

"There is no military, naval or air-

force uniform corresponding with that description."

"Not in this country. Maybe they were foreigners."

"The girl says not. They spoke the language as only we can speak it and knew the country like the backs of their hands."

"Have you asked the authorities whether they know of *any* uniform that does correspond?"

"No. The girl agrees that their clothes had a sort of official look and thinks they were wearing army disposal stuff dyed green. If so, we've poor chance of tracing it. Ex-army jackets have been thrown on the market by the thousands."

"How about their car? You thought it might be stolen."

"To date we've pulled in reports of ten missing in various parts of the country. Four of them are green. We have urgent calls out for those four numbers. No luck so far." He gazed morbidly through an adjacent window. "Anyway, they may have resprayed it and changed the tags. Or it may be legitimately owned. Or it may be a rented car. The Thunderbug is a popular make. It would take months to check all sales and rentals from coast to coast."

Harper thought it over and said, "Well, you'll know it if ever you lay hands on it. You have a tire-cast and that's something."

"Doesn't follow it's one of theirs. Anybody could have gone up that lane anytime the same day. All we've discovered is that it doesn't belong to any logging vehicle. Neither do those three fellows answer the descriptions of any logging company's employees, past or present."

"No matter what that girl says I still think they're the boys you want."

"The girl was an unwilling witness in that event. She wasn't a guilty party. So why should she cover up for a bunch of strangers?"

"Maybe they weren't strangers," Harper offered.

"What d'you mean?"

"Doesn't follow that because they gave her a lift they must have been unknown to her."

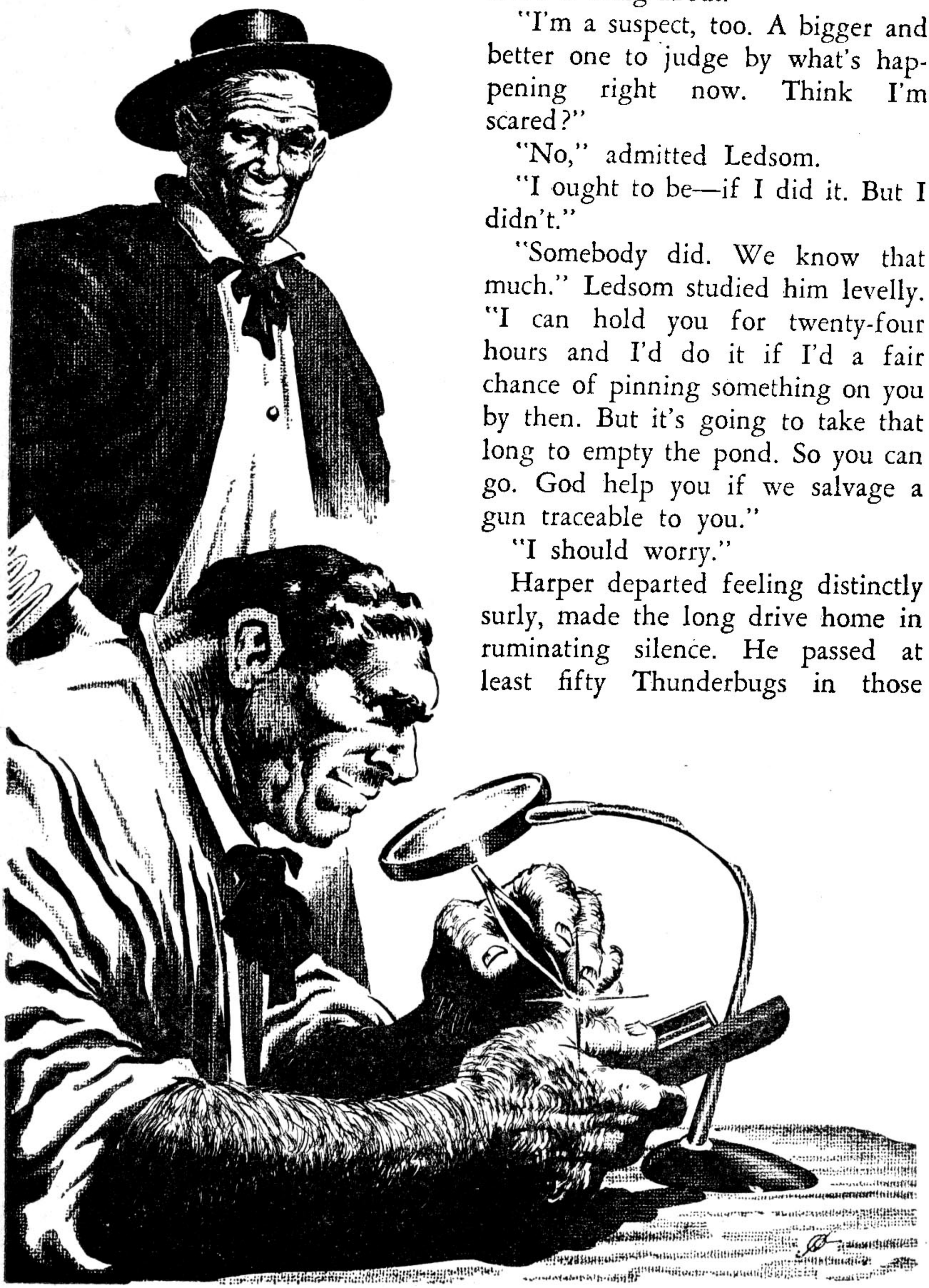
"She swears she didn't know them from Adam."

"You could bet on her saying that —if one of them happened to be a crazy boy-friend or a shiftless relative."

"Hm-m-m!" Ledsom viewed this as remotely possible but rather unlikely. He made a note on a pad. "Her home-town law gave us a report on her character, home conditions, status of parents and that's all. Might be worth probing more deeply into her background."

"If she's telling lies about a murder, she must have a very strong reason. Perhaps she's been intimidated. Perhaps they have convinced her that they'll be back to cut her throat if she dares speak out of turn."

"Wrong guess," snapped Ledsom, positively. "I've been in this game a long time and I can tell when a suspect is secretly afraid. She wasn't.



She was frankly bewildered at being dragged into something she didn't know a thing about."

"I'm a suspect, too. A bigger and better one to judge by what's happening right now. Think I'm scared?"

"No," admitted Ledsom.

"I ought to be—if I did it. But I didn't."

"Somebody did. We know that much." Ledsom studied him levelly. "I can hold you for twenty-four hours and I'd do it if I'd a fair chance of pinning something on you by then. But it's going to take that long to empty the pond. So you can go. God help you if we salvage a gun traceable to you."

"I should worry."

Harper departed feeling distinctly surly, made the long drive home in ruminating silence. He passed at least fifty Thunderbugs in those

seven hundred miles, saw no persons resembling the missing trio.

III

He had a small plant employing six myopic but deft-fingered men. Also an office barely large enough to hold his desk and that of a secretary cum stenographer cum telephone operator. This person, name of Moira, was three inches taller than himself and about half the width. Cupid couldn't lug a ladder into the room and that fact suited Harper topnotch.

Sitting at his desk he was examining a set of miniscule glass forceps under a powerful magnifier when Riley opened the door and took the two steps necessary to reach the middle. His plainclothes effectively advertised him as a cop in disguise.

"Morning, lieutenant," greeted Harper, glancing up momentarily before returning attention to the task in hand.

"Morning, Neanderthal." There being no extra chair or space for one, Riley hooked a thick leg over a desk corner, rested himself as best he could. He bent forward to stare through the magnifier. "Beats me how paws so thick and hairy can fiddle with stuff that size."

"Why not? You pick your teeth, don't you?"

"Leave my personal habits out of this." His eyes became accusing. "Let's discuss some of yours."

Harper sighed, fitted the forceps into a velvet-lined case, placed it in a drawer. He shoved the magnifier to one side, looked up.

"Such as what?"

"Being around when things happen."

"Can I help it?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I wonder. It's mighty queer the way you latch onto this and that."

"Be specific," Harper invited.

"We've had a call. Fellow wants to know if you're still around. And if not why not."

"All right, I'm still around. Go tell him."

"I wanted to know *why* he wanted to know," said Riley, pointedly.

"And he told you. He said it isn't in the mud."

"Mud? What mud?"

"At the bottom of the pond." Harper grinned up at him. "He also asked whether I'm known to own a .32."

"You're right. It was Captain Ledsom. He gave me the details from first to last."

"Whereupon you solved the whole case for him," suggested Harper. "Two minds being better than one."

"*You* are going to solve it," said Riley.

"Am I?" Harper rubbed a chin and produced rasping noises. "Moira, throw this bum out."

"Do your own dirty work," ordered Riley. "You aren't paying her to act as bouncer as well, are you?" He turned to Moira. "How much are you making, Sylph?"

Moira giggled and said, "Not enough."

"Disgraceful," opined Riley. "I don't know why you stick with this hirsute curmudgeon."

"Such words," put in Harper. "I'll bet you can read, too."

"And without moving my lips," Riley boasted. "So let's get down to basics. You're going to let business go to pot while you play Sherlock."

"Why?"

"Firstly because I told Ledsom you could clear up the matter if continuously and vigorously prodded. So he wants me to prod—continuously and vigorously."

"Secondly?"

"Because there's now a reward for information leading to apprehension and conviction of the killer or killers. Being human and in old shoes and wearing a tie obviously given with a gallon of alk, you could use the dough."

"That all?"

"Not by a long shot. I've saved the best bit to the last." He grinned, revealing big teeth. "An hour ago some hoarse-voiced character phoned Ledsom and said he'd seen Alderson having an argument with a compressed bruiser answering more or less to your description. Know what that makes you?"

"The sacrificial goat," said Harper, moodily.

Riley nodded. "We'd pick you up and sweat a confession out of you but for two things. One is that we know you too well to believe you did it. The other is that the witness is not available to identify you."

"Why isn't he?"

"He said his piece and cut off. So Ledsom doesn't know who called."

"That looks fishy."

"Some folk hate to get involved," observed Riley. "More's the pity."

"I'm not surprised. I became too public-spirited myself. See what it's brought me."

"You jumped into it. Get busy and wriggle out of it."

"I can't afford the time," Harper complained.

"You can't afford a spell in clink either," Riley pointed out. "If Ledsom asks us to take you in, we'll have to do it."

"Do you think that's likely?"

"God knows. It depends on what they turn up in the way of further evidence."

"If they find any pointing at me, it will be purely circumstantial."

"That's no consolation when you're sitting around awaiting trial," said Riley. "The moment Ledsom believes he's got enough to convince a jury he'll make the pinch. He may then find he's wrong because the jury proves difficult to satisfy. So even if you get away with it you'll have been put through the mill, lost a lot of patience, time and money."

Harper said flatly, "They haven't the chance of a celluloid cat unless they find that witness and he identifies me. Even that won't be proof. It will do no more than suggest a motive. And if the witness does identify me he'll be a liar who

knows something about the shooting and aims to divert attention. He can't appear without becoming a suspect himself."

"Could be. A way to find out would be to trace him and beat the truth out of him."

"The state troopers can do that themselves."

"Maybe," said Riley. "And maybe they couldn't."

"Maybe I couldn't either."

"I'm not so sure. You've done some darned funny things these last few years."

"Such as what?"

"That Grace Walterson murder. Twelve years old and unsolved—until you sit on a park bench and hear a boozey tramp muttering about it in his sleep. You tell us. We grab him and he confesses."

"Sheer luck," informed Harper.

"Was it? The Grace Walterson case had been long forgotten and wasn't in our bailiwick anyway. We had to check across country to get details. That guy did it all right. He was drunk like you said. There was only one respect in which his story didn't jibe with yours."

"What was that?"

"He didn't go to sleep and he didn't mutter. He swears he sat there blurry-eyed but wide-awake and wordless while you slid away and brought back a patrolman."

"He wrote his confession on paper and I ate it," said Harper. "I just can't resist paper." He frowned at the other. "You must be nuts. The sot voiced the burden on his conscience and gave himself away."

"All right." Riley stared at him very hard. "But *you* had to be there when he did it. Then there was the Tony Giacomo case. He heists a bank, kills two, and *you* have to be lounging nearby two days later when he—"

"Oh, give it a rest," suggested Harper, wearily. "I'm thirty-seven years old, have rubbed shoulders with nine wanted men and you pretend it's remarkable. How many have you sat next to in your half century of sin?"

"Plenty, I daresay. Not one of them told me he was wanted and begged me to take him in."

"None begged me either."

"The entire bunch did the next best thing. They made the mistake of being some place where you were, too. You've upped our score of snatches by quite a piece and the Commissioner thinks you're great. But I think there's something decidedly odd about it."

"Name it then."

"I can't," confessed Riley. "I can't so much as imagine an explanation."

"Some folk are always there when accidents happen," Harper pointed out. "They can't help it. It's the way things go. Take my Aunt Matilda—"

"Let somebody else take her—I'm married," said Riley. "Are you going to break this case or do you prefer to wait until I'm ordered to bring you in?"

"How much is the reward?"

Riley looked prayerfully at the ceiling. "He weakens at the thought of money. Five thousand dollars."

"I'll stew it a while."

"If the idea is to wait for the reward to be jacked up," warned Riley, "you may wait too long. By the tone of his voice Ledsom's feeling mean enough to put his own mother in the jug."

With that, he bestowed a curt nod on Moira and walked out. They listened to his heavy footsteps parading along the outer passage and fading away in the distance.

"Moira, do you sense anything strange about me?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Harper," she assured.

It was true enough. Her mind revealed that she wished he were ten inches taller and ten years younger. It might add a little spice to office work. She asked no more than that because her stronger emotional interests were being satisfied elsewhere.

He did not probe any more deeply into her thinking processes. His life resembled that of one perpetually walking by night through a city of well-lit and wide open bedrooms. He tried not to look, didn't want to look but often could not avoid seeing. He was guilty of invasion of privacy twenty times per day and just as frequently regretted it.

"Riley must be talking through his hat."

"Yes, Mr. Harper."

He called Riley on the phone mid-morning of the following day, announced, "You've given me the fidgets."

"That was my intention," said Riley, smirking in the tiny visi-screen.

"Everything is well in hand here, we being better organized than are some police departments. I reckon I can leave for a few days without risk of bankruptcy. But I'm not going away blind and bollixed."

"What d'you mean?"

"For a start, I'll get nowhere if the moment I set foot across the line Ledsom's boys grab me for the hell of it."

"I'll tend to that," Riley promised. "They'll leave you alone—unless they can prove you're ready for cooking."

"I want the addresses of Alderson's widow and of that girl. Also of the fellow who phoned Ledsom —that's if they've managed to trace him."

"Leave it with me. I'll call you back as soon as I can."

Harper pronged the phone, watched its fluorescent dial cloud over and go blank. He did not like the situation. He felt no real concern over entanglement in a murder. That affair would straighten itself out sooner or later. It was the least of his worries.

What bothered him was the hulking but agile-minded Riley's vague suspicions concerning his aptitude for uncovering evil long hidden from everyone else. Though devoid of a satisfactory theory to explain it,

Riley had him tagged as a natural born smeller-out of witches.

The trick was easy enough. He had found out long ago that if he stared too long at a man with a guilty conscience the recipient of the stare became wary while the guilt radiated from his mind in vivid details. Nine times in the last ten years he had gazed absently at people who had rung a mental alarm-bell and unknowingly broadcast their reasons for doing so. They had literally thought themselves into jail or the chair.

Harper had no difficulty in imagining the reaction should the news ever get out that no individual's mind was truly his own. He would be left without a friend other than some person of his own peculiar type, if such a one existed.

As for the criminal element, they'd see to it that his life wasn't worth a moment's purchase. The world's pleasantness so long preserved by his self-concealment would change to a hell of avoidance by day and menace by night.

While waiting for Riley, he indulged macabre amusement by picturing the manner of his own demise at the hands of the fearful. Obviously they couldn't use the conventional method of the gunman lurking in an alley. Such an assassin could not ready himself without thinking about the task in hand and thus warning the victim of the impending deed. No tactic could be effective that involved the presence of an active mind.

They would have to turn to some delayed or remotely-controlled device that could function without radiating its intentions. A time-bomb might be suitable.

So he'd come to the office one morning, give Moira the cheery hiho, sit at his desk, pull open a drawer and—*bam!* Then the smoke would clear away and give him a view of the afterlife, if any.

Possibly he had been followed-up in police thought as direct result of his foolishness in passing them news so openly and so often. He had been impelled to do it mostly because he detested finding himself in the presence of somebody who had got away with mayhem and any time might try to get away with it again. It irked his sense of justice. And it gratified him to feel that at long last some hapless victim had been avenged.

One fellow he had detected, chased and finally shot down had been seven times guilty of rape and once of murder accompanied by criminal assault. He could not let a louse like that freely run around for the sake of keeping Riley at arm's length.

In future it might be better to pass the word to the police by some indirect method such as, for example, the anonymous telephone call. It was doubtful whether that would serve. He had become too well-known a local character to leave the police puzzling over the source of the tip-offs. Any one of them from the Commissioner downward could

put two and two together and make it four.

The phone yelped and Riley came on. "I've got those two addresses." He read them out while Harper made a note of them, then said, "The unknown caller hasn't been traced but Ledsom now thinks there's nothing to his message. They've found a fellow roughly corresponding to your description who gave Alderson some lip in the mid-morning. There were several witnesses and the caller in all probability was one of those."

"What was this squabbler doing at 4 P. M.?"

"He's in the clear. He was miles away and can prove it."

"Mm-m-m! All right, I'll go take a look around and hope my luck holds out."

"*Is* it luck?" asked Riley pointedly.

"Bad luck to my way of thinking," said Harper. "If you had fathered ten sets of twins, you'd appreciate without being told that some men can be afflicted."

"More likely I'd appreciate that some guys know how," Riley retorted. "And that's the trouble with you —so go to it!"

He faded off the screen. Harper sighed for the third time, tucked the slip of paper with its addresses into a vest pocket, spoke to Moira.

"I'll phone each day to see what's doing. If you can't handle something urgent and important you'll have to nurse it until I ring through."

"Yes, Mr. Harper."

"And if anyone turns up to pinch me tell them they're too late—I'm on the lam."

"Oh, Mr. Harper!"

Ruth Alderson proved to be a pretty blonde with sad eyes. Obviously she was still in much of a mental whirl.

Sitting opposite her and idly turning his hat in his hands, Harper said, "I hate to trouble you at such a time, Mrs. Alderson, but it is necessary. I have a special interest in this case. I found your husband and was the last to speak to him."

"Did he—?" She swallowed hard, stared at him pathetically. "Did he . . . suffer much?"

"It was all very quick. He was too dazed to feel pain. He talked of you then kind of faded away. 'Betty,' he said, 'Betty.'" Then he was gone." He frowned in puzzlement, added, "But your name is Ruth."

"He always called me Betty. Said it suited me. He made a pet name of it."

She put on a sudden tearfulness, covered her face with her hands, made no sound. He watched her quietly a while.

When she had recovered, he said, "There's a slight chance you might be able to help find the rat who did it."

"How?" she asked helplessly.

"Tell me, did Bob have any enemies?"

She considered the question,

gathering her thoughts with difficulty. "He arrested a number of people. Some went to jail. I don't suppose they loved him for that."

"Did any of them promise to get him when they came out?"

"If they did, he never mentioned it to me. It isn't the sort of thing he would tell." She paused, went on, "Four years ago he caught a man named Josef Grundoff and Bob said that when he was sentenced Grundoff swore to kill the judge."

"But he did not threaten your husband?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"You cannot recall any occasion on which somebody has menaced your husband specifically?"

"No, I can't."

"Nor any time when extraordinary resentment has been shown as a result of him doing his duty?"

"He had wordy arguments twice a week," she said wearily. "He often came home riled about someone. But as far as I can tell it was the normal give and take between the police and the public. I know of nobody who hated him enough to kill him."

"Only this Grundoff?"

"Grundoff only threatened the judge."

"I don't like pestering you this way, Mrs. Alderson, but can you recall any incident that seemed to worry your husband even if only temporarily? Any small happening no matter how insignificant at any time in the past?"

"Not in connection with his police duties," she replied. A faint smile came into her features. "All his bothers were domestic ones. He was a bag of nerves when my babies were due."

Harper nodded understanding, continued with, "One more angle. It is imperative that I try it. Please forgive me, won't you?"

"What do you mean?" Her eyes widened.

"You are an attractive person. Mrs. Alderson. Did Bob earn anyone's enmity by marrying you?"

She flushed and gave back strongly, "The idea is quite ridiculous."

"Not at all. Such things have happened. They will happen again and again. Jealousy is perhaps the oldest motive for murder. It feeds upon itself, unseen, unsuspected. You might well have been admired and desired without realizing it."

"I don't think so."

"Since your marriage has any male friend or acquaintance shown undue attention toward you or displayed more than average friendship?" He saw the revulsion rising in her mind, knew that he could have expressed himself more tactfully, added with haste, "I do not expect you to be aware of an unconfessed lover. I am asking you to help seek a possible killer."

She cooled down, said dully, "There is nobody."

"When you first met Bob did you leave anybody for his sake?"

"I did not. I was free and unattached."

"Thank you, Mrs. Alderson." He stood up, glad to be at the end of

the matter. "I apologize most sincerely for subjecting you to all this. And I really do appreciate your coöperation." He followed her to the front door, paused there, patted her gently on the shoulder. "Nothing anyone can say is adequate. Actions speak louder than words. You have my card. Anytime I can help please call on me to do so. I shall consider it a privilege."

"You are very kind," she murmured.

He got into his car, watched her close the door, said to himself savagely, "Damn! Damn!"

A mile down the road he stopped beside a phone booth and called Ledsom.

"So it's you," said the police captain, not visibly overjoyed. "What d'you want this time?"

"Some information."

"About what?"

"A character named Josef Grundoff."

"You're doing fine, digging up that hoodlum," Ledsom commented. "I wouldn't have thought of him myself."

"Why not?"

"He got twenty years for second-degree murder. It will be a long, long time before he's out."

"Is that all?" asked Harper.

"How much more do you want?"

"Official reassurance that he's still inside. Maybe he has escaped."

"We'd have been advised of it. They'd send out fliers within twenty-four hours."

"Do you think it worth checking?" Harper persisted. "Just in case some notice has gone astray?"

"I can do that in five minutes." Ledsom became crabbed and demanded, "How did you get hold of Grundoff's name, anyway?"

"From Mrs. Alderson."

The other registered surprise. "Surely she hasn't told you that Grundoff—?"

"She said only that he'd sworn to get the judge," Harper chipped in. "So it seemed to me possible that he might have had Alderson's name on his list as well."

"He had no list. He was merely making tough talk. The judge said twenty years and Grundoff went nuts. That sort of thing happens often." He was silent a moment then continued, "I'll check all the same. It's one chance in a million but we can't overlook it. Call me back a bit later."

Harper phoned him from a diner twenty miles farther on.

"No luck," Ledsom informed. "Grundoff is still in the jug."

"Did he have any pals who might do his dirty work for him?"

"No. He was a lone wolf."

"Do you think he may have made friends in clink who've been released and started tending his affairs?"

"Not on your life," scoffed Ledsom. "No ex-con is going to shoot up a cop merely to please some lag still inside. There would have to be money in it, big money. Grundoff couldn't dig up ten bucks."

"Thanks," said Harper glumly. "So that's another wrong tree up which I've barked. Oh, well, press on regardless."

"To where?"

"That girl who was in the Thunderbug. Did you learn any more about her?"

"Yes. Her boy friend is in the armed forces and serving overseas. She has no relative with a police record, no bad egg in the family. Helps us a lot, doesn't it?"

"How about her protecting a girl friend who, perhaps, is afflicted with a trigger-happy lover?"

"How about pigs taking wings? The follow-up has been good and thorough. Her entire circle of relatives, neighbors and friends is in the clear."

"All right, keep your hair on. I'm only a major suspect trying to establish my pristine purity."

Ledsom let go a loud snort and cut off. Evidently lack of progress was trying his patience.

The second address was that of the central house in an old-fashioned but still imposing terrace of substantially built property. The road was wide, quiet, tree-lined and had an air of stuffy respectability. Harper went up six steps, thumbed the bell-stud.

A tall, good-looking youth of about eighteen answered the door, eyed him quizzically.

"Miss Jocelyn Whittingham in?" Harper asked, trying to sound official or at least semiofficial.

"No." The other's mind confirmed the truth of that but went on to whisper to itself, *"Joyce doesn't want to see anybody. Who is this muscle-bound ape? Another nosey cop? Or a reporter? Joyce is fed up answering questions. Why don't they leave her alone?"*

"Any idea when she'll be back?"

"No."

That was a lie. The girl had promised to return by six.

"Hm-m-m!" Harper glanced up and down the road in the manner of one idly wondering what to do next. In deceptively casual tones he tried to hand the other a mental wallop. "Ever plugged a state trooper?"

No alarm-bell rang in the opposing brain. The youth's thoughts swirled confusedly while he doubted his own ears.

"Have I ever *what?*"

"Sorry," said Harper, knowing his blow had gone wide of the mark. "I was thinking out loud about something else. When do you suppose I could see Miss Whittingham?"

"I don't know."

Same lie again.

"Too bad." Harper registered indecision.

"What d'you want to see her about?" inquired the youth.

"A personal matter."

"Well, she isn't in and I don't know when she'll be in."

"Suppose I call back between six and seven?"

"Please yourself." He showed facial indifference while his mind nursed the notion that the visitor could go jump in the lake.

"All right, I'll try again later."

The youth nodded, shut the door. He was not sufficiently interested even to ask Harper's name. He was devoid of guilt and bored by the affairs of his sister Miss Jocelyn Whittingham.

Harper spent an hour strolling aimlessly around the town while his car was greased and serviced in a central garage. At twenty to six he returned on foot to the road, stationed himself by a bus stop fifty yards from the house, kept watch for the girl's homecoming.

He had only a rough description of his quarry but needed no more than that. One question would serve to stimulate self-identification voluntarily or involuntarily. There is no way of preventing the brain from registering its negatives or affirmatives no matter how great the desire to distort it.

Once the girl got inside that house the puzzle then would be how to gain an interview contrary to her wishes. If she flatly refused to see him, he had no power to compel her to do so. In such circumstances his only positive tactic would be to cajole the local police into bringing her in for further questioning. They would not do that without excellent reason and it was distasteful to him to invent a reason.

A face-to-face interview was imperative. If she were indoors, he could stand there all night picking up her thoughts and sorting them

out from other nearby thoughts with no difficulty whatsoever. He could, if he wished, spy upon her mind for a week.

It would do him not the slightest bit of good so long as her mind and its thinking processes moved only in channels having nothing to do with the case in hand. Questions were necessary to force her brain onto the case and make it reveal any cogent evidence it might be hiding. A vocal stimulus was required. To provide it he must ask her about this and that, drawing useful conclusions from all points where her thoughts contradicted her words.

Twice while he waited a girl walked past and momentarily captured his attention. So long as they did not mount the steps to the house he made no attempt to identify them mentally. He had his code of ethics developed since early childhood; he did not listen to private musings except when circumstances impelled him to do so. Of course, he could not avoid hearing the sudden cry of an alarmed conscience or a loud call for help such as Alderson had broadcast. But the muted voice of a passing mind, lacking the amplitude of defensive untruths, went by him unheard. He merely watched those girls until they had gone beyond the house and departed from sight.

A few minutes later a third girl came from the farther end of the road. She, too, ignored the house, continued straight on and rounded the far corner.

A bus pulled up at the stop, discharged four passengers and rolled away. One of them, a tall, sallow man, eyed him curiously.

"It'll be half an hour before there's another."

"Yes, I know."

The other shrugged, crossed the road, entered the house facing the stop. Harper moved some distance down the road where he could keep watch without being snooped upon from the windows by the sallow man.

At five to six a girl entered the road from the end nearest his former post, walked hurriedly along with a sharp *click-click* of high heels. She was of medium height, fresh-featured, plump and about twenty. Without glancing around or noticing Harper she climbed the steps to the house, felt in her handbag for a key.

From seventy yards away Harper probed at her, seeking confirmation of her identity. The result was shocking. The precise instant his mind touched hers she became aware of the contact and he in his turn knew that she was aware. She dropped the handbag in her flurry, bent and grabbed for it as he started to run toward her.

Getting the bag, she fumbled inside it with frantic haste while his feet pounded heavily along the sidewalk. Her eyes held a luminous glare as she found the key, stabbed it at the door. Perspiration beaded the running Harper's broad features while his right hand pawed under

his left arm and his legs continued to race.

The key slid in and turned. Harper stopped at ten yards distance, leveled his gun and and squeezed its butt. The thing went *spat-spat-spat* with such swiftness that it sounded like somebody tearing a foot of canvas. The noise was not loud. A stream of match-head sized steel balls hit the target dead center.

Miss Jocelyn Whittingham let go the key, sank to her knees without a sound, keeled over with her head against the door. Harper stood sweating, watched the blood run out of her hair and listened to her brain packing up for keeps.

He stared around, saw no onlookers, no witnesses. The brief plinking of gunfire had attracted nobody's attention. He left her lying there and paced swiftly up the road. His face was strained and wet as he retrieved his car and got out of town fast.

IV

The police must have moved fast and skillfully. He had covered a mere three hundred miles before he was advertised on the air and in the newssheets. He was having supper in a cheap hashery when he got an evening paper carrying the news.

WANTED FOR MURDER, it said. There followed a fairly accurate description of himself and of his car, complete with tag number. He cursed underbreath as he read it. There were twenty customers in the place, most of them long-distance truckers. Half of them had read or were reading the same sheet. Some were unaware of his existence; the others glanced at him casually and without suspecting that the subject of the report was here under their very eyes. He knew their lack of suspicion with absolute certainty and that was about the only advantage he possessed.

Outside, in plain view, stood the car. Its numbers seemed to swell and grow enormous even as he looked at them. Three big men in denims lumbered past its rear end without giving it so much as a second look, got into an adjacent machine and pulled away. His luck might hold out like that for some time but it just couldn't last forever. Sooner or later the number plate would be spotted waiting somewhere, by somebody with sharp eyes and a good memory for numbers.

He could leave the car where it was and help himself to another. When you're wanted for murder a mere theft can't add to the grief. But to do that would have compensating disadvantages. The number of the stolen car would be broadcast in short time, leaving him no better off than before. Moreover, right now the law did not know whether he was heading for Peking or Pernambuco but a car-swap would give away the direction of his escape and get every hick deputy on the lookout for him ahead. Also, it would reveal that he had crossed state lines to evade arrest, a federal offense that might bring in the F.B.I.

The F.B.I. needed bringing in. Of that he was more than positive. But he did not relish the notion of the F.B.I. taking part in a nation-wide hunt for himself, especially since someone over-excitable might copy his recent tactic by shooting first and asking questions afterward. He was in the most peculiar position of wanting to get to the F.B.I. before they could get to him.

The means by which the law had tagged him as the culprit could be guessed quite easily. Ledsom's knowledge that he was visiting the girl. Her brother's description of the caller at the door. The sallow man's evidence about the lounger at the bus stop. Above all, the missiles in the body, like unto bullets from no other gun.

Stewing it over he could not help wondering whether Ledsom now felt certain that he knew who had killed Alderson. It would be a very natural tendency on that officer's part to assume the same hand in both cases even though different weapons had been used.

What he liked least about this sudden howl for a man named Harper was not that it boosted the official hunt for him, but that it might start an unofficial search. The forces of law and order should not be the only ones to take deep interest in the datum that he had killed Miss Jocelyn Whittingham. Certain others undoubtedly would be after him, anxious to know how it all came about, anxious to deal with him before it was too late. Those three fellows in the Thunderbug, for instance.

Swallowing the rest of his coffee he got out of the place as quickly as he could without drawing attention to his urgency. He waited nervily by a row of alk-pumps while his tank was filled, then drove at top pace into the twilight that rapidly became night, a dark, moonless night. He had more than five hundred miles yet to go.

At four-forty in the morning, with the pale halo of dawn beginning to show in the east, some wideawake sharp-eye either read his plates or chased him on general principles.

He reached a half-mile stretch of road under repair, perforce crawled at fifteen over the torn surface. A watchman's hut stood at the end, and beside it a car with side-lamps glowing. He passed the hut, accelerated, gained speed and a mile and a half lead when the parked car came to life, shot out onto the road, went after him with siren blasting and spotlight blinking.

Harper could not hear a siren nor pick up following thoughts. He was too far ahead and too preoccupied with driving. He shoved the pedal down to the floorboards and let the machine leap ahead. If the pursuers were police, as their spotlight suggested, that alone would be enough to convince them that they were onto something worth running down.

There was no alternative other than letting them chase. If he was going to be taken in, it must be by

people who were peculiarly well-informed and knew how many beans make five. He was pretty certain that no county sheriff, no state, city or town police possessed the information that qualified them to become his captors.

Tires squealed, headlights swung and rocked as he took a couple of bends at breakneck speed. The car was powerful and fast, in tiptop condition, but the one behind might be even better. So far as he could judge from frequent glances at the rear-view mirror, the other machine did have a slight advantage because its winking spotlight seemed to be creeping up on him ever so gradually.

With his needle trembling at over ninety he tore through a crossroads, along a main artery darkened still more by large trees on both sides. The trees whizzed past like huge ghosts, arms out, transfixed by this nighttime pursuit.

There was no traffic other than his own car and the one behind. Far ahead and slightly to his right he could see the sky-glow from street lights of a sizable city, wondered whether he could make it that distance and, if so, what he'd do when he got there. Maybe if the ones behind came close enough in the next ten miles they'd start shooting. What to do then?

He rocked around another half-bend, momentarily lost the lights in the mirror which by now were less than a mile to the rear. His own beams swung briefly across the end of a track through thick timber. He swung into it so suddenly and recklessly that for a second or two he feared the machine would overturn.

Switching off all lamps he ploughed another fifty yards into complete blackness, meanwhile praying that he would not hit an invisible tree or dive into a hidden ditch. Twigs crackled and snapped under rolling wheels but luck remained with him. He braked, dropped a window, watched and listened.

The siren could be heard now. A prowl car, sure enough. By this time it was on top of the bend. Headlights slewed across the night as it came round and the next moment it thundered past, wailing as it went. Its passing was far too swift to enable Harper to see how many were within or to pick up a random thought.

He sat in darkness until he could see faint, diminished beams racing up a slope four miles away. Then he reversed, got back onto the road, made off in the way he had come. Reaching the crossroads over which he had recently blundered, he turned to the right, continued along this new route.

Without further incident he reached Washington late in the morning, planted the car in a park on the outskirts, took a bus into the city. There he found a phone and called the office.

Either the office visiscreen was out of order or had been switched off, for his own screen remained blank

and Moira's response was equally blank.

"Harper plant. Can I help you?"

"Only God can help me," he said. "This is your boss."

She let out a distinct gasp.

"What's so soul-shaking about that?" he demanded. "You have spoken to me many a time before."

"Yes, Mr. Harper. Of course, Mr. Harper." She sought desperately for words. "I didn't expect you just yet."

"Tsk!" He grinned wolfishly at the dead screen. "Why not? I told you I'd call, didn't I?"

"Certainly, Mr. Harper, but—"

"But *what?*"

She hadn't the vaguest idea what. She was tongue-tied and in a tangle.

"You've been reading the papers," he observed grimly. "But no matter. Has anything turned up?"

"Turned up?"

"Look, Moira, pay no attention to those dicks sitting on my desk. Listen to me: has anything come along in the mail that requires my personal handling?"

"N-n-no, Mr. Harper."

"Any complications I'm needed to clear up?"

"N-n-no."

"All right. Put one of those guys on the phone."

She got into a worse tangle. "I don't understand, Mr. Harper. There isn't—"

"Now, now, no lies!" he ordered.

At that point she gave up and he heard her say weakly to somebody else, "He knows you're here and insists in speaking to you."

There sounded a deep grunt that somehow conveyed disgust. Harper's screen suddenly cleared and showed a beefy face scowling at him.

Before the other could speak Harper said, "When I can't see a thing in my own office I know somebody doesn't want me to look. I also know Moira's been told to keep me on as long as she can while this call is being traced. Well, you're wasting your time for which suffering taxpayers are paying, of whom I am one. You pack up and get busy on the local sinners. Tell Riley I love him despite all his faults."

The face scowled more deeply. "Now see here, Harper—"

"Listen to me for once," continued Harper impatiently. "It may help persuade you that you're doing no good warming my blotter if I tell you I'm calling from Washington and that I'm making for F.B.I. headquarters to give myself up."

Incredulity expressed itself on the distant features. "You mean that?"

"Check with the F.B.I. in about fifteen minutes' time. They'll tell you they've got me."

He pronged the phone and walked out, joined the crowds on the sidewalk. He had covered two blocks when a tall, dark-haired, neatly dressed young man threw him a brief but penetrating glance in passing, did a swift double-take, continued a few yards beyond then turned and followed.

Harper strolled steadily on, smiling to himself as he filched data out

of the shadower's mind. Robert Slade, thirty-two, F.B.I. agent, obsessed by the notion that Harper bore a very close resemblance to Harper. The encounter was purely accidental but the boy intended to stick to the opportunity until he was sure enough to make a pinch.

Turning down a side street, Harper covered three more blocks, became a mite uncertain of his whereabouts. He was not very familiar with Washington. He stopped on a corner, lit a cigarette, gazed furtively over cupped hands, found Slade studiously examining a window full of panes-in-the-neck.

Ambling back he touched Slade's elbow, said, "Pardon me. I'm looking for F.B.I. headquarters. Can you direct me?"

It shook Slade more than if he'd suddenly stuck a gun in his belly.

"Why . . . er . . . yes, of course." His clear gray eyes betrayed uncertainty about his suspicions. His mind was saying, *Hell of a coincidence!*

"You're Robert Slade, aren't you?" inquired Harper, pleasantly conversational.

The other rocked back. "I am. You have the advantage of me, though. I don't recall knowing you."

"Would it do you any good to make an arrest?"

"What d'you mean?"

"I'm seeking your H.Q. You can show me the way. If you would like to call it a pinch, it's all right with me. I'm Wade Harper."

Slade took in a deep breath. "You're not kidding?"

"Why should I? Don't I look like Harper?"

"You sure do. And maybe you're fed up being mistaken for him. If so, there's little we can do about it."

"That can soon be settled. You have my prints on file." He felt under an arm. "Here's my gun. Don't let the comparison boys in the ballistics department lose it—I hope to get it back some day."

"Thanks." Openly baffled, Slade shoved it into a pocket, pointed down the street. "This way."

They moved along side by side. Slade made no suggestion of using his handcuffs, neither was he particularly wary. Harper's attitude had created within him a condition of chronic skepticism; he was inclined to think this capture would gain him no kudos because the captive was too self-possessed to be other than innocent.

Reaching the big building they went inside. Slade showed Harper into a small room, said, "Wait there a minute," and departed. The exit and the open street were within easy reach. There was no obstacle to an escape other than that provided by a hard-looking character on duty at the door.

Taking his ease in a pneumatic chair while he waited, Harper amused himself tracking Slade's mind. The agent went along a short corridor, entered an office, spoke to somebody there.

"I've just picked up Wade Harper. He's in room number four."

"By himself?"

"Yes."

"Are you cracked? He can make a dive and—"

"He was on his way here when I found him," interjected Slade, honestly refusing the credit for the grab. *"He wanted to come."*

"Holy smoke! There's something mighty funny about this." A pause, then, *"Bring him in here."*

Harper got up, walked along the passage, arrived at the door just as Slade opened it to come and get him. For the third successive time Slade was taken aback. He stood aside, silent and puzzled, while Harper marched boldly in, took a seat and gazed at the lean-faced man behind the desk. The latter returned his gaze and gave himself away without knowing it. William Pritchard, thirty-nine, area supervisor.

"Morning, Mr. Pritchard," said Harper with the cheerful air of a person who has not a worry in the world.

Pritchard blinked, marshaled his wits, said, "There's a call out for you. You're wanted for the murder of Jocelyn Whittingham."

"Yes, I know. I read the papers."

"Somebody's blundered," thought Pritchard, impressed by this coolness. *"He's got an alibi."* Clearing his throat, he asked, "Well, do you wish to say anything about it?"

"Plenty—but not to you."

"Why not to me?"

"No personal reason, I assure you. I'd like to talk to Sam Stevens."

"Go see where he is," Pritchard ordered after a little hesitation, deciding that one interlocutor was as good as another.

Slade went away, came back, informed, "Stevens is in Seattle."

The phone called shrilly, Pritchard picked it off his desk, said, "Yes? How did you know? Oh, he told you himself, did he? No, he wasn't fooling. He's here all right. He's in front of me right now." He racked the phone, stared hard at Harper. "You can't see Stevens. He isn't available."

"A pity. He could have got me somebody high up. I want to talk as high as I can get."

"Why?"

"I refuse to say."

Frowning disapproval, Pritchard leaned forward. "Did you or did you not shoot this Whittingham girl?"

"Yes, I did."

"All right. Are you willing to sign a confession to that effect?"

"No."

"You admit shooting her but you refuse to sign a confession?"

"That's right."

"Care to offer a reason?" Pritchard invited, studying him carefully.

"I've a good reason. I didn't kill her."

"But she's dead. Didn't you know that?"

Harper made two waves of a hand in manner suggesting that this was a minor point of little consequence.

"So you shot her but didn't kill her?" Pritchard persisted. "You put a dozen steel beads through her skull

but somehow refrained from committing homicide?"

"Correct."

That did it. Pritchard's and Slade's minds worked in perfect accord, weighed the evidence, reached a simultaneous verdict: not guilty of murder by reason of insanity.

Sighing deeply, Harper said, "Sam Stevens is the only boy I know in this outfit. He made a check on my plant once, about two years ago. He entered it on some sort of national security list which you people keep on file. He gave me a gun-permit and a bunch of bureaucratic instructions chief of which says I'm federal property the moment war breaks out. I become confiscated lock, stock and barrel."

"So?" prompted Pritchard, seeing no point in this.

"The Whittingham business has to do more or less with the same issue, namely, national security. Therefore I can talk only to somebody who'll know what I'm talking about."

"That would be Jameson," promptly whispered Pritchard's thoughts.

"Such as Jameson," Harper calmly added.

They reacted as though he had uttered a holy name in the unholy precincts of a cheap saloon.

"Or whoever is *his* boss," said Harper, for good measure.

With a touch of severity, Pritchard demanded, "You just said that Stevens is the only member of the F.B.I. known to you. So how do you know of Jameson? Come to that, how did you know *my* name?"

"He knew mine, too," put in Slade, openly itching for a plausible explanation.

"That's a problem I'll solve only in the presence of somebody way up top," said Harper. He smiled at Pritchard and inquired, "How's your body?"

"Eh?"

Out of the other's bafflement Harper extracted a clear and detailed picture of the body, said in helpful tones, "You have a fish-shaped birthmark on the inside of your left thigh."

"That's enough for me!" Pritchard stood up, badly worried. He said to Slade, "You keep an eye on this Houdini while I go see what Jameson says." He departed hurriedly.

Harper asked Slade, "May I have a sheet of paper, please?"

Extracting one from a drawer in the desk Slade slipped it across. He watched Harper take out a fountain pen and prepare to write. The confession after all, he thought. Definitely a nut who'd refuse a thing one moment and give it the next. Strange how even an intelligent man could go so completely off his rocker. An hereditary weakness, perhaps.

Ignoring these uncomplimentary ideas which assailed him as clearly as if they'd been shouted aloud, Harper waited a few moments then began to write. He scribbled with great rapidity, finished a short time before Pritchard's return.

"He won't see you," announced Pritchard with a that-is-that air.

"I know." Harper gave him the paper.

Glancing over it, Pritchard popped his eyes, ran out full tilt. Slade stared after him, turned a questioning gaze upon Harper.

"That was a complete and accurate transcript of their conversation," Harper informed. "Want to lay any bets against him seeing me now?"

"No," said Slade, developing the willies. "I don't care to throw away good money."

Jameson proved to be a middle-aged bull of a man with a thick mop of curly gray hair. His eyes were blue and cold, his manner that of one long accustomed to the exercising of authority. Sitting erect in his chair he kept one strong forefinger firmly planted on the sheet of paper lying on the desk before him. He wasted no time in getting down to business.

"How did you do it?"

"Easily enough. I took aim, fired and down she slid."

"I'm not asking about that." The finger tapped impatiently. "I am referring to this."

"Oh, the eavesdropping." Harper pretended to gain an understanding that he had not lost in the first place. "I did it in the same way the enemy might be able to do it anytime he wants to know what we're up to."

"You may go," Jameson said to Pritchard. "I'll call you when I want you." He waited until the door had closed, fixed full attention on the other. "Are you categorically asserting that agents of other powers are able to read our minds at will?"

"No."

"Then why make such a suggestion?"

"I'm merely putting over the theory that what one can do another can do," said Harper. "It's a notion I've nursed for years. So far I've been unable to find any evidence in support."

"Obviously you are talking about something *you* can do. What can you do?"

"That," said Harper, pointing to the paper.

Jameson was no fool. He had got the idea at the start but found considerable difficulty in absorbing it. The manifest explanation was proving indigestible. He tried again to cope with it, failed, decided to put the issue fairly and squarely.

"It would take a telepath to play these sort of tricks."

"Nobody else but," agreed Harper.

"Whoever heard of one?" asked Jameson, battling his own incredulity.

Harper merely shrugged.

Switching his little intercom-board, Jameson spoke into its mike. "Is Miss Keyes there? Put her on. Miss Keyes, I want you to type a column of twenty-eight digit numbers chosen at random. Bring it to me immediately you have finished." He switched off, gave Harper a challenging look, poked the paper toward

him and said, "See what you can do with that."

"Now I've got to search through the general mess for somebody concocting meaningless numbers," Harper complained. "I may miss the first one or two while I'm feeling around."

"Never mind. Do the best you can. If you get only a quarter of them, it will convince me that the age of miracles has not passed."

Harper wrote down eighteen of them plus the last two digits of the nineteenth. Taking the paper without comment, Jameson waited for Miss Keyes. She arrived shortly, gave him her list, departed with no visible surprise. If she'd been ordered to wear her machine's dust-cover as a hat, she would have done it without question. Jameson compared the two columns.

Finally he said, "This is worse than a bomb in the Pentagon. Nothing is private property any more."

"I know."

"How did it happen?"

"Can a man with a harelip tell you how it happened? All I know is that I was born that way. For a few years I assumed that everyone else was precisely like myself. Being a child it took quite a time to learn that it was not so, to learn that I was a one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind, to learn that I could be feared and that the feared are hated."

"There must be a reason for it," said Jameson.

"Does it matter?"

"It matters a lot. You are a freak created by some very special arrangement of circumstances. If we could detail those circumstances fully and completely, we could estimate the likelihood of them being duplicated elsewhere. That in turn would give us a fair idea of whether there are any more like you and, if so, who's got them."

Harper said quietly and soberly, "I don't think that matters a damn either. Not any more."

"Why doesn't it?"

"Because I made mental contact with Jocelyn Whittingham and she promptly called me an insulting name. So I shot her."

"You considered that adequate motive for murder?" prompted Jameson.

"In view of the name, yes!"

"What did she call you?"

"A Terrestrial bastard," informed Harper, hard-eyed.

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For a full two minutes Jameson sat there like one paralyzed. His thoughts milled wildly around and he was momentarily oblivious of the fact that the other could read them as easily as if they were flashed in neons.

Then he asked, "Are you sure of that?"

"The only person in the world who can be positive about someone else's mind is a telepath," assured Harper. "I'll tell you something else: I shot her because I knew I couldn't kill her. It was a physical impossibility."

"How d'you make that out?" Jameson asked.

"No living man could harm Jocelyn Whittingham—because she was already dead."

"Now see here, we have a detailed police report—"

"I killed something else," said Harper, with devastating effect. "The thing that had already slaughtered her."

Jameson promptly went into another whirl. He had a cool, incisive mind used to dealing with highly complicated but essentially normal problems. This was the first time within his considerable experience that he had been slapped in the face by a sample of the supernormal. Even now he strove to cope with it in rational, everyday terms. It was about as easy as trying to use a yardstick to measure the distance to the Moon.

One thing surprised the observing Harper, namely, that much of the other's confusion stemmed from the fact that he lacked certain information he could reasonably be expected to possess. High up in the bureaucratic hierarchy Jameson might be, evidently he was not high enough. All the same, he had enough pull to take the matter farther and get some action.

Harper said, "You've got the bald account from police sources. It isn't enough. I'd like to give you my side of the story."

"Go ahead," invited Jameson,

glad to concentrate on something that might clear up the muddle.

Commencing with his pickup of the dying Alderson's broadcast, Harper took it through to the end.

Then he said, "No ordinary human being is ever aware of his mind being read. He gains no sense of physical contact that might serve to warn him. He remains completely unconscious of being pried into. I have been absorbing your thoughts the whole time we've been here together; your senses have not registered the probe in any way whatever, have they?"

"No," Jameson admitted.

"And if I had not told you that I'm a telepath, and satisfied you as to the truth of it, you'd have found no cause to suspect that your mind is wide open to me, would you?"

"No."

"Well," went on Harper reminiscently, "the instant I touched the mind inside Jocelyn Whittingham it felt the contact, knew whence it came, took wild alarm and hated me with a most appalling ferocity. In the same instant I detected all its reactions and recognized it as nonhuman. The contact did not last a fiftieth of a second but it was enough. I knew it as nothing born of woman. I knew it as surely as your own eyes can tell you that a rattlesnake is not a mewling babe."

"If it wasn't human," inquired Jameson, with much skepticism, "what was it?"

"That I don't know."

"Of what shape or form?"

"The shape and form of the Whittingham girl. It *had* to be that. It was using her body."

Disbelief suddenly swamped Jameson's brain. "I will concede that you are either a genuine telepath or the practitioner of some new and superb trick that makes you look like one. But that doesn't mean I have to swallow this murder story. What your defense boils down to is that you shot a corpse animated by God knows what. No jury on earth will give such an incredible plea a moment's consideration."

"I'll never face a jury," Harper told him.

"I think you will—unless you drop dead beforehand. The law must take its course."

"For the first time in my naughty life I'm above the law," said Harper, impressively confident. "What's more, the law itself is going to say so."

"How do you reach that remarkable conclusion?"

"The law isn't interested only in the death of Jocelyn Whittingham. It is even more concerned about the slaying of Trooper Alderson, he having been a police officer. And you can't pin *that* one on me if you try from now to Christmas. Reason why you can't is because I didn't do it."

"Then who did?" Jameson challenged.

"A-a-ah!" Harper eyed him meaningfully. "Now you're getting right down to the heart of the matter. Who killed Alderson and why?"

"Well?"

"Three men in a Thunderbug. Three men who, in all probability, resented Alderson's intrusion at a critical moment when the Whittingham girl was being taken over."

"Taken over?"

"Don't stare at me like that. How do I know precisely what occurred? All I do know is that something must have happened, something did happen to produce the result I discovered."

Jameson looked baffled.

"Three men," continued Harper, giving it emphasis. "In green suits, matching green ties, gray shirts and collars. Three men wearing uniforms with which nobody is familiar. Why haven't those uniforms been recognized?"

"Because they were not uniforms at all," Jameson hazarded. "They merely looked that way, having a sort of official cut, let us say."

"Or because they were uniforms that nobody knows about," suggested Harper. "Because the government hasn't said anything to anybody. Because officialdom hasn't breathed a word to a soul. Is the taxpayer always told where his money is going?"

"What are you getting at?" Jameson demanded.

"We're pulling the Moon to pieces and nobody thinks anything of it. It's been going on long enough to have become commonplace. A Moon-boat is now about as remarkable as a Cunarder used to be. We're so sophisticated about such matters that we've lost the capacity for surprise."

"I'm aware of all this, since I live in the present," said Jameson, a trifle impatiently. "What of it?"

"Who's cooked up notions of exploiting Venus or Mars? Have they sent anyone there to take a look and, if so, when was it? Are they due back by now? Were they three men in green uniforms with gray shirts?"

"My God!" ejaculated Jameson, becoming visibly strained.

"Three men went somewhere, got more than they bargained for, involuntarily brought it back to spread around. That's my theory. Try it for size."

"If I approach the proper quarter with such a fantasy, they'll think I'm cracked."

"I know why you fear that; I can read your mind, remember? Firstly, you personally know of no space-expedition, have heard not the slightest hint of one. Secondly, you cannot credit my diagnosis. Right?"

"Fat lot of use denying it."

"Then look at it this way: I know even if you don't that for a fragmentary moment I touched a genuinely alien mind in possession of a human body. That entity could not have solidified out of sheer nothingness. It must have arrived in some concealed manner. Somebody must have brought it. The only possible suspects are those three men."

"Go on," encouraged Jameson.

"We have not the vaguest notion how long those three have been gal-

livanting around. Maybe for a week, maybe for a year." He fixed his listener with an accusative stare. "Therefore, the Whittingham girl may not be the first or by any means the last. That trio may have given the treatment to a hundred and be busily tending to a hundred more while we're sitting here making useless noises. If we continue to sit quietly by, they'll enslave half the world before we wake up."

Jameson fidgeted and gloomed hesitantly at the phone.

"Brockman of Special Services," said Harper. "He's the guy you've got in mind right now." He made an urgent gesture. "All right, get through to him. What is there to lose? Perhaps he'll tell you what he wouldn't dream of telling me. Ask him if an expedition is out in space and when it's due back."

"Ten to one he'll ignore the question and want to know why I'm asking," Jameson protested. "I can hardly offer him your notions."

"He'll try that only if there's no such expedition," Harper asserted. "But if in fact there is one, and it's a top secret, your query will make his mustache drop off, if he has a mustache. He'll hotfoot over to find how the news got out. Try him and let's hear what he says."

Doubtfully, Jameson picked up the phone, said in resigned tones, "Get me Special Services Department, Mr. Brockman."

When the call went through Jameson spoke in the reluctant manner of one compelled to announce the arrest of Snow White and all the seven dwarfs.

"We're onto something peculiar here. I won't take up your time with the full details. It would help considerably if you can tell me whether a new space-venture has been made in secret." He listened a bit while his expression gradually went flat. "Yes, it's highly important that we should know one way or the other. Will you? Thanks a lot!" He planted the phone.

"He doesn't know?" said Harper.

"Correct."

"Should he know?"

"I assumed that he would. I could be wrong. The more highly confidential a piece of knowledge, the fewer entrusted with it and the farther we'll have to seek for an answer, if there is a satisfactory answer." Taking a large blue handkerchief from his breast pocket he mopped his brow although he was not perspiring. "Brockman said he will call back as soon as he can make it."

"It would save valuable time to ring the White House and ask the President. Don't tell me *he* won't know what's going on."

Jameson was shocked. "Look, leave me to handle this in my own way, will you?"

"Sure. But the longer we take over this the sooner you may start handling things in some unearthly way." Harper registered a sour grin. "Not having my gun I'd then be forced to strangle you with my own

hands—if I could do so without *you* taking *me* over."

"Shut up!" ordered Jameson, looking slightly sick. He scowled at the phone which promptly emitted a yelp. The unexpectedness of it made him jerk in his chair. He snatched it up, said, "Well?" let half a dozen expressions run over his face. Then he racked the phone, came to his feet, said, "They want us over there immediately."

"And we know why, don't we?"

Offering no response, Jameson led the way down, got into a car driven by an agent who resembled a cross between a haberdashery salesman and a wrestling champ. They rolled ten blocks, went up to the twentieth floor of a glass and concrete building, entered an office in which waited four serious men.

These four glanced briefly at Harper without recognizing him despite all the recent publicity. Apparently they rarely got around to reading the newspapers or watching the video.

The oldest of the quartet snapped at Jameson, "What's all this about a space-expedition?"

Seeing nothing for it but to pass the buck, Jameson indicated his companion. "This is Wade Harper. State police have him tagged as a murderer. He came to us an hour or so ago. My query arose from his story."

Four pairs of eyes shifted to Harper. "What story?"

These men were edgy and Harper could see it. He could also see why they had the willies: they were deeply concerned about reserved data becoming public property. And he could see, too, that for the moment Jameson had forgotten his special aptitude. It isn't easy for people to become accustomed to an almost mythical abnormality in the thoroughly normal-looking.

Addressing the oldest man present, he filched his name and said, "Mr. King, I know for a fact that eighteen months ago we sent a ship to Venus, the nearest planet. That ship was the result of twenty years of governmental experimentation. It bore a crew of three hand-picked men. Its return has two alternative dates. If the crew found conditions unbearable, the ship should have been back last November. If conditions permit them to exist and indulge a little exploration, they're due in mid-June, about five weeks hence. The fact that they are not known to have returned is officially considered encouraging. The government awaits their arrival before giving the news to the world."

King heard all this with facial impassivity that he fondly imagined concealed his boiling thoughts. He asked with forced calmness, "And how did you obtain this information?"

It was too much for Jameson who had listened with amazement to the recital and been awakened by it. "This man is telepathic, Mr. King. He has picked the facts out of your mind."

"Indeed?" King was openly skeptical. "Then how do you account for the nature of your call to Brockman twenty minutes ago?"

"I suspected it then," Harper chipped in. "But now I *know.*" He studied King levelly, added, "At the moment you're thinking that if the world is to be afflicted with such creatures as telepaths it might be a good thing to put them out of harm's way, and fast."

"You know too much," said King. "No government could function with any degree of security with people like you hanging around."

"I've been hanging around enough years to make me wish they were fewer. We haven't had a revolution yet."

"But we have a suspected murderer dragged into a government office by a departmental director of the F.B.I.," said King, making it sound like a legitimate grievance. "It is certainly a new and previously unheard-of practice. I hope they had the forethought to search you for concealed weapons."

By Harper's side Jameson reddened and interjected, "Pardon me, Mr. King, but there is far more to this issue than the aspect that seems to irritate you."

"Such as what?"

"The ship is back," Harper put in.

All four jerked as though stabbed with needles.

King demanded, "When did it return? Where did it land?"

"I don't know."

They relaxed, suddenly confident that Harper was talking through the rear of his neck.

"Then how do you know?"

"He found a trace of the crew," informed Jameson.

Harper contradicted carefully, "No, I don't think I did. I think the crew is dead."

"So the crew died and you've not the faintest notion of where their ship is planted?" inquired King. "Nevertheless you *know* that the ship has returned?"

"I'd bet a million dollars on it."

"It made the trip all on its own-some? A unique spatial convulsion flung it thirty million miles or more across the void and dumped it some place unknown to all and unsuspected by anyone but you?"

"Your sarcasm is pointless, doesn't help any and furthermore it gives me a pain in the neck," snapped Harper, becoming tough. "The ship was brought here by a bunch of Venusians. How d'you like that, eh?"

King didn't like it at all. His mind unhesitatingly rejected the bald statement, started sorting out a dozen objections and deciding which to voice first.

The bespectacled man on his right took advantage of the pause to chip in and speak to Harper as one would to a wayward child.

"Piloting a spaceship is not an easy matter."

"No, Mr. Smedley, I guess it isn't."

"It's highly technical. It requires a great deal of know-how."

"That," said Harper, "is precisely the hell of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Anyone who can highjack a ship and run it forthwith, without any tuition, can take over anything else we've got with as little trouble." He gave them a few seconds to stew the point, then added for good measure, "Bit by bit, piece by piece, until they have everything and we have nothing—not even our souls."

"That idea is detestable," said King, beginning to feel cold.

"It should be," agreed Harper. "And further, you'd do well to abandon this latest notion you're concocting."

"What notion?"

"That I'm the agent of a scheming gang across the ocean who, in some mysterious way, are trying to pull a fast one. All that feuding is over as from today. They're in the same mess along with the rest of humanity and the sooner that's realized the better. They're going to become just as scared as I am right now."

"I doubt it. They'll be equally suspicious. They'll blame us for trying to disturb the world with a better and bigger bogey."

"It won't matter a cuss who blames who when we're no longer human. Come to that, we won't be mentally capable of apportioning blame."

King argued stubbornly, "It seems to me that you're taking a devil of a lot for granted on the basis of very little evidence. That evidence may be real enough to you. To us it comes secondhand. Even if we accept Jameson's statement that you are a genuine telepath, even if we take at face value the symptoms of it which you have displayed in this room, the fact remains that you're just as capable as anyone else of imagining things. I can conceive no logical reason for supposing that a telepath is impervious to delusions. Do you seriously expect us to alert the entire defenses of this country on the strength of your story?"

"No, I don't," admitted Harper.

"Then what do you expect of us?"

"Firstly, I wanted official confirmation of my suspicion that a ship really has been sent somewhere beyond the Moon. That is why I came all the way here and avoided being picked up by local police who know too little and bark too much. Somehow or other I *had* to learn about that ship."

"Secondly?"

"I now expect action within reasonable limits. If it produces the proof you require, I expect further action on a national scale."

"It is far easier to talk about getting proof than to go out and dig it up. If proof exists, why didn't you find it yourself and bring it with you? Surely your own commonsense should tell you that the wilder a story the more proof it requires to make convincing?"

"I know," said Harper. "And I reckon I could have got enough to make you leap out of your shirt if only I'd possessed an item hidden in your top-secret files."

"To what are you referring?"

"The photographs of those three spacemen." He eyed King and his confreres with the sorrowful reproof of one surprised by their inability to perceive the obvious. "We have a witness who got a good, close look at two of those three and made careful note of them. Show him your pictures. If he says they're the boys, that settles it. The balloon goes up next minute."

Jameson waggled his eyebrows and put in, "Yes, that is the logical move. It should decide the matter one way or the other. We can do better than that, too. We can remove any element of doubt."

"How?" inquired King.

"That Thunderbug must have come from somewhere. It may have traveled hundreds of miles before reaching the fateful spot. A dozen, twenty or forty people may have noticed it and the three men with it. I can put agents on the job of tracing that back-track and finding the witnesses. If all of them say the same thing, namely, that those three men are your missing pilots—" He let it die out, thereby making it sound highly sinister.

"To enable you to do that," King pointed out, "we would have to get those photographs released from secret files and provide you with a large number of copies."

"Of course."

"But that means the general dissemination of reserved data."

Harper emitted a loud groan, rubbed his jaw and recited the names of the twelve apostles.

Staring at him distastefully, King said, "I'll see what the appropriate department decides."

"While you're at it," Harper suggested, "you can persuade some other appropriate department to seize the body of Jocelyn Whittingham and subject it to an expert autopsy. I don't know whether that will tell us anything, but it might."

"I'll see what they decide," repeated King. He went out with visible unwillingness. The remaining three fidgeted and registered the discomfort of men compelled to hold a buck that cannot be passed.

"Have you got a gun?" Harper asked Jameson.

"Yes."

"Better hold onto it good and tight."

"Why?"

"Because if he gets nowhere with the higher-ups I'm going to run amok."

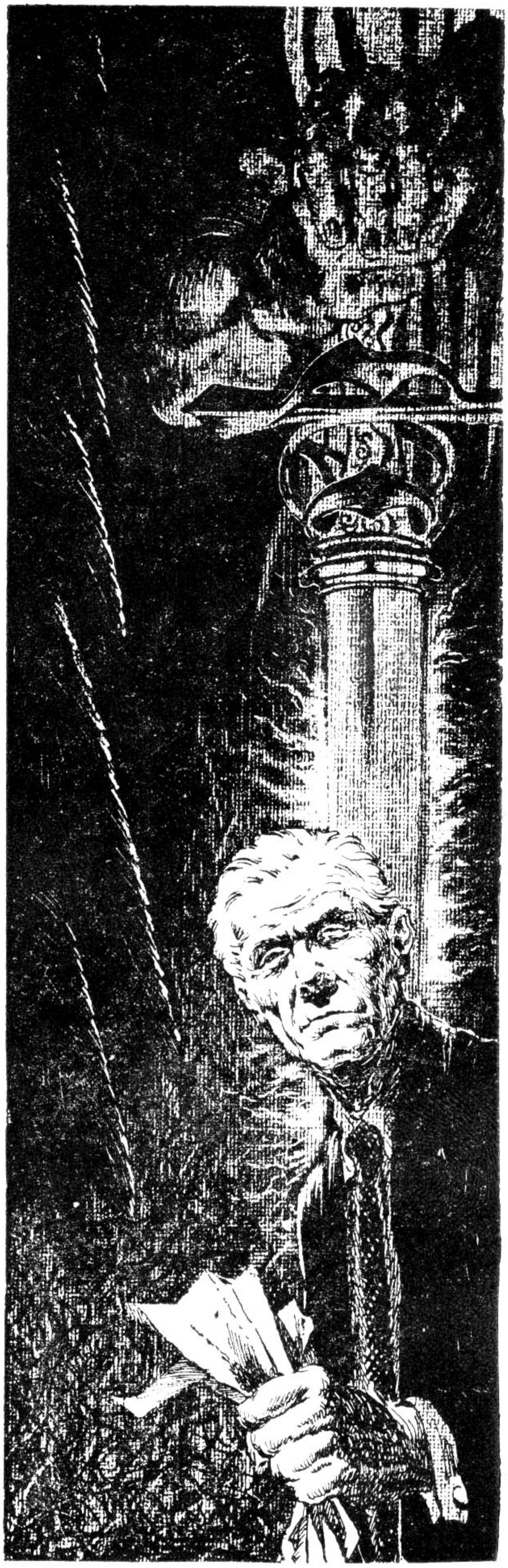
"You'd better not!" warned Jameson.

"I'd rather die quickly in a fracas here than slowly some place else," said Harper fervently.

The three watched him with open apprehension.

TO BE CONTINUED

JUDGMENT DAY



If a man pulls a trigger knowing what a gun is, and how powder works, and what bullets can do, that's murder. But if he pulls a psychological trigger —other people wouldn't accuse him of murdering a planet, would they?

BY L. SPRAGUE de CAMP

Illustrated by Freas

It took me a long time to decide whether to let the earth live. Some might think this an easy decision. Well, it was and it wasn't. I wanted one thing, while the mores of my culture said to do the other.

This is a decision that few have to make. Hitler might give orders for the execution of ten million, and Stalin orders that would kill another ten million. But neither could send the world up in a puff of flame by a few marks on a piece of paper.

Only now has physics got to the point where such a decision is possible. Yet, with due modesty, I don't think my discovery was inevitable.

Somebody might have come upon it later—say in a few centuries, when such things might be better organized. My equation was far from obvious. All the last three decades' developments in nuclear physics have pointed away from it.

My chain-reaction uses *iron*, the last thing that would normally be employed in such a series. It's at the bottom of the atomic energy-curve. Anything else can be made into iron with a release of energy, while it takes energy to make iron into anything else.

Really, the energy doesn't come from the iron, but from the . . . the other elements in the reaction. But the iron is necessary. It is not exactly a catalyst, as it is transmuted and then turned back into iron again, whereas a true catalyst remains unchanged. But the effect is the same. With iron so common in the crust of the earth, it should be possible to blow the entire crust off with one big *poof*.

I recall how I felt when I first saw these equations, here in my office last month. I sat staring at my name on the glass of the door, "Dr. Wade Ormont," only it appears backwards from the inside. I was sure I had made a mistake. I checked and rechecked and calculated and recalculated. I went through my nuclear equations at least thirty times. Each time my heart, my poor old heart, pounded harder and the knot in my stomach grew tighter. I had enough sense not to tell anybody else in the department about my discovery.

I did not even then give up trying to find something wrong with my equations. I fed them through the computer, in case there was some glaring, obvious error I had been overlooking. Didn't that sort of thing—a minus for a plus or something—once happen to Einstein? I'm no Einstein, even if I am a pretty good physicist, so it could happen to me.

However, the computer said it hadn't. I was right.

The next question was: What to do with these results? They would not help us towards the laboratory's objectives: more powerful nuclear weapons and more efficient ways of generating nuclear power. The routine procedure would be to write up a report. This would be typed and photostated and stamped "Top Secret." A few copies would be taken around by messenger to those who needed to know about such things. It would go to the AEC and the others. People in this business have learned to be pretty close-mouthed, but the knowledge of my discovery would still spread, even though it might take years.

I don't think the government of the United States would ever try to blow up the world, but others might. Hitler might have, if he had known how, when he saw he faced inevitable defeat. The present Commies are pretty cold-blooded calculators, but one can't tell who'll be running their show in ten or twenty years. Once this knowledge gets around, anybody with a reasonable store of nuclear

facilities could set the thing off. Most would not, even in revenge for defeat. But some might threaten to do so as blackmail, and a few could actually touch it off if thwarted. What's the proportion of paranoids and other crackpots in the world's population? It must be high enough, as a good fraction of the world's rulers and leaders have been of this type. No government yet devised—monarchy, aristocracy, theocracy, timocracy, democracy, dictatorship, soviet, or what have you—will absolutely stop such people from coming to the top. So long as these tribes of hairless apes are organized into sovereign nations, the nuclear Ragnarök is not only possible but probable.

For that matter, am I not a crackpot myself, calmly to contemplate blowing up the world?

No. At least the psychiatrist assured me my troubles were not of that sort. A man is not a nut if he goes about gratifying his desires in a rational manner. As to the kind of desires, that's nonrational anyway. I have adequate reasons for wishing to exterminate my species. It's no high-flown farfetched theory either; no religious mania about the sinfulness of man, but a simple, wholesome lust for revenge. Christians pretend to disapprove of vengeance, but that's only one way of looking at it. Many other cultures have deemed it right and proper, so it can't be a sign of abnormality.

For instance, when I think back over my fifty-three years, what do I remember? Well, take the day I first entered school . . .

I suppose I was a fearful little brute at six: skinny, stubborn, and precociously intellectual. Because my father was a professor, I early picked up a sesquipedalian way of speaking —which has been defined as a tendency to use words like "sesquipedalian." At six I was sprinkling my conversation with words like "theoretically" and "psychoneurotic." Because of illnesses I was as thin as a famine-victim, with just enough muscle to get me from here to there.

While I always seemed to myself a frightfully good little boy whom everyone picked on, my older relatives in their last years assured me I was nothing of the sort, but the most intractable creature they ever saw. Not that I was naughty or destructive. On the contrary, I meticulously obeyed all formal rules and regulations with a zeal that would have gladdened the heart of a Prussian drill-sergeant. It was that in those situations that depend, not on formal rules, but on accommodating oneself to the wishes of others, I never considered any wishes but my own. These I pursued with fanatical single-mindedness. As far as I was concerned, other people were simply inanimate things put into the world to minister to my wants. What they thought I neither knew nor cared.

Well, that's my relatives' story. Perhaps they were prejudiced, too. Anyway, when I entered the first

grade in a public school in New Haven, the fun started the first day. At recess a couple grabbed my cap for a game of "siloochee." That meant that they tossed the cap from one to the other while the owner leaped this way and that like a hooked fish trying to recover his headgear.

After a few minutes I lost my temper and tried to brain one of my tormentors with a rock. Fortunately, six-year-olds are not strong enough to kill each other by such simple means. I raised a lump on the boy's head, and then the others piled on me. Because of my weakness I was no match for any of them. The teacher dug me out from the bottom of the pile.

With the teachers I got on well. I had none of the normal boy's spirit of rebellion against all adults. In my precocious way I reasoned that adults probably knew more than I, and when they told me to do something I assumed they had good reasons and did it. The result was that I became teacher's pet, which made my life that much harder with my peers.

They took to waylaying me on my way home. First, they would snatch my cap for a game of siloochee. The game would develop into a full-fledged baiting-session, with boys running from me in front, jeering, while others ran up behind to hit or kick me. I must have chased them all over New Haven. When they got tired of being chased they would turn around, beat me—which they could do with absurd ease—and chase me for a while. I screamed, wept, shouted threats and abuse, made growling and hissing noises, and indulged in pseudo-fits like tearing my hair and foaming at the mouth in hope of scaring them off. This was just what they wanted. Hence, during most of my first three years in school, I was let out ten minutes early so as to be well on my way to my home on Chapel Street by the time the other boys got out.

This treatment accentuated my bookishness. I was digging through Millikan's "The Electron" at the age of nine.

My father worried vaguely about my troubles but did little about them, being a withdrawn bookish man himself. His line was medieval English literature, which he taught at Yale, but he still sympathized with a fellow-intellectual and let me have my head. Sometimes he made fumbling efforts to engage me in ball-throwing and similar outdoor exercises. This had little effect, since he really hated exercise, sport, and the outdoors as much as I did, and was as clumsy and uncoördinated as I to boot. Several times I resolved to force myself through a regular course of exercises to make myself into a young Tarzan, but when it came to executing my resolution I found the calisthenics such a frightful bore that I always let them lapse before they had done me any good.

I'm no psychologist. Like most followers of the exact sciences, I

have an urge to describe psychology as a "science," in quotes, implying that only the exact sciences like physics are entitled to the name. That may be unfair, but it's how many physicists feel.

For instance, how can the psychologists all these years have treated sadism as something abnormal, brought on by some stupid parent's stopping his child from chopping up the furniture with a hatchet, thereby filling him with frustration and insecurity? On the basis of my own experience I will testify that all boys—well, perhaps ninety-nine per cent—are natural-born sadists. Most of them have it beaten out of them. Correct that: most of them have it beaten down into their subconscious, or whatever the headshrinkers call that part of our minds nowadays. It's still there, waiting a chance to pop up. Hence crime, war, persecution, and all the other ills of society. Probably this cruelty was evolved as a useful characteristic back in the stone-age. An anthropological friend once told me this idea was fifty years out of date, but he could be wrong also.

I suppose I have my share of it. At least I never wanted anything with such passionate intensity as I wanted to kill those little fiends in New Haven by lingering and horrible tortures. Even now, forty-five years after, that wish is still down there at the bottom of my mind, festering away. I still remember them as individuals, and can still work myself into a frenzy of hatred and resentment just thinking about them. I don't suppose I have ever forgotten or forgiven an injury or insult in my life. I'm not proud of that quality, but neither am I ashamed of it. It is just the way I am.

Of course I had reasons for wishing to kill the little tyrants, while they had no legitimate grudge against me. I had done nothing to them except to offer an inviting target, a butt, a punching-bag. I never expected, as I pored over Millikan's book, that this would put me on the track of as complete a revenge as anybody could ask.

So much for boys. Girls I don't know about. I was the middle one of three brothers; my mother was a masterful character, lacking the qualities usually thought of as feminine; and I never dated a girl until I was nearly thirty. I married late, for a limited time, and had no children. It would neatly have solved my present problem if I had found how to blow up the male half of the human race while sparing the female. That is not the desire for a super-harem, either. I had enough trouble keeping one woman satisfied when I was married. It is just that the female half has never gone out of its way to make life hell for me, day after day for years, even though one or two women, too, have done me dirt. So, in a mild detached way, I should be sorry to destroy the women along with the men.

By the time I was eleven and in the sixth grade, things had got worse. My mother thought that sending me

to a military academy would "make a man of me." I should be forced to exercise and mix with the boys. Drill would teach me to stand up and hold my shoulders back. And I could no longer slouch into my father's study for a quiet session with the encyclopedia.

My father was disturbed by this proposal, thinking that sending me away from home would worsen my lot by depriving me of my only sanctuary. Also he did not think we could afford a private school on his salary and small private income.

As usual, my mother won. I was glad to go at first. Anything seemed better than the torment I was enduring. Perhaps a new crowd of boys would treat me better. If they didn't, our time would be so fully organized that nobody would have an opportunity to bully me.

So in the fall of 1927, with some fears but more hopes, I entered Rogers Military Academy at Waukeegus, New Jersey . . .

The first day, things looked pretty good. I admired the gray uniforms with the little brass strip around the edge of the visors of the caps.

But it took me only a week to learn two things. One was that the school, for all its uniforms and drills, was loosely run. The boys had plenty of time to think up mischief. The other was that, by the mysterious sense boys have, they immediately picked me as fair game.

On the third day somebody pinned a sign to my back, reading CALL ME SALLY. I went around all day unconscious of the sign and puzzled by being called "Sally." "Sally" I remained all the time I was at Rogers. The reason for calling me by a girl's name was merely that I was small, skinny, and unsocial, as I have never had any tendencies towards sexual abnormality.

To this day I wince at the name "Sally." Some years ago, before I married, matchmaking friends introduced me to an attractive girl and could not understand why I dropped her like a hot brick. Her name was Sally.

There was much hazing of new boys at Rogers; the teachers took a fatalistic attitude and looked the other way. I was the favorite hazee, only with me it did not taper off after the first few weeks. They kept it up all through the first year. One morning in March, 1928, I was awakened around five by several boys seizing my arms and legs and pinched my nose and another holding me down while one of them forced a cake of soap into my mouth.

"Look out he don't bite you," said one.

"Castor oil would be better."

"We ain't got none. Hold his nose; that'll make him open up."

"We should have shaved the soap up into little pieces. Then he'd have foamed better."

"Let me tickle him; that'll make him throw a fit."

"There, he's foaming fine, like a old geyser."

"Stop hollering, Sally," one of

them addressed me, "or we'll put the suds in your eyes."

"Put the soap in 'em anyway. It'll make a red-eyed monster out of him. You know how he glares and shrieks when he gits mad?"

"Let's cut his hair all off. That'll *reely* make him look funny."

My yells brought one of the masters, who sharply ordered the tormentors to cease. They stood up while I rose to a sitting position on my bunk, spitting out soapsuds. The master said:

"What's going on here? Don't you know this is not allowed? It will mean ten rounds for each of you!"

"Rounds" were Rogers' form of discipline. Each round consisted of marching once around the track in uniform with your piece on your shoulder. (The piece was a Springfield 1903 army rifle with the firing-pin removed, lest some student get .30 cartridges to fit and blow somebody's head off.) I hoped my tormentors would be at least expelled and was outraged by the lightness of their sentence. They on the other hand were indignant that they had been so hardly treated and protested with the air of outraged virtue:

"But Mr. Wilson, sir, we was only *playing* with him!"

At that age I did not know that private schools do not throw out paying students for any but the most heinous offenses; they can't afford to. The boys walked their ten rounds and hated me for it. They regarded me as a tattle-tale because my howls had drawn Mr. Wilson's attention and devoted themselves to thinking up new and ingenious ways to make me suffer. Now they were more subtle. There was nothing so crude as forcing soap down my throat. Instead it was hiding parts of my uniform, putting horse manure and other undesirable substances in my bed, and tripping me when I was drilling so my nine-pound Springfield and I went sprawling in the dirt.

I fought often, always getting licked and usually being caught and given rounds for violating the school's rules. I was proud when I actually bloodied one boy's nose, but it did me no lasting good. He laid for me in the swimming pool and nearly drowned me. By now I was so terrorized that I did not dare to name my attackers, even when the masters revived me by artificial respiration and asked me. Wilson said:

"Ormont, we know what you're going through, but we can't give you a bodyguard to follow you around. Nor can we encourage you to tattle as a regular thing; that'll only make matters worse."

"But what can I *do,* sir? I try to obey the rules—"

"That's not it."

"What, then? I don't do anything to these kids; they just pick on me all the time."

"Well, for one thing, you could deprive them of the pleasure of seeing you yelling and making wild swings that never land—" He drummed on his desk with his fingers.

"We have this sort of trouble with boys like you, and if there's any way to stop it I don't know about it. You . . . let's face it; you're *queer.*"

"How?"

"Oh, your language is much too adult—"

"But isn't that what you're trying to teach us in English?"

"Sure, but that's not the point. Don't argue about it; I'm trying to help you. Then another thing. You argue about everything, and most of the time you're right. But you don't suppose people like you for putting them in the wrong, do you?"

"But people *ought*—"

"Precisely, they ought, but they don't. You can't change the world by yourself. If you had muscles like Dempsey you could get away with a good deal, but you haven't. So the best thing is to adopt a protective coloration. Pay no attention to their attacks or insults. Never argue; never complain; never criticize. Flash a glassy smile at everybody, even when you feel like murdering them. Keep your language simple and agree with what's said whether you feel that way or not. I hate to give you a counsel of hypocrisy, but I don't see any alternative. If we could only make some sort of athlete out of you—"

This was near the end of the school year. In a couple of weeks I was home. I complained about the school and asked to return to public school in New Haven. My parents objected on the ground that I was getting a better education at Rogers than I should get locally, which was true.

One day some of my old pals from public school caught me in a vacant lot and gave me a real beating, so that my face was swollen and marked. I realized that, terrible though the boys at Rogers were, they did not include the most fearful kind of all: the dimwitted muscular lout who has been left behind several grades in public school and avenges his boredom and envy by tormenting his puny classmates. After that I did not complain about Rogers.

People talk of "School days, school days, dear old golden rule days—" and all that rubbish. Psychologists tell me that, while children suffer somewhat, they remember only the pleasant parts of childhood and hence idealize it later.

Both are wrong as far as I am concerned. I had a hideous childhood, and the memory of it is as sharp and painful forty years later as it was then. If I want to spoil my appetite, I have only to reminisce about my dear, dead childhood.

For one thing, I have always hated all kinds of roughhouse and horseplay, and childhood is full of them unless the child is a cripple or other shut-in. I have always had an acute sense of my own dignity and integrity, and any japery or ridicule fills me with murderous resentment. I have always hated practical jokes. When I'm asked "Can't you take a joke," the truthful answer is no, at

least not in that sense. I want to kill the joker, then and for years afterwards. Such humor as I have is expressed in arch, pedantic little witticisms which amuse my academic friends but which mean nothing to most people. I might have got on better in the era of duelling. Not that I should have made much of a duellist, but I believe men were just a bit more careful then how they insulted others who might challenge them.

I set out in my second year at Rogers to try out Wilson's advice. Nobody will ever know what I went through, learning to curb my hot temper and proud, touchy spirit, and literally to turn the other cheek. All that year I sat on my inner self, a mass of boiling fury and hatred. When I was teased, mocked, ridiculed, poked, pinched, punched, hair-pulled, kicked, tripped, and so on, I pretended that nothing had happened, in the hope that the others would get tired of punching a limp bag.

It didn't always work. Once I came close to killing a teaser by hitting him over the head with one of those long window-openers with a bronze head on a wooden pole with which every classroom was equipped in the days before air-conditioned schools. Luckily I hit him with the wooden shaft and broke it, instead of with the bronze part.

As the year passed and the next began, I made myself so colorless that sometimes a whole week went by without my being baited. Of course, I heard the hated nickname "Sally" every day, but the boys often used it without malice from habit. I also endured incidents like this: Everybody, my father, the masters, and the one or two older boys who took pity on me had urged me to go in for athletics. Now, at Rogers one didn't have to join a team. One had compulsory drill and calisthenics, but beyond that things were voluntary. (It was, as I said, a loosely-run school.)

So I determined to try. One afternoon in the spring of 1929 I wandered out to the athletic field, to find a group of my classmates getting up a game of baseball. I quietly joined them.

The two self-appointed captains squared off to choose their teams. One of them looked at me incredulously and asked: "Hey, Sally, are *you* in on this?"

"Yeah."

They began choosing. There were fifteen boys there, counting the captains and me. They chose until there was one boy left: me. The boy whose turn it was to choose said to the other captain:

"You can have him."

"Naw, I don't want him. You take him."

They argued while the subject of their mutual generosity squirmed and the boys already chosen grinned unsympathetically. Finally one captain said:

"Suppose we let him bat for both sides. That way, the guys the side

of he's on won't be any worse off than the other."

"O.K. That suit you, Sally?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I guess I don't feel good anyway." I turned away before visible tears disgraced a thirteen-year-old.

Just after I started my third year, in the fall of 1929, the stock market fell flat. Soon my father found that his small private income had vanished as the companies in which he had invested, such as New York Central, stopped paying dividends. As a result, when I went home for Christmas, I learned that I could not go back to Rogers. Instead I should begin again with the February semester at the local high school.

In New Haven my 'possum-tactics were put to a harder test. Many boys in my class had known me in former days and were delighted to take up where they had left off. For instance—

For decades, boys who found study-hall dull have enlivened the proceedings with rubber bands and bits of paper folded into a V-shape for missiles. The trick is to keep your missile-weapon palmed until the teacher is looking elsewhere, and then to bounce your wad off the neck of some fellow-student in front of you. Perhaps this was tame compared to nowadays, when, I understand, the students shoot ball-bearings and knock the teacher's teeth and eyes out, and carve him with switch-blade knives if he objects. All this happened before the followers of Dewey and Watson, with their lunacies about "permissive" training, had made classrooms into a semblance of the traditional cannibal feast with teacher playing the rôle of the edible missionary.

Right behind me sat a small boy named Patrick Hanrahan: a wiry, red-haired young hellion with a South Boston accent. He used to hit me with paper wads from time to time. I paid no attention because I knew he could lick me with ease. I was a head taller than he, but though I had begun to shoot up I was as skinny, weak, and clumsy as ever. If anything I was clumsier, so that I could hardly get through a meal without knocking over a glass.

One day I had been peppered with unusual persistence. My self-control slipped, as it would under a determined enough assault. I got out my own rubber band and paper missiles. I knew Hanrahan had shot at me before, but, of course, one never saw the boy who shot a given wad at you.

When a particularly hard-driven one stung me behind the ear, I whipped around and let Hanrahan have one in the face. It struck just below his left eye, hard enough to make a red spot. He looked astonished, then furious, and savagely whispered:

"What you do that for?"

"You shot me," I whispered back.

"I did not! I'll git you for this! You meet me after class."

"You did, too—" I began, when

the teacher barked: "Ormont!" I shut up.

Perhaps Hanrahan really had not shot that last missile. One could argue that it was not more than his due for the earlier ones he *had* shot. But that is not how boys' minds work. They reason like the speaker of Voltaire's lines:

"Cet animal est très méchant;
Quand on l'attaque, il se défend!"

I knew if I met Hanrahan on the way out I should get a fearful beating. When I saw him standing on the marble steps that led up from the floor of the study-hall to the main exit, I walked quietly out the rear door.

I was on my way to the gym when I got a kick in the behind. There was Paddy Hanrahan, saying: "Come on, you yellow dog, fight!"

"Hello there," I said with a sickly grin.

He slapped my face.

"Having fun?" I said.

He kicked me in the leg.

"Keep right on," I said, "I don't mind."

He slapped and kicked me again, crying: "Yellow dog! Yellow dog!" I walked on toward the gymnasium as if nothing were happening, saying to myself: pay no attention, never criticize or complain, keep quiet, ignore it, pay no attention— At last Paddy had to stop hitting and kicking me to go to his own next class.

Next day I had a few bruises where Hanrahan had struck me— nothing serious. When he passed me he snarled: "Yellow dog!" but did not renew his assault. I have wasted much time in the forty years since then, imagining revenges on Paddy Hanrahan. Hanrahan coming into my office in rags and pleading for a job, and my having him thrown out— All that nonsense. I never saw him again after I finished school in New Haven.

There were a few more such incidents during that year and the following one. For instance at the first class-meeting in the autumn of 1930, when the student officers of my class were elected for the semester, after several adolescents had been nominated for president, somebody piped up: "I nominate Wade Ormont!"

The whole class burst into a roar of laughter. One of the teachers pounced on the nominator and hustled him out for disturbing an orderly session by making frivolous nominations. Not knowing how to decline a nomination, I could do nothing but stare stonily ahead as if I hadn't heard. I need not have worried; the teachers never even wrote my name on the blackboard with those of the other nominees, nor did they ask for seconds. They just ignored the whole thing, as if the nominator had named Julius Caesar.

Then I graduated. As my marks put me in the top one percentile in scientific subjects and pretty high in the others, I got a scholarship at M. I. T. Without it I don't think my father could have afforded to send me.

When I entered M. I. T. I had developed my protective shell to a good degree of effectiveness, though not so perfectly as later: the automatic, insincere, glassy smile turned on as by a switch; the glad hand; the subdued, modest manner that never takes an initiative or advances an opinion unless it agrees with somebody's else. And I never, *never* showed emotion no matter what. How could I, when the one emotion inside me, overwhelming all others, was a blazing homicidal fury and hatred, stored up from all those years of torment? If I really let myself go I should kill somebody. The incident with the window-opener had scared me. Much better never to show what you're thinking. As for feeling, it is better not to feel—to view the world with the detachment of a visitor at the zoo.

M. I. T. was good to me: it gave

me a sound scientific education without pulverizing my soul in a mortar every day. For one thing, many other undergraduates were of my own introverted type. For another, we were kept too busy grinding away at heavy schedules to have time or energy for horseplay. For another, athletics did not bulk large in our program, so my own physical inferiority did not show up so glaringly. I reached medium height—about five-eight—but remained thin, weak, and awkward. Except for a slight middle-aged bulge around the middle, I am that way yet.

For thousands of years, priests and philosophers have told us to love mankind without giving any sound reason for loving the creatures. The mass of them are a lot of cruel, treacherous, hairless apes. They hate us intellectuals, longhairs, highbrows, eggheads, or double-domes, despite —or perhaps because—without us they would still be running naked in the wilderness and turning over flat stones for their meals. Love them? Hah!

Oh, I admit I have known a few of my own kind who were friendly. But by the time I had learned to suppress all emotion to avoid baiting, I was no longer the sort of man to whom many feel friendly. A bright enough physicist, well-mannered and seemingly poised, but impersonal and aloof, hardly seeing my fellow-men except as creatures whom I had to manipulate in order to live. I have heard my colleagues describe others of my type as a "dry stick" or "cold fish," so no doubt they say the same of me. But who made me that way? I might not have become a fascinating *bon-vivant* even if I had not been bullied, but I should probably not have become such an extreme aberrant. I might even have been able to like individuals and to show normal emotions.

The rest of my story is routine. I graduated from M. I. T. in 1936, took my Ph.D. from Chicago in 1939, got an instructorship at Chicago, and next year was scooped up by the Manhattan Engineer District. I spent the first part of the war at the Argonne Labs and the last part at Los Alamos. More by good luck than good management, I never came in contact with the Communists during the bright pink era of 1933-45. If I had, I might easily, with my underdog complex and my store of resentment, have been swept into their net. After the war I worked under Lawrence at Berkeley—

I've had a succession of such jobs They think I'm a sound man, perhaps not a great creative genius like Fermi or Teller, but a bear for spotting errors and judging the likeliest line of research to follow. It's all part of the objective, judicious side of my nature that I have long cultivated. I haven't tried to get into administrative work, which you have to do to rise to the top in bureaucratic set-ups like this. I hate to deal with people as individuals. I could probably do it—I have forced myself to

do many things—but what would be the purpose? I have no desire for power over my fellows. I make enough to live on comfortably, especially since my wife left me—

Oh, yes, my wife. I had got my Ph.D. before I had my first date. I dated girls occasionally for the next decade, but in my usual reserved, formal manner.

Why did I leave Berkeley to go to Columbia University, for instance? I had a hobby of noting down people's conversation in shorthand when they weren't noticing. I was collecting this conversation for a statistical analysis of speech: the frequency of sounds, of words, combinations of words, parts of speech, topics of conversation, and so on. It was a purely intellectual hobby with no gainful objective, though I might have written up my results for one of the learned periodicals. One day my secretary noticed what I was doing and asked me about it. In an incautious moment I explained. She looked at me blankly, then burst into laughter and said:

"My goodness, Dr. Ormont, you *are* a nut!"

She never knew how close she came to having her skull bashed in with the inkwell. For a few seconds I sat there, gripping my pad and pencil and pressing my lips together. Then I put the paper quietly away and returned to my physics. I never resumed the statistical study, and I hated that secretary. I hated her particularly because I had had my own doubts about my mental health and so could not bear to be called a nut even in fun. I closed my shell more tightly than ever.

But I could not go on working next to that secretary. I could have framed her on some manufactured complaint, or just told the big boss I didn't like her and wanted another. But I refused to do this. I was the objective, impersonal man. I would never let an emotion make me unjust, and even asking to have her transferred would put a little black mark on her record. The only thing was for *me* to go away. So I got in touch with Columbia—

There I found a superior job with a superior secretary: Georgia Ehrenfels, so superior in fact that in 1958 we were married. I was already in my forties. She was twelve years younger and had been married and divorced once.

I think it took her about six months to realize that she had made an even bigger mistake than the first time. I never realized it at all. My mind was on my physics, and a wife was a nice convenience but nobody to open up one's shell for. Later, when I finally realized that things had begun to go bad, I tried to open my shell and found that the hinges were stuck.

My wife tried to make me over, but that is not easy with a middle-aged man even under the most favorable conditions. She pestered me to get a house in the country until I gave in. I had never owned a house and proved an inefficient household-

er. I hated the tinkering, gardening, and other minutiae of suburban life. Georgia did most of the work. Then one day later I came home from work to find her gone and a note beginning:

Dear Wade:

It is no use. It is not your fault. You are as you are, as I should have realized at the beginning. Perhaps I am foolish not to appreciate your many virtues and to insist on that human warmth you do not have—

Well, she got her divorce and married another academic man. I don't know how they have got on, but the last I heard they were still married. Psychologists say people tend to repeat their marital mistakes rather than to learn from them. I resolved not to repeat mine by the simple expedient of having nothing more to do with women. So far I have kept to it.

This breakup did disturb me for a time, more than Iron Man Ormont would care to admit. I drank heavily, which I had never done. I began to make mistakes in my work. Finally I went to a psychiatrist. They might be one-third quackery and one-third unprovable speculation, but to whom else could one turn?

The psychiatrist was a nice little man, stout and square-built, with a subdued manner—a rather negative, colorless personality. I was surprised, for I had expected something with a pointed beard, Viennese gestures, and aggressive garrulity. Instead he quietly drew me out. After a few months he told me:

"You're not the least psychotic, Wade. You do have what we call a schizoidal personality. Such people always have a hard time in personal relations. Now, you have found a solution for your problem in your pose of good-natured indifference. The trouble is that the pose has been practiced so long that it's become the real Dr. Ormont, and it has raised up its own difficulties. You practiced so long and so hard suppressing your emotions that now you can't let them go when you want to—"

There was more of the same, much of which I had already figured out for myself. That part was fine; no disagreement. But what to do about it? I learned that the chances of improvement by psychoanalytical or similar treatment go down rapidly after the age of thirty, and over forty it is so small as hardly to be worth bothering with. After a year of spending the psychiatrist's time and my money, we gave up.

I had kept my house all this time. I had in fact adapted myself intelligently to living in a house, and I had accumulated such masses of scientific books, magazines, pamphlets, and other printed matter that I could no longer have got into an ordinary apartment. I had a maid, old and ugly and I spent my time, away from the office, alone in my house. I learned to plant the lot with ground-cover that required no mowing and to hire a gardener a few times a year

so as not to outrage the neighbors too much.

Then I got a better job here. I sold my house on Long Island and bought another here, which I have run in the same style as the last one. I let the neighbors strictly alone. If they had done likewise I might have had an easier time deciding what to do with my discovery. As it is, many suburbanites seem to think that if a man lives alone and doesn't wish to be bothered, he must be some sort of ogre.

If I write up the chain-reaction, the news will probably get out. No amount of security-regulations will stop people from talking about the impending end of the world. Once having done so, the knowledge will probably cause the blowing-up of the earth—not right away, but in a decade or two. I shall probably not live to see it, but it wouldn't displease me if it did go off in my lifetime. It would not deprive me of much.

I'm fifty-three and look older. My doctor tells me I'm not in good shape. My heart is not good; my blood-pressure is too high; I sleep badly and have headaches. The doctor tells me to cut down on coffee, to stop this and stop that. But even if I do, he can't assure me a full decade more. There is nothing simple wrong with me that an operation would help; just a poor weak body further abused by too intensive mental work over most of my life.

The thought of dying does not much affect me. I have never got much fun out of life, and such pleasures as there are have turned sour in recent years. I find myself getting more and more indifferent to everything but physics, and even that is becoming a bore.

The one genuine emotion I have left is hatred. I hate mankind in general in a mild, moderate way. I hate the male half of mankind more intensely, and the class of boys most bitterly of all. I should love to see the severed heads of all the boys in the world stuck on spikes.

Of course I am objective enough to know why I feel this way. But knowing the reason for the feeling doesn't change the feeling, at least not in a hardened old character like me.

I also know that to wipe out all mankind would not be just. It would kill millions who have never harmed me, or for that matter harmed anybody else.

But why should I be just? When have these glabrous primates been just to me? The head-shrinker tried to tell me to let my emotions go, and then perhaps I could learn to be happy. Well, I have just one real emotion. If I let it go, that's the end of the world.

On the other hand, I should destroy not only all the billions of bullies and sadists, but the few victims like myself. I have sympathized with the downtrodden because I knew how they felt. If there were some way to save them while destroying the rest —But my sympathy

is probably wasted; most of the downtrodden would persecute others, too, if they had the power.

I had thought about the matter for several days without a decision. Then came Mischief Night. This is the night before Hallowe'en, when the local kids raise hell. The following night they go out again to beg candy and cookies from the people whose windows they have soaped and whose garbage-pails they have upset.

All the boys in my neighborhood hate me. I don't know why. It's one of those things like a dog's sensing the dislike of another dog. Though I don't scream or snarl at them and chase them, they somehow know I hate them even when I have nothing to do with them.

I was so buried in my problem that I forgot about Mischief Night, and as usual stopped in town for dinner at a restaurant before taking the train out to my suburb. When I got home, I found that in the hour of darkness before my arrival, the boys had given my place the full treatment. The soaped windows and the scattered garbage and the toilet-paper spread around were bad but endurable. However, they had also burgled my garage and gone over my little British two-seater. The tires were punctured, the upholstery slashed, the paint scratched, and the wiring ripped out of the engine. There were other damages like uprooted shrubbery—

To make sure I knew what they thought, they had lettered a lot of shirt-cardboards and left them around, reading: OLD LADY ORMONT IS A NUT! BEWARE THE MAD SCIENTIST!

That decided me. There is one way I can be happy during my remaining years, and that is by the knowledge that all these bullies will get theirs some day. I hate them. I hate them. I hate everybody. I want to kill mankind. I'd kill them by slow torture if I could. If I can't, blowing up the earth will do. I shall write my report.

THE END

IN TIMES TO COME

Next month Kelly Freas has an experimental cover, for Jack Vance's story, "The Gift of Gab." It's a fairyland sort of cover—done by a highly interesting technique involving a glass-plate transfer that has produced an effect that's eminently suited to the subject. I'll appreciate comments on it.

"The Gift of Gab" involves a neat question, too. Surely it's going to be held illegal to enslave intelligent races on other worlds—and even more, to destroy intelligent races for meat, or other metabolic products. But . . . how do you tell a totally alien intelligence from a totally alien domesticable animal? Vance, I think, has a sound, and fascinating speculation on the problem.

THE EDITOR.

VICTORY

It seemed Earth was a rich, and undefended planet in a warring, hating galaxy. Things can be deceptive though; children playing can be quite rough — but that ain't war, friend!

BY LESTER del REY

Illustrated by Rogers

1

From above came the sound of men singing. Captain Duke O'Neill stopped clipping his heavy black beard to listen. It had been a long time since he'd heard such a sound —longer than the time since he'd last had a bath or seen a woman. It had never been the singing type of war. Yet now even the high tenor of old Teroini, who lay on a pad with neither legs nor arms, was mixed into the chorus. It could mean only one thing!

As if to confirm his thoughts, Burke Thompson hobbled past the cabin, stopping just long enough to shout. "Duke, we're home! They've sighted Meloa!"

"Thanks," Duke called after him, but the man was hobbling out of sight, eager to carry the good news to others.

Fourteen years, Duke thought as he dragged out his hoarded bottle of water and began shaving. Five since he'd seen Ronda on his last leave. Now the battered old wreck that was left of the flagship was less than an hour from home base, and the two other survivors of the original fleet of eight hundred were limping along behind. Three out of eight hundred—but they'd won! Meloa had her victory.

And far away, Earth could rest in unearned safety for a while.

Duke grimaced bitterly. It was no time to think of Earth now. He

shucked off his patched and filthy clothes and reached for the dress grays he had laid out in advance; at least they were still in good condition, almost unused. He dressed slowly, savoring the luxury of clean clothes. The buttons gave him trouble; his left hand looked and behaved almost like a real one, but in the three years since he got it, there had been no chance to handle buttons.

Then he mastered the trick and stepped back to study the final results. He didn't look bad. Maybe a little gaunt and in need of a good haircut. But his face hadn't aged as much as he had thought. The worst part was the pasty white where his beard had covered his face, but a few days under Meloa's sun would fix that. Maybe he could spend a month with Ronda at a beach. He still had most of his share of his salary—nearly a quarter million Meloan credits; even if the rumors of inflation were true, that should be enough.

He stared at his few possessions, then shrugged and left them. He headed up the officers' lift toward the control room, where he could see Meloa swim into view and later see the homeport of Kordule as they landed.

The pilot and navigator were replacements, sent out to bring the old ship home, and their faces showed none of the jubilation of the crew. They nodded at him as he entered, staring toward the screens without expression. Aside from the blueness of their skins and the com-

plete absence of hair, they looked almost human, and Duke had long since stopped thinking of them as anything else.

"How long?" he asked.

The pilot shrugged. "Half an hour, captain. We're too low on fuel to wait for clearance, even if control is working. Don't worry. There'll be plenty of time to catch the next ship to Earth."

"Earth?" Duke glowered at him, suspecting a joke, but there was no humor on the blue face. "I'm not going back!" Then he frowned. "What's an Earth ship doing on Meloa?"

The navigator exchanged a surprised look with the pilot, and nodded as if some signal had passed between them. His voice was as devoid of expression as his face. "Earth resumed communication with us the day the truce was signed," he answered. He paused, studying Duke. "They're giving free passage back to Earth to all terran veterans, captain."

Nice of them, Duke thought. They were willing to let the men who'd survived come back, just as they hadn't forbidden anyone to go. Very nice! They could keep their world—and all the other coward planets like them! When the humanoid world of Meloa had been attacked by the insectile monsters from Throm, Earth could have ended the invasion in a year, as those with eyes to see had urged her. But she hadn't chosen to do so. Instead, she had stepped back on her high retreat of neutrality, and let the Throm aliens do as they liked. It wasn't the first time she'd acted like that, either.

With more than half of the inhabited planets occupied by various monsters, it seemed obvious that the humanoid planets had to make a common stand. If Meloa fell, it would be an alien stepping stone that could lead back eventually to Earth itself. And once the monsters realized that Earth was unwilling to fight, her vast resources would no longer scare them—she'd be only a rich plum, ripe for the plucking.

When Duke had been one of the first to volunteer for Meloa, he had never realized his home world could refuse to join the battle. He'd believed in Earth and humanity then. He'd waited through all the grim days when it seemed Throm must win—when the absence of replacements proved the communiques from Meloa to be nothing but hopeful lies. But there had been no help. Earth's neutrality remained unshaken.

And now, after fourteen years in battle hell, helping to fight off a three-planet system of monsters that might have swarmed against all the humanoid races, Earth was willing to forgive him and take him back to the shame of his birthright!

"I'm staying," he said flatly. "Unless you Meloans want to kick me out now?"

The pilot swung around, dropping a quick hand on his shoulder. "Captain," he said, "that isn't something to joke about. We won't forget that

there would be no Meloa today without men like you. But we can't ask you to stay. Things have changed—insanely. The news we sent to the fleet was pure propaganda!"

"We guessed that," Duke told him. "We knew the Throm ships. And when the dispatches reported all those raids without any getting through, we stopped reading them. How many did penetrate, anyhow?"

"Thirty-one full raids," the navigator said woodenly. "Thirty-one in the last four months!"

"Thirty-one! What happened to the home fleet?"

"We broke it up and sent it out for your replacements," the pilot answered dully. "It was the only chance we had to win."

Duke swallowed the idea slowly. He couldn't picture a planet giving up its last protection for a desperate effort to end the war on purely offensive drive. Three billion people watching the home fleet take off, knowing the skies were open for all the hell that a savage enemy could send! On Earth, the World Senate hadn't permitted the building of one battleship, for fear of reprisal.

He swung to face the ports, avoiding the expression on the faces of the two Meloans. He'd felt something of the same on his own face when he'd first inspected Throm. But it couldn't be that bad on Meloa; she'd won her hard-earned victory!

They were entering the atmosphere now, staggering down on misfiring jets. The whole planet seemed to be covered with a gray-yellow haze that spoke of countless tons of blast dust in the air. From below, Duke heard the men beginning to move toward the big entrance lock, unable to wait for the landing. But they were no longer his responsibility. He'd given up his command before embarking.

The ship came down, threatening to tilt every second, and the pilot was sweating and swearing. The haze began to clear as they neared the ground, but the ports were too high for Duke to see anything but the underside of the thick clouds. He stood up and headed for the lift, bracing himself as the ship pitched.

Suddenly there was a sickening jar and the blast cut off. The ship groaned and seemed to twist, then was still. It was the worst landing Duke had known, but they were obviously down. A second later he heard the port screech open and the thump of the landing ramp.

The singing of the men had picked up into a rough marching beat. Now abruptly it wavered. For a moment, a few voices continued, and then died away, like a record running down. There was a mutter of voices, followed by shouts that must have been the relief officers, taking over. Duke was nearly to the port before he heard the slow, doubtful sound of steps moving down the ramp. By the time he reached it, the last of the men was just leaving. He stopped, staring at the great port city of Kordule.

Most of the port was gone. Where

the hangars and repair docks had been, a crater bored into the earth, still smoking faintly. A lone girder projected above it, to mark the former great control building, and a Meloan skeleton was transfixed on it near the top. It shattered to pieces as he looked and began dropping, probably from the delayed tremor of their landing.

Even the section their ship stood on was part of the crater, he saw, with an Earth buldozer working on it. There was room for no more than ten ships now. Two of the berths were occupied by fat Earth ships, sleek and well kept. Three others held the pitted, warped hulks of Meloan battleships. There were no native freighters, and no sign of tending equipment or hangars.

The pilot had come up behind him, following his gaze. Now the man nodded. "That's it, captain. Most cities are worse. Kordule escaped the blasts until our rocket cannon failed. Got any script on you?" At Duke's nod, he pointed. "Better exchange it at the booth, before the rate gets worse. Take Earth dollars. Our silver's no good."

He held out a hand, and Duke shook it. "Good luck, captain," he said, and swung back into the ship.

Mercifully, most of Kordule was blanketed by the dust fog. There was the beginning of a series of monstrous craters where men had begun rebuilding underground, the ruined landing field, and a section of what had been the great business district. Now it was only a field of rubble, with bits of windowless walls leading up to a crazy tangle of twisted girders. Only memory could locate where the major streets had been. Over everything lay the green wash of *incandite*, and the wind carried the smell of a charnel house. There was no sign of the apartment where he and Ronda had lived.

He started down the ramp at last, seeing for the first time the motley crew that had come out to meet the heroes of the battle of Throm. They had spotted him already, however, and some were deserting the men at the sight of his officer's uniform. Their cries mingled into an insane, whining babble in his ears.

". . . Just a scrap for an old man, general . . . three children at home starving . . . fought under Jones, captain . . . cigarette?"

It was a sea of clutching hands, ragged bodies with scrawny arms and bloated stomachs, trembling and writhing in its eagerness to get to him first. Then as one of the temporary officers swung back with a couple of field attendants, it broke apart to let him pass, its gaze riveted on him as he stumbled between the lines.

He spotted a billboard one man was wearing, and his eyes focused sharply on it. "Honest Feroiya," it announced. "Credit exchange. Best rates in all Kordule." Below that, chalked into a black square, was the important part: "2,345 credits the dollar."

Duke shook his head but the sign

did not change. A quarter million credits for a hundred dollars. And he'd thought—

"Help a poor old widow." A trembling hand plucked at his sleeve, and he swung to face a woman in worse rags than the others, her eyes dull and unfocused, her lips mouthing the words only by habit. "Help the widow of General Dayole!"

He gasped as he recognized her. Five years before, he'd danced with her at a party given by Dayole—danced and agreed that the war was ruining them and that it couldn't get worse.

He reached into his pocket, before remembering the worthlessness of his bills. But there was half a pack of the wretched cigarettes issued the men. He tossed them to her and fled, while the other beggars scrambled toward her.

He walked woodenly across the leprous field, skirting away from the Earth ships, toward a collection of tents and tin huts that had swallowed the other veterans. Then he stopped and cursed to himself as a motorcycle sprang into life near the Earth freighters and came toward him. Naturally, they'd spotted his hair and skin color.

The well-fed, smooth-faced young man swung the machine beside him. "Captain O'Neill?" he asked, but his voice indicated that he was already certain. "Hop in, sir. Director Flannery has been looking forward to meeting you!"

Duke went steadily on, not varying his steps. The machine paced him uncertainly. "Director Flannery of Earth Foreign Office, Captain O'Neill. He requests your presence," he shouted over the purr of his machine. He started to swing ahead of the marching man.

Duke kept his eyes on his goal. When his steady steps almost brought him against the cycle, it roared out of his way. He could hear it behind him as he walked, but it faded.

There was only the sight and smell of Kordule ahead of him.

II

Senators were already filing through the Presidium as Edmonds of South Africa came out of his office with Daugherty of the Foreign Office. The youngest senator stopped beside the great bronze doors, studying the situation. Then he sighed in relief. "It's all right," he told Daugherty. "Premier Lesseur's presiding."

He hadn't been sure the premier's words were a full promise before. And while he hadn't been too worried, it was good to see that the doubtful vice-premier wouldn't be presiding.

"It better be all right," the diplomat said. "Otherwise, it's my neck. Cathay's counting on Earth to help against the Kloomirians, and if Director Flannery ever finds I committed us—"

Edmonds studied the seats that were filling, and nodded with more confidence as he saw that most of the senators on whom he counted

were there. "I've got enough votes, as I told you. And with Lesseur presiding, the opposition won't get far with parliamentary tricks against me. This time, Earth's going to act."

Daugherty grunted, obviously still worried, and headed up the steps to the reserved Visitors' Gallery, while Edmonds moved to his seat in the assembly room. Today he didn't even mind the fact that it was back in the section reserved for the newest members—the unknowns and unimportants, from the way the press treated them. He would be neither unknown nor unimportant, once his bill was passed, and his brief experience would only add to the miracle he was working.

Looking back on his efforts, he found the results something of a miracle to himself. It had taken two years of vote-swapping, of careful propaganda, and of compromise with his principles. That business of voting for the combined Throm-Meloa Aid Bill had been a bitter thing; but old Harding was scared sick of antagonizing the aliens by seeming partiality, and Edmonds' switch was the step needed to start the softening up.

At that, he'd been lucky. In spite of what he'd learned of the manipulation of sociological relationships, in spite of the long preparation in advertising dynamics and affective psychology, he couldn't have made it if Cathay hadn't been a human colony!

Now, though, Lesseur was calling the chamber to order. The senators quieted quickly, and there was almost complete silence as the old man picked up the paper before him.

"The Senate will consider Resolution 1843 today," Lesseur said quietly. *"A Resolution that Earth shall grant assistance to the Colony of Cathay in the event of any aggressive alien act,* proposed by Sir Alfred Edmonds. Since the required time for deliberation has elapsed, the chair will admit discussion on this resolution. Senator Edmonds!"

Edmonds was on his feet, and every face turned to him. The spotlight came down on him, blinding him to the others. He picked up the microphone, polishing the words in his mind. The vote might already be decided, but the papers would still print what he said now! And those words could mean his chance to work his way up through the Committee of Foreign Affairs and perhaps on to becoming Earth's youngest premier.

It might even mean more. Once Earth shook off her lethargy and moved to her rightful position of power and strength among the humanoid worlds, anything could happen. There was the Outer Federation being formed among the frontier worlds and the nucleus of close relations with hundreds of planets. Some day there might be the position of premier of a true Interstellar Congress!

Edmonds began quietly, listening to his voice roll smoothly from the speakers, giving the long history of

Earth and her rise to a position as the richest and most respected of planets. He retold the story of how she had been the first to discover the interstellar drive, and how it had inevitably spread. He touched on the envy of the alien worlds, and the friendship of the humanoid planets that had enabled Earth to found her dozen distant colonies. He couldn't wisely discuss her cowardice and timidity in avoiding her responsibilities to help her friends; but there was another approach.

"In the forefront of every battle against alien aggression," he declaimed proudly, "have been men from Earth. Millions of our young men have fought gloriously and died gladly to protect the human—and humanoid—civilizations from whatever forms of life have menaced them. Djamboula led the forces of Hera against Clovis, just as Captain O'Neill so recently directed the final battle that saved Meola from the hordes of Throm. In our own ranks, we have a man who spent eight long and perilous years in such a gallant struggle to save a world for humanoid decency. Senator Harding—"

From the darkened sea of faces, a voice suddenly sounded. "Will the senator yield?" It was the deep baritone of Harding.

Edmonds frowned in irritation, but nodded. A few words of confirmation on his point from Harding couldn't hurt. "I yield to the senator from Dixie," he answered.

The spotlight shifted as Harding got slowly to his feet, making a white halo of his hair. He did not look at Edmonds, but turned to face Lesseur.

"Mr. Chairman," he said, "I move that Resolution 1843 be tabled!"

"Second!" The light shifted to another man, but Edmonds had no time to see who it was as he stood staring open-mouthed at Harding.

He shouted for the chair's attention, but Lesseur brought the gavel down sharply once, and his voice rang over the speakers. "It has been moved and seconded that Resolution 1843 be tabled. The senators will now vote."

Edmonds stood frozen as the voting began. Then he dropped back hastily to press the button that would turn the square bearing his number a negative red. He saw his light flash on, while other squares were lighting. When the voting was finished, there were three such red squares in a nearly solid panel of green.

"The resolution is tabled," Lesseur announced needlessly.

Harding stood up and began moving towards the rear where Edmonds sat. The junior senator was too stunned for thought. Dimly he heard something about regrets and explanations, but the words had no meaning. He felt Harding help him to his feet and begin to guide him toward the door, where someone had already brought a shocked, white-faced Daugherty.

It was then he thought of Cathay, and what his ambition and Earth's ultimate deceit and cowardice would mean to the millions there.

III

A week of the dust-filled air of Meloa had left its mark on Captain Duke O'Neill. It had spread filth over his uniform, added another year to his face, and made waking each morning a dry-throated torture. Now he stopped at the entrance to the ship where he had been reassigned a berth for the night shift. An attendant handed him a small bottle, three biscuits, and a magazine. He tasted the chemically purified water sickly, stuffed the three ersatz biscuits into his pocket, and moved down the ramp, staring at the magazine.

It was from Earth, of course, since no printing was being done yet on Meloa. It must have come in on one of the three big Earth freighters he'd heard land during the night. Tucked into it was another of the brief notes he'd been receiving: "Director Flannery will be pleased to call on Captain O'Neill at the captain's convenience."

He shredded the note as he went across the field; he started to do the same with the news magazine, until the headlines caught his attention.

Most of the news meant nothing to him. But he skimmed the article on the eleventh planet to join the Outer Federation; the writer was obviously biased against the organization, but Duke nodded approvingly. At least someone was doing something. He saw that Cathay was in for trouble. Earth was living up to her old form! Then he shoved the

magazine into his pocket and trudged on toward the veteran's reassignment headquarters.

Machinery was being moved from the Earth freighters, and Duke swore again. Five billion Earthmen would read of their "generosity" to Meloa, and any guilt they felt for their desertion would vanish in a smug satisfaction at their charity. Smugness was easy in a world without dust or carrion smell or craters that had been factories.

There were only a few Meloans in the crude tent that served as their headquarters. Duke went back toward the cubbyhole where a thin, haggard man sat on a broken block behind a makeshift desk.

The hairless blue head shook slowly while the man's eyes dropped hungrily to the paper in Duke's pocket and away again guiltily. "No work, Captain O'Neill. Unless you can operate some of those Earth machines we're getting?"

Duke grimaced, passing the magazine over to hands that trembled as they took it. His education was in ultra-literary creative writing, his experience in war. And here, where there was the whole task of rebuilding a planet to be done, the ruin of tools and power made what could be done too little for even the few who were left. There was no grain to reap or wood to cut after the killing gas from Throm had ruined vegetation; there were no workable mines where all had been blasted closed. Transportation was gone. And the economy had passed beyond hand tools, leaving too few of those. Even whole men were idle, and his artificial hand could never replace a real one for carrying rubble.

"Director Flannery has been asking for you again," the man told him.

Duke ignored it "What about my wife?"

The Meloan frowned, reaching for a soiled scrap of paper. "We may have something. One of her former friends thinks she was near this address. We'll send someone out to investigate, if you wish, captain; but it's still pretty uncertain."

"I'll go myself," Duke said harshly. He picked up the paper, recognizing the location as one that had been in the outskirts.

The man behind the desk shook his head doubtfully. Then he shrugged, and reached behind him for a small automatic. "Better take this—and watch your step! There are two bullets left."

Duke nodded his thanks and turned away, dropping the gun into his pocket. Behind him he heard a long sigh and the rustle of a magazine being opened quickly.

It was a long walk. At first, he traced his way through streets that had been partially blasted clear. After the first mile, however, he was forced to hunt around or over the litter and wreckage, picking the way from high spot to high spot. There were people about, rooting through the debris, or patrolling in groups. He drew the automatic and carried

it in his hand, in plain sight. Some stared at him and some ignored him, but none came too close.

Once he heard shouting and a group ran across his path, chasing a small rodent. He heard a wild tumult begin, minutes later. When he passed the spot where they had stopped, a fight was going on, apparently over the kill.

At noon he stopped to drink sparingly of his water and eat one of the incredibly bad biscuits. What food there was available or which could be received from the Earth freighters was being mixed into them, but it wasn't enough. The workers got a little more, and occasionally someone found a few cans under the rubble. The penalty for not turning such food in was revocation of all food allotment, but there was a small black market where unidentified cans could be bought for five Earth dollars, and some found its way there. The same black market sold the few remaining cigarettes at twice that amount each.

It was beginning to thunder to the north as he stood up and went wearily on, and the haze was thickening. He tried to hurry, uncertain of how dark it would get. If he got caught now, he'd never be able to return before night. He stumbled on a broken street sign, decoding what was left of it, and considered. Then he sighed in relief. As he remembered it, he was almost there.

The buildings had been lower here, and the rubble was thinner. There seemed to be more people about, judging by the traces of smoke that drifted out of holes or through glassless windows. He saw none outside, however.

He was considering trying one of the places from which smoke was coming when he saw the little boy five hundred feet ahead. He started forward, but the kid popped into what must have been a cellar once. Duke stopped, calling quietly.

This time it was a girl of about sixteen who appeared. She sidled closer, her eyes fixed on his hair. Her voice piped out suddenly, scared and desperate. "You lonesome, Earthman?" Under the fright, it was a grotesque attempt at coquetry. She edged nearer, staring at him. "I won't roll you, honest!"

"All I want is information," he told her thickly. "I'm looking for a woman named Ronda—Ronda O'Neill. She was my wife."

The girl considered, shaking her head. Her eyes grew wider as he pulled out a green Earth bill, but she didn't move. Then, as he added the two remaining biscuits, she nodded quickly, motioning him forward. "Mom might know," she said.

She ran ahead, and soon an older woman shuffled up the broken steps. In her arms was a baby, dead or in a coma, and she rocked it slowly, moaning softly as she listened to his questions. She grunted finally, and reached out for the reward. Shuffling ahead of him, she went up the rubble-littered street and around a corner, to point. "Go in," she said. "Ronda'll be back."

Duke shoved the crude door back and stepped into what was left of a foyer in a cheap apartment house. The back had been blasted away, but the falling building had sealed over one corner, covering it from most of the weather. Light came from the shattered window, showing a scrap of blanket laid out on the floor near a few possessions. At first, nothing identified the resident in any way, and he wondered if it were a trap. Then he bent over a broken bracelet, and his breath caught sharply. The catch still worked, and a faded miniature of him was inside the little holder. Ronda's!

Duke dropped onto the blanket, trying to imagine what Ronda would be like, and to picture the reunion. But the present circumstances wouldn't fit into anything he could imagine. He could only remember the bravely smiling girl who had seen him off five years before.

He heard a babble of voices outside, but he didn't look out. The walk had exhausted him. Hard as the bed was, it was better than standing up. Anyhow, if Ronda came back, he was pretty sure she would be warned of his presence.

He slept fitfully, awakened by the smells and sounds from outside. Once he thought someone looked in, but he couldn't be sure. He turned over, almost decided to investigate, and dozed off again.

It was the hoarse sound of breathing and a soft shuffle that wakened him that time. His senses jarred out of slumber with a feeling of wrongness that reacted in instant caution. He let his eyes slit open, relieved to find there was still light.

Between him and the door, a figure was creeping up on hands and knees. The rags of clothes indicated it was a woman and the knife in one hand spelled murder!

Duke snapped himself upright to a sitting position, his hand darting for the gun in his pocket. A low shriek came from the woman, and she lunged forward, the knife rising. There was no time for the gun. He caught her wrist, twisting savagely. She scratched and writhed, but the knife spun from her grasp. With a moan, she collapsed across his knees.

He turned her face up, staring at it unbelievingly. "Ronda!"

Bloated and stained, lined with fear, it still bore a faint resemblance to the girl he had known. Now a fleeting look of cunning crossed her face briefly, to be replaced with an attempt at dawning recognition. "Duke!" She gasped it, then made a sound that might have been meant for joy. She stumbled to her knees, reaching out to him. But her eyes swiveled briefly toward the knife. "Duke, it's you!"

He pushed her back and reached for the knife. He was sure she'd known who it was—had probably been the one who awakened him by looking in through the broken window. "Why'd you try to kill me, Ronda? You saw who it was. If you needed money, you know I'd give you anything I had. Why?"

"Not for money." She twisted from him and slumped limply against a broken wall. Tears came into her eyes. This time the catch in her voice was real. "I know . . . I know, Duke. And I wanted to see you, to talk to you, too." She shook her head slowly. "What can I do with money? I wanted to wake you up like old times. But Mrs. Kalaufa —she led you here—she said—"

He waited, but she didn't finish. She traced a pattern on the dust of the floor, before looking up again. "You've never been really hungry! Not that hungry! You wouldn't understand."

"Even with the dole, you can't starve that much in the time since Kordule was bombed," he protested. He gagged as he thought of the meaning he'd guessed from her words, expecting her to deny it.

She shrugged. "In ten years, you can do anything. Oh, sure, you came back on leave and we lived high. Everything was fine here, wasn't it? Sure it was, for you. They briefed me on where I should take you, so there'd be good food ready. They kept a few places going for the men who came back on leave. We couldn't ruin your morale!"

She laughed weakly, and let the sound die away slowly. "How do you think we sent out the food and supplies for the fleet the last three years, after the blockade on our supplies from friendly worlds? Why do you think there was no more leave for you? Because they didn't think you brave soldiers could stand just seeing how the rest of us lived! And you think you had it tough! Watch the sky for the enemy while your stomach hopes for the sound that might be a rat. Hide three cans of food you'll be shot for hoarding—because there is nothing else important in the world. And then have a man steal them from you when the raids come! What does a soldier know of war?"

The sickness inside him grew into a knot, but he still couldn't fully believe what she was saying. "But cannibalism—"

"No." She shook her head with a faint trace of his own disgust. "No, Duke. Mrs. Kalaufa told me . . . you're not really the same race—Not as close as you are to an Earth animal, and you don't call that cannibalism. Nobody on Meloa has ever been a cannibal—yet! How much money do you have, Duke?"

He took it out and handed it to her. She counted it mechanically and handed it back. "Not enough. You can't take me away when you leave here."

"I'm not leaving," he told her. He dropped the money back on the blanket beside her.

She stared at him for a moment and then pulled herself up to her feet, moving toward the door. "Good-by, Duke. And get off Meloa. You can't help us any more. And I don't want you here when I get desperate enough to remember you might take me back. I like you too much for that, even now."

He took a step toward her, and she ducked.

"Get out!" She screamed it at him. "Do you think I can stand looking at you without drooling any longer? Do you want me to call Mrs. Kalaufa for help?"

Through the open door, he saw Mrs. Kalaufa across the street, still cradling the child. As the door slammed shut behind him, the woman screamed, either as a summons or from fear that he'd seek revenge on her. He saw other heads appear, with frantic eyes that stared sullenly at the gun he carried. He stumbled down the street, where rain was beginning to fall, conscious that it would be night before he got back to the port. He no longer cared.

There was no place for him here, he now saw. He was still an Earthman, and Earthmen were always treated as a race apart somehow. He didn't belong. Nor could he go back to a life on Earth. But there were still the recruiting stations there; so long as war existed, there had to be such stations. He headed for the fat ships of Earth that squatted complacently on the wrecked port.

IV

Prince Queeth of Sugfarth had left the royal belt behind, and only a plain band encircled his round little body as he trotted along, his four legs making almost no sound. His double pair of thin arms and the birdlike head on his long neck bobbled excitedly in time to his steps. Once he stopped to glance across the black stone buildings of the city as they shone in the dull red of the sun, toward the hill where his father's palace was lighted brightly for the benefit of his Earth guests. Queeth touched his ears together ceremoniously and then trotted on, until he came to the back door of his group's gymnasium. He whistled the code word and the door opened automatically.

The whole group was assembled, though it was past sleep week for most of them. Their ears clicked together, but they waited silently as he curled himself up in the official box. Then Krhal, the merchant viscount, whistled questioningly. "This will have to be important, Queeth."

The prince bobbed his ears emphatically. "It is. My father's guests have all the news, and I learned everything. It won't be as long as we thought." He paused, before delivering the big news. "The bipeds of Kloomiria are going to attack Cathay. There'll be official war there within two weeks!"

He saw them exchanging hasty signals, but again it was Krhal who voiced their question. "And you think that is important, Queeth? What does it offer us? Cathay is a human colony. Earth will have to declare war with her. And with Earth's wealth, it will be over before we could arrive."

"Earth has already passed a resolution that neutrality will apply to colonies as well as to other planets!"

This time the whistles were sharp-

er. Krhal had difficulty believing it at first. "So Earth really is afraid to fight? That must mean those rumors that she has no fleet are true. Our ancestors thought so, and even planned to attack her, before the humanoids defeated us. The ancestor king believed that even a single ship fully armed might conquer her."

"It could be," Queeth admitted. "But do you agree that this is the news for which we've waited so long?"

There was a quick flutter of ears. "It's our duty," Krhal agreed. "In a war between Cathay and Kloomiria, we can't remain neutral if we're ever to serve our friends. Well, the ship is ready!"

That came as a surprise to Queeth. He knew the plans were well along, but not that they were completed. As merchant viscount, and second-degree adult, Krhal was entitled to a tenth of his father's interests. He'd chosen the biggest freighter and the balance in fluid assets, to the pleasure of his father—who believed he was planning an honorable career of exploring.

"The conversion completed?" Queeth asked. "But the planet bombs—!"

"Earth supplied them on the last shipment. I explained on the order that I was going to search uninhabited planets for minerals."

Queeth counted the group again, and was satisfied. There were enough. With a ship of that size, fully staffed and armed, they would be a welcome addition to any fleet.

They might be enough to tip the balance for victory, in fact. And while Cathay and Kloomiria lay a long way on the other side of Earth's system, the drives were fast enough to cover it in two weeks.

"Does your father know?" Krhal asked.

Queeth smirked. "Would you tell him? He still believes along with the Earth ambassador that the warrior strain was ruined among our people when we lost the war with the humanoids."

"Maybe it was," Krhal said doubtfully. "In four generations, it could evolve again. And there are the books and traditions from which we trained. If even a timid race such as those of Earth can produce warriors like O'Neill—a mere poet—why can't the Sugfarth do better? Particularly when Earth rebuilt factories for us to start our shipbuilding anew."

"Then we join the war," the prince decided.

There was a series of assent signals from the group.

"Tonight," he suggested, and again there was only assent.

Krhal stood up, setting the course for the others. When the last had risen, Queeth uncurled himself and rose from the box. "We'll have to pass near Earth," he suggested as they filed out toward the hangars where Krhal kept his ship. "Maybe we should show our intentions there!"

There was a sudden whistle of surprise. Then the assent was mounting wildly. Queeth trotted ahead toward the warship, making his attack plans over again as he realized he was a born leader who could command such enthusiasm. He had been doubtful before, in spite of his study of elementary statistical treatment of relationships.

The lights in the palace showed that the Earth guests were still celebrating as the great, heavily-laden warship blasted up and headed toward Earth.

V

Duke O'Neill found a corner of the lounge where no Earthman was near and dropped down with the magazine and papers, trying to catch up on the currents of the universe as they affected the six hundred connected worlds. Most of the articles related to Earth alone, and he skipped them. He found one on the set-up of the Outer Federation finally. The humanoid planets there were in a pocket of alien worlds, and union had been almost automatic. It was still loose, but it seemed to have sound enough a basis.

If Earth had been willing to come out of its shell and risk some of its fat trading profits, there could have been an even stronger union that would have driven warlike thoughts out of the minds of all the aliens.

Instead, she seemed to be equally interested in building up her potential enemies and ruining her friends. Duke had watched a showing of new films on the work being done

on Throm the night before, and he was still sick from it. Throm had lost the war, but by a military defeat, not by thirty-one unprotected raids on all her surface. She still had landing fields equipped for Earth ships, and the big freighters were dropping down regularly, spewing out foods, equipment and even heavy machinery for her rebuilding. Throm was already on the road back. Meloa had to wait until she could pull herself up enough to build fields.

Duke turned his eyes to the port. The ship had stopped at Clovis on the way back to Earth. From where he sat, he could see almost Earth-like skyscrapers stretching up in a great city. The landing field was huge, and there were rows on rows of factories building more of the freighters that stubbed the field.

It seemed impossible, when he remembered that only forty years had passed since Djamboula's suicide raid had finally defeated the fungoid creatures of the planet and since the survivors' vows to repay all Earthmen for their defeat. They were a prolific race, of course—but without help from Earth, the factories would be shacks and the rockets and high-drive ships would be only memories.

He wondered how many were cursing their ancestors for making the mistake of attacking a neighboring humanoid planet instead of Earth, only two days away on high drive. By now, they knew that Earth was defenseless. And yet, they seemed content to go on with their vows forgotten. Duke couldn't believe it. Down underground, beyond Earth inspection, they could have vast stockpiles of weapons, ready to install in their ships within days.

How could Earth risk it, unless she had her own stock of hidden ships and weapons? Yet if she did, he was sure that it would have been impossible not to use them in defense of the colony of Cathay.

He stared out, watching the crewmen mixing with the repulsive alien natives, laughing as they worked side by side. There must be some factor he didn't understand, but he'd never found it—nor did he know anyone who had guessed it.

He stirred, uncomfortable with his own thoughts. But it wasn't fear for Earth that bothered him. It was simply that sooner or later some alien race would risk whatever unknown power the others feared. If the aliens won, the vast potential power of Earth would then be turned against all the humanoid races of the universe. Humanity could be driven from the galaxy.

He turned the pages, idly glancing at the headlines. It was hard to realize that the paper wasn't right off the presses of Earth; it must have been brought out to Clovis on the latest ship. He checked the date, and frowned in surprise. According to the rough calendar he'd kept, it was the current date. Somewhere he must have lost track of two days. How much else had he lost sight of during the long years of war?

A diagram caught his attention almost at once as he turned to another magazine. It was of a behemoth ship, bigger than any he had ever seen, and built like the dream of a battleship, though it was listed as a freighter. He scanned it, mentally converting it. With a few like that, Meloa could have won during the first year.

Then he swore as he saw it was part of an article on the progress of some alien world known as Sugfarth—by the article, a world of former warriors, once dedicated to the complete elimination of humanoids!

He saw Flannery coming along the deck at that moment, and he picked up the magazine, heading for his cabin. He'd ignored previous summons on the thin excuse of not feeling well. He had no desire to talk with Earthmen. It was bad enough to take their charity back to Earth and to have to stay on the planet until he could sign on with the Outer Federation. His memories were ugly enough, without having them refreshed.

But Flannery caught him as he was opening the door to his cabin. The director was huge, with heavy, strong features and a body that looked too robust for the white hair and the age that showed around his eyes. His voice was tired, however, showing his years more plainly than his looks.

"Captain O'Neill," he said quickly. "Stop jousting with windmills. It's time you grew up. Besides, I've got a job for you."

"Does my charity passage demand an interview, director?" Duke asked.

The other showed no offense, unfortunately. He smiled wryly. "If I choose, it does. I'm in command of this ship, as well as head of the Foreign Office. May I come in?"

"I can't keep you out," Duke admitted. He dropped onto the couch, sprawling out, while the other found the single chair.

Flannery picked up the magazine and glanced through it. "So you're interested in the Outer Federation?" he asked. "Don't be. It doesn't have a chance. In a week or so, you'll see it shot. And I don't mean we'll wreck it. They've picked their own doom, against all the advice we could give them. Care to have a drink sent down while we talk?"

Duke shook his head. "I'd rather cut it short."

"Hotheads," Flannery told the walls thoughtfully, "make the best men obtainable, once they're tamed. Nothing beats an idealist who can face facts. And the intelligent ones usually grow up. Captain, I've studied your strategy against Throm on that last drive after Doyale was killed. Brilliant! I need a good man, and I can pay for one. If you give me a chance, I can also show you why you should take it. Know anything about how Earth got started on its present course?"

"Dumb luck and cowardice, as far as I can see," Duke answered.

When Earth discovered the first inefficient version of the high drive, she had found herself in a deserted section of the universe, with the nearest inhabited star system months away. The secret of the drive couldn't be kept, of course, but the races who used it to build war fleets found it easier to fight with each other than with distant Earth. Later, when faster drives were developed, Earth was protected by the buffer worlds she had rebuilt.

Flannery grinned. "Luck—and experience. We learned something from our early nuclear-technological wars. We learned more from the interstellar wars of others. We decided that any planet ruined by such war wouldn't fight again—the women and children who lived through that hell would see to it—unless new hatreds grew up during the struggle back. So we practically pauperized ourselves at first to see that they recovered too quickly for hate and fear. We also began digging into the science of how to manipulate relationships—Earth's greatest discovery—to set up a system that would work. It paid off for us in the long run."

"So what's all that got to do with me?" Duke asked. He'd heard of the great science of Earth and her ability to manipulate all kinds of relationships before, spoken of in hush-hush terms when he was still in college. But he'd quit believing in fairy tales even before then. Now he was even sicker of Earth's self-justification.

Flannery frowned, and then shrugged. "It's no secret I need a good man on Throm, and you're the logical candidate, if I can pound some facts into your head. I've found that sending an Earthman they know as a competent enemy works wonders. Not at first—there's hostility for a while—but in the long run it gives them a new slant on us."

"Then you'd better get an Earthman," Duke snapped. "You're talking to a citizen of Meloa! By choice!"

"I hadn't finished my explanation," Flannery reminded.

Duke snorted. "I was brought up on explanations. I heard men spouting about taming the aliens when I first learned to talk—as if they were wild animals. I read articles on how the Clovisem and those things from Sugfarth needed kindness. It's the same guff I heard about how to handle lions. But the men doing the talking weren't in the ring; and I noticed the ringmaster carried a whip and gun. He knew the beasts. I know the aliens of Throm."

"From fighting them? From hating them? Or from being more afraid of them than you think Earth is, captain? I've talked to more aliens than you've ever seen."

"And the Roman diplomats laughed at the soldiers who told them the Goths were getting ready to sack Rome."

Flannery stared at him in sudden amusement. "We aren't in an Empire period, O'Neill. But you might look up what the Romans did to

conquered people during the Republic, when Rome was still growing. Captain, I'm not underrating the aliens!"

"Tame aliens! Or ones faking tameness. You've seen them smiling, maybe. I saw the other side."

The old man sighed heavily and reached for his shirt. He began unbuttoning it and pulling it over his head. "You've got a nice prosthetic hand," he said. "Now take a look at some real handiwork!"

There was a strap affair around his shoulders, with a set of complicated electronic controls slipped into the muscle fibers. From them, both arms hung loose, unattached at the shoulder blades. Further down, another affair of webbing went around his waist.

"Only one leg is false," he explained, "but the decorations are real. They came from a highly skilled torturer. I've had my experience with aliens. Clovisem, if you're curious. I was the second in command on Djamboula's volunteer raid, forty years ago."

Duke dropped his eyes from the scars. For a second, he groped for words of apology. Then the cold, frozen section of his brain swallowed the emotions. "I've seen a woman with a prosthetic soul," he said bitterly. "Only she didn't turn yellow because of what the aliens did!"

Red spots shot onto Flannery's cheeks and one of the artificial arms jerked back as savagely as a real one. He hesitated, then reached for his shirt. "O. K., squawman!"

The word had no meaning for Duke, though he knew it was an insult. But he couldn't respond to it. He fumbled through his memories, trying to place it. Something about Indians—

Flannery began buttoning his pants over the shirt. "I'm out of bounds, captain," he said more quietly. "I hope you don't know the prejudices behind that crack. But you win. If you ever want the rest of the explanation, look me up."

He closed the door behind him softly and went striding evenly up the passage.

Duke frowned after him. The talk had gotten under his skin. If there were things he didn't know—

Then he swore at himself. There was plenty he didn't know. But the carefully developed indoctrination propaganda of the top Earth psychologists wasn't the answer he wanted.

He'd have to make his stay on Earth shorter than he'd planned. If they could get to a man who had served under Djamboula and convince him that Clovisem were nice house pets, it was little wonder they could wrap the rest of Earth around their psychological fingers.

Too bad their psychology wasn't adjusted to aliens!

VI

Barth Nevesh was nearly seven feet tall, and his cat-shaped ears stuck up another four inches above his head. Even among the people of

Kel he was a big man, but to the representatives of the other humanoid worlds of the Federation, he seemed a giant. The thick furs he wore against the heavy chill of the room added to his apparent size, and the horns growing from his shoulders lifted his robes until he seemed to have no neck.

Now he stood up, driving his heavy fist down against the big wooden table. "The question is, do we have the answer or not?" he roared. "You say we do. Logic says we do. Then let's act on it!"

The elfin figure of Lemillulot straightened up at the other end of the table. "Not so fast, commander. Nobody questions the power of your fleet. Nobody doubts that we have the only possible answer to the aliens that Earth is helping to take over our universe—strength through unity. But is it as good as it can be?"

"How better?" Barth roared again. "Every world in this alien pocket has been building its strength since the Earthmen's ships first reached here and showed us space travel was possible. We've seen the stinking aliens get the same ships. But now we've got something they can't resist—a Federation, in spite of all Earth could do to stop us. If all our fleets strike at once, no alien world can resist—and we can stop merely holding them back. Wipe them out, one by one, I say! The only good alien is a dead alien!"

There was a lot of talk—more than Barth usually heard or contributed in a month. Lemillulot was the focus of most of it. The little man would never be satisfied. He wanted all the humanoid worlds organized, and by now it was plain that Earth's influence would be too strong outside of their own section.

Their accomplishments were already enough. United as they were, the Federation was clearly invincible. Their fleets were at full size and the crews were thoroughly trained. No other time would be better.

There had already been a stir of ship-building on the alien worlds, since the first word of the Federation had somehow leaked out. The Federation position was as good as it would ever be—and with eleven fleets working together, nothing better was needed.

"Knock them down with the long shells, haze them to base with interceptors, and then rip their worlds with planet bombs," Barth repeated his plans. "We can do it in six hours for a planet—we can start at the strongest, Neflis, and work down through the weakest, to make up for our losses. And if the Earth forces start moving in to rebuild them—well, I've been thinking the Federation could use a little more wealth and power!"

"Humanoids don't attack humanoids," Lemillulot protested.

The snarling, dog face of Sra from Chumkt opened in a grin, and his sly voice held a hint of a chuckle. "Or so Earth keeps preaching. But Earthmen aren't humanoids. They're humans!"

He laughed softly at his own wit.

There were rumbles of uncertainty, but Barth saw that the seed had taken root. If they kept working together, he and Sra could force it to ripen soon enough.

"That can wait," Barth decided. "The question is, do we attack Neflis, and when? I say now!"

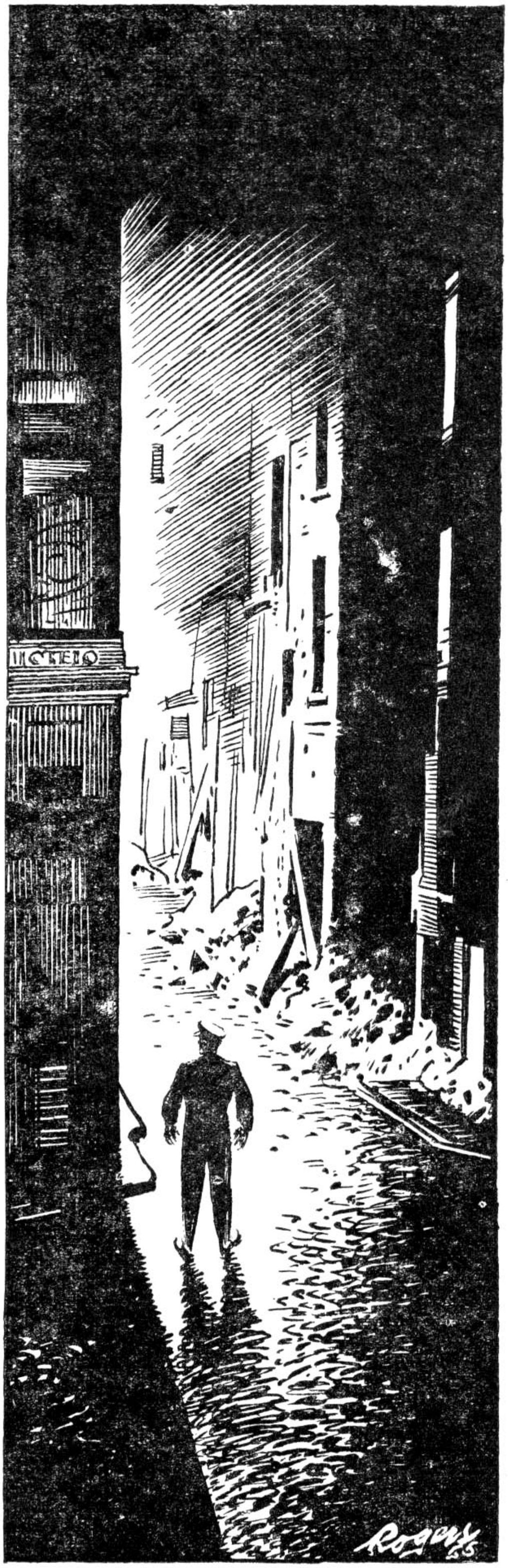
It took an hour more for the decision. But there would be only one answer, and the final vote was unanimous. The fleets would take off from their home worlds and rendezvous near the barren sun; from there, they would proceed in a group, under the control of Barth, toward the alien world of Neflis.

The commander checked his chronometer as the delegates went to send their coded reports to their home worlds. He had the longest distance to lead his fleet, and there was no time for delay.

Outside, the harsh snow crackled under his feet, and a layer of storm clouds cut off the wan heat of Kel's sun. He drew in a deep breath, watching the swirl of white as he exhaled. It was a good world—a world to build men. It was the world from which a leader should come.

The fleet would be all his within a day. And for a time, it would be busy at the work of wiping out the nearby aliens. After that—well, there were other aliens further out toward the last frontiers of exploration. With care, the fleet could be kept busy for years.

Barth was remembering his histories, and the armies that had been



swept together. In a few years, fighting men began to think of themselves as a people apart, and loyalty to their birthplace gave way to loyalty to their leader. Five years should be enough. Then there could be more than a Federation; there could be the empire among the worlds that had been his lifelong dream.

But first, there was Earth. He snorted to himself as he reached the ships of his fleet. Missionaries! Spreading their soft fear through the universe. In five years, his fleet should be ready for ten times the power of any single planet—including Earth.

Sra would be the only problem in his way. But that could be met later. For the moment, the man from Chumkt was useful.

Barth strode up the ramp of his flagship, shouting out to his men as he went. There was no need of signals. They had been primed and waiting for days, ready to follow him up.

He dropped to the control seat, staring at the little lights that would tell him of their progress. "Up ship!" he shouted, and from the metal halls and caverns of the ship other voices echoed his cry.

The *Wind Dragon* leaped upwards sharply. Behind, as the red lights showed, four hundred others charged into the sky and the open space beyond. Barth sat at the great screen, watching as they drew on steadily toward the rendezvous, mulling over his plans.

They were three hours out from Kel when he turned the control over to his lieutenant and went below, where his table was laden with the smoking cheer of good green meat and ale. With a sigh of contentment, he threw back his outer robe and prepared to forget everything until he had dined.

He was humming hoarsely to himself as he cut a piece of the meat and stuck it on his left shoulder horn, within reach of his teeth. Maybe a little of the baked fish would blend well—

The emergency drum blasted through the ship as he lifted the knife. Swearing and tearing at the flesh near his mouth, he leaped up and forward toward the control room. He heard voices shouting, something about a fleet. Then he was at the screens where he could see for himself.

Five million miles ahead, another fleet was assembled, where none should be from any of the Federation worlds! His eyes swept sideways across the screen, estimating the number. It was impossible. There weren't a quarter of that number in the fleet of any world, humanoid or alien!

Barth flipped on the microresolver, twisting the wheel that sent it racing across the path of the fleet ahead. His eyes confirmed what his mind had already recognized.

The aliens had their own federation. There were ships of every type there, grouped in units. Thirteen alien worlds were combined against the Outer Federation.

For a breath he hesitated, ready

to turn back and defend Kel while there was time. But it would never work. One fleet would never be enough to defend the planet against the combined aliens.

"Cluster!" he barked into the communicator. "Out rams and up speed. Prepare for breakthrough!"

If they could hit the aliens at full drive and cut through the weaker center, they could still rendezvous with the other fleets. The combined strength might be enough. And the gods help Kel if the aliens refused to follow him!

Earth, he thought; Earth again, coddling and protecting aliens, forming them into a conspiracy against the humanoid worlds. If Kel or any part of the Federation survived, that debt would be paid!

VII

Earth lay fat and smug under the sun, seemingly unchanged since Duke had left it. For generations the populace had complained that they were draining themselves dry to rebuild other worlds, but they had grown rich on the investment. It was the only planet where men worked shorter and shorter hours to give them more leisure in which to continue a frantic effort to escape boredom. It was also the only world where the mention of aliens made men think of their order books instead of their weapons.

Duke walked steadily away from the grotesquely elaborate landing field. He had less than thirty cents in his pocket, but his breakfast aboard had left him satisfied for the moment. He turned onto a wider street, heading the long distance across the city toward the most probable location of the recruiting stations.

The Outer Federation station would be off the main section, since the official line was disapproving of such a union. But he was sure there would be one. The system of recruiting was a tradition too hard to break. Earth used it as an escape valve for her troublemakers. And since such volunteers made some of the best of all fighters, they had already decided the outcome of more than one war. By carefully juggling the attention given the stations, Earth could influence the battles without seeming to do so.

The air was thick with the smell of late summer, and there was pleasure in that, until Duke remembered the odor of Meloa, and its cause. Later the cloying perfume of women mixed with the normal industrial odors of the city, until his nose was overdriven to the point of cutoff. He saw things in the shop windows that he had forgotten, but he had no desire for them. And over everything came the incessant yammer of voices saying nothing, radios blaring, television babbling, and vending machines shouting.

He gave up at last and invested half his small fund in a subway. It was equally noisy, but it took less time. Beside him, a fungoid creature from Clovis was busy practicing si-

lently on its speaking machine, but nobody else seeemd to notice.

Duke's head was spinning when he reached the surface again. He stopped to let it clear, wondering if he'd ever found this world home. It wouldn't matter soon, though; once he was signed up at the recruiting station, there would be no time to think.

He saw the sign, only a few blocks from where the recruiting posters for Meloa had been so long ago. It was faded, but he could read the lettering, and he headed for it. As he had expected, it was on a dirty back street, where the buildings were a confusion of shipping concerns and cheaper apartment houses.

He knew something was wrong when he was a block away. There was no pitch being delivered by a barking machine, and no idle group watching the recruiting efforts on the street. In fact, nobody was in front of the vacant store that had been used, and the big posters were ripped down.

He reached the entrance and stopped. The door was half open, but it carried a notice that the place had been closed by order of the World Foreign Office. Through the dirty glass, Duke could see a young man of about twenty sitting slumped behind a battered desk.

He stepped in and the boy looked up apathetically. "You're too late, captain. Neutrality went on hours ago when the first word came through. Caught me just ready to ship out—after two lousy months recruiting here, I have to be the one stranded."

"You're lucky," Duke told him mechanically, not sure whether he meant it or not. Oddly, the idea of a kid like this mixed up in an interplanetary war bothered him. He turned to go, then hesitated. "Got a newspaper or a directory around that I could borrow?"

The boy fished a paper out of a wastebasket. "It's all yours, captain. The whole place is yours. Slam the door when you go out. I'm going over to the Cathay office."

"I'll go along," Duke offered. The address of that place was all he'd wanted from the paper. He'd have preferred the Federation to joining up with Earth colonists, but beggars never made good choosers.

The kid shook his head. He dragged open a drawer, found a slip of paper, and handed it over. It was a notice that the legal maximum age for recruiting had been reduced to thirty! "You'd never make it, captain," he said.

Duke looked at the paper in his hands and at the dim reflection of his face in a window. "No," he agreed. "I didn't make it."

He followed the boy to the door, staring out at the street, thick with its noises and smells. He dropped to the doorsill and looked briefly up at the sky where two ships were cutting out to space. Flannery had known the regulation and hadn't told him. Yet it was his own fault; the age limit was lower now, but there had always been a limit. He had

simply forgotten that he'd grown older.

He found it hard to realize he'd been no older than the kid when he'd signed up for the war with Throm.

For a while he sat looking at the street, trying to realize what had happened to him. It took time to face the facts. He listened with half his attention as a small group of teen-age boys came from one of the buildings and began exchanging angry insults with another group apparently waiting for them on the corner. From their attitudes, some of them were carrying weapons and were half-eager, half-afraid to use them. It was hard to remember back to the time when such things had seemed important to him. He considered putting a stop to the argument, before it got out of hand, since no police were near; but adults had no business in kid fights. He watched them retreat slowly back to an alley, still shouting to work up their courage. Maybe he should be glad that there was even this much fire left under the smug placidity of Earth.

Finally, he picked up the newspaper from where he'd dropped it and began turning back to the want ads. His needs were few, and there should be dishwashing jobs, at least, somewhere in the city. He still had to eat and find some place to sleep.

A headline glared up at him, catching his attention. He started to skim the story, and then read it thoroughly. Things weren't going at all as he'd expected in the Outer Worlds, if the account were true; and usually, such battle reports weren't altered much.

The aliens had developed a union of their own—if anything, a stronger one than the humanoids had. Apparently they'd chased the Federation ships into some kind of a trap. Losses on both sides were huge. And raids had begun on all the alien and humanoid planets.

He scowled as he came to the latest developments. One section of the Federation fleet under Sra of Chumkt had pulled out, accusing the faction headed by Barth Nevesh of leading the aliens to the humanoid rendezvous. Kel's leader had gone after the deserters, fought it out with them in the middle of the larger battle, killed Sra, and declared himself the head of the whole Federation. It was madness that should have led to complete annihilation; only the fumbling, uncoördinated leadership of the aliens had saved the humanoid fleets. And now the Federation was coming apart at the seams, with Barth Nevesh frantically scurrying around to catch up the pieces.

Duke read it through again, but with no added information. It was a shock to know that the aliens had combined against the humanoid Federation. Still, looking back on that, he could begin to see that they would have to, once they knew of the Federation. But the rest of the account—

Flannery's words came back to him. The director had been right. His prediction was already coming true, after only three days—unless he had either had prior knowledge or juggled things to make it come true! Duke considered it, but he could see no way Flannery could either learn or act in advance of the arrival of the ship on Earth. The Federation was farther from Meloa than from this planet. He'd been forced to depend on the same accounts Duke had read in the papers on board the ship.

Then Duke glanced at the date on the current paper idly, and his thoughts jolted completely out of focus. It was dated only three days later than the paper he had seen when they were docked on Clovis! Without instantaneous communication, it was impossible. He might have been mistaken about the date before, but—

Nothing fitted. The feeling of uncertainty came back, crowding out the minor matter of his memory of the date. He stared at the richness of even this poor section of an Earth that huddled here as if afraid of its own shadows, yet reeked with self-satisfaction. He thought of Meloa and Throm, and the gallant try at Federation that had been made on the Outer Worlds. Strength had to lie in union and action; yet all the evidence seemed to say that it lay in timidity and sloth.

Reluctantly he turned the page away from the news, to seek for the job sections. From the alley, there came the sound of a police whistle, and shouts that faded into the distance. It was probably the breaking up of the teen-age argument. A few people ran by, heading for the excitement, but Duke had lost all interest. A taxi stopped nearby and he heard a patter that might have been that of children's feet, but he didn't look up.

Then a sharper whistle shrilled almost in his ear and he twisted around to stare at a creature who was gazing at him. Four spindly legs led up to a globular body encased in a harness-like contraption. Above the body, two pairs of thin arms were waving about, while a long neck ended in a birdlike head, topped by two large ears.

The ears suddenly seemed to shimmer in the air, and a surprisingly human voice sounded. "You're Captain Duke O'Neill!"

Before Duke could answer, a small hand came out quickly to find his and begin shaking it, while the ears twittered on in excitement. "I'm honored to meet you, Captain O'Neill. I've been studying your work against Throm. Amazingly clever strategy! Permit me—I'm Queeth, lately a prince of Sugfarth. Perhaps you noticed our ship? No, of course not. You must have landed at the government field. My crew and I are on the way to the war about to begin between Kloomiria and Cathay."

"Why tell me about it?" Duke asked roughly. Sugfarth—the ship

he'd seen diagrammed had come from there. If one of those titans was to be used against Cathay, Earth's colony was doomed. And the impertinent little monster—!

The creature tried to imitate a shrug with his upper set of arms. "Why not, captain? We're registered here as a recruiting ship for Cathay, so it's no secret. We thought we might as well carry along some of the men going out to help, since we had to pass near Earth anyhow. And I dropped by here in the hope that there might be a few who had failed to join the Federation and who would like to switch to Cathay."

"Wait a minute," Duke said. He studied the alien, trying to rake what he'd learned from the article out of his memory. But no record of subtlety or deceit had been listed there. The Sugfarth were supposed to be honest—in fact, they'd been one of the rare races to declare their war in advance. Somehow, too, the words had a ring of truth in them. "*For* Cathay?"

"Certainly, captain. For whom else? The civilized Earth races naturally have to stick together against the barbarians."

Duke stared at the almost comic figure, juggling the words he had heard with the obvious facts. "What Earth races? Do you mean that Earth is now giving citizenship to your people?"

"Not on this planet, of course." A pair of beady black eyes stared back, as if trying to understand a ridiculous question. "But we're citizens of Earth's economic-cultural-diplomatic system, naturally."

Duke felt something nibble at his mind, but he couldn't grasp it. And he wasn't accustomed to carrying on long chitchat with aliens. He shoved the thoughts away and reached for the paper again. "You won't find

recruits here, Queeth. Only me. And I'm too old for the recruiting law. Besides, I've got to find a job."

He turned the pages, locating the column he wanted. What had Flannery meant about Republican Rome? Duke could remember dimly something about Rome's granting citizenship to her conquered neighbors. It had been the basis of the city's growth and later power. Now if Earth could inspire citizenship from conquered aliens—

Queeth made a sound like a sigh and shuffled his four feet on the sidewalk uncertainly. "If you came aboard on a visit, who could stop our taking off at once?" he suggested. "We have room for another officer, and we need men like you, Captain O'Neill, to help us against the aliens out there!"

Duke looked down at the small face, and even the alien features couldn't disguise the obvious sincerity behind the words. It should have made his decision automatic. He'd come here to be recruited, and he was being accepted. There was a ship waiting for him, where his skills could be used. With such a ship, things would be different from the war he had known. He had a picture of Kloomiria under attack from it.

Abruptly, he was seeing again the exploding ships of Throm, and the charnel smell of Kordule on victorious Meloa was thick in his nose.

He stood up, shaking his head, and held out his hand, groping for the phrases that had been all-important once among the recruits he had joined. "Thanks, Queeth," he said finally. "But I've got something to catch up on here. Good luck—on to victory—and give the aliens hell!"

He stood watching Queeth patter off toward the waiting cab and saw it drive away. Then he turned to the want ads in earnest.

Nothing was clear in his mind yet, but he'd need a job first, then a room near the library. He had a lot of current history to catch up on. Whatever Earth was up to had to be recorded somewhere, if he could find it.

VIII

Through half his reign, Var of Kloomiria had nursed his hatred of the humans into a holy mission. It was eighty years since his visit to Cathay, when the colonists' children had run screaming from him, shouting that he was a monster, but time had only sharpened the memory. He had covered his too-human body under a multitude of robes and had gloried in the alienness of his head, with its fringe of breathing tentacles and the two lobsterlike claws that concealed his tiny mouth. Year after long year, he had built and prayed for the war of vengeance that must come.

Almost, it had passed him by. With the threat of help from Earth for Cathay, he had been forced to delay while larger fleets were built. His reign had been drawing to a close and he had almost resigned himself to the law that would turn

the rulership over to his eldest son. Then the boy had died in an explosion less than a week from the change of rule, and almost simultaneously Earth's timidity had won again, and the protection had been denied her colony.

Now Var's waiting was finished. He stood in the cabin of his flagship, heading back to Kloomiria after the opening raid of the war, savoring the sweetness of the damage he had done Cathay. Life was sweet.

Behind him, the door dilated softly and his aide came in, carrying a roll of paper. "A message from Cathay, magnificence," he announced.

Var opened the message and studied it. Then he read it again, uncertainly. He was sure of his knowledge of English, but the note was senseless gibberish. Again he read it, this time aloud:

"Yours of the fourteenth ultimo received and contents noted. We are pleased to inform you that we are in a position to fill your entire order and that shipment is going out at once by special messenger. We trust that you will find our products superior in every way. We believe that you will find our terms completely reasonable."

It made no more sense aloud.

The aide sighed apologetically. "Deliberately misapplied archaicism is sometimes regarded as humorous by Earthmen, magnificence. I suspect this is a warning that they are retaliating."

"Bluff!" Var read the words again, but he could make no other meaning from them. Did the fools expect him to believe their flippancy spelled confidence, or were they deceiving themselves? And the hint of surrender terms was sheer stupidity. It must be an offer, though the wording seemed to indicate *he* should surrender!

He threw the message into a waste receptacle in disgust and went over to look at the screens where Kloomiria was showing. The humans of Cathay might try a return raid, but he was unworried. Cathay's fleet was pitiful, and she had no heavy ships from which to launch planet bombs. Of course, there were spy reports of vast numbers of what seemed to be guided missiles, but they could never get through the confusion-signals that blanketed Kloomiria.

As he watched, a signal blinked. He opened the circuit and the face of his admiral looked out. "We've received indications of a swarm of small ships, magnificence," the man reported. "High speed and piloted. It may be a suicide squadron."

"Suicide!" Var spat the word out. "Whoever heard of the human cowards risking their necks?"

The aide touched his shoulder apologetically. "They are mentioned in Earth books, magnificence. And there was Djamboula."

Var stared at the screen as the flight was relayed to him, snarling. Definitely, they were one-man ships, not guided missiles. His defenses had never been built to handle suicide squadrons.

"Up, surround them, blast them!"

he ordered. A few might get through to the ships or to the planet below, but quick action would wreak havoc among them and discourage further attempts.

The Kloomirian fleet opened into a circle and began rising. Now the swarm of little ships began breaking apart, fanning out and attempting to turn. Var hissed. Not even the courage to go through with it after they were discovered! They—

He leaped to the screen, cursing at what he saw.

Where the little ships had opened a hole, a monstrous bulk was hurtling through at fantastic speed. The tiny ships had screened it, but now it outran them, boring straight toward the opening in the Kloomirian fleet. Atomic cannon began running out of enormous hatches, like the bristles jutting from a tendril brush.

"Blast out!" Var screamed into his engine phone. His flagship leaped away at full drive, while the enemy seemed to grow on the screen. Then it diminished as they began drawing away from the fleet.

There was nothing Var could do about the horror that followed. The great vessel bored through the fleet with cannons spitting out hell. If countershots were fired, they had no effect.

"Sugfarth!" the aide screamed in his ears. "A ship from Sugfarth!"

Var remembered the pictures he had seen, and they matched, though none had suggested such a size. It was impossible. The race of Sugfarth were aliens—warriors who had fought humanoids as few races had done. They would have fought with him, not against him!

The ship drove down toward the planet, braking fiercely now. From it, two bulky objects fell. While the planet bombs dropped, the behemoth began to rise again. It came through the shattered ranks of Kloomiria's fleet, blasting again, and headed toward the tiny ships that had screened it, new hatches opening to receive them.

Half of Var's fleet was in total ruin. On the planet below, two horrible gouts of flame leaped up through the atmosphere and beyond it, while all of Kloomiria seemed to tremble as half a continent was ruined. Var stared down at the destruction, unmoving.

The aide coughed, holding out another roll of paper. "Cathay is broadcasting an appeal for us to surrender without reprisals, magnificence. And the Estate Governors are demanding fleet protection."

Var crushed the paper in his hands without reading it.

It would take half the remaining part of the fleet to give even token protection to Kloomiria. His plans had never been based on holding back the seemingly weak forces of Cathay.

"No answer," he said. His hand reached for the communicator switch and he began issuing orders. "The fleet will regroup and return to base for immediate repairs and rearming. Commanders of *all* ships will pre-

pare to take off against Cathay within six hours!"

Somehow, the humans had to be crushed completely before they could destroy Kloomiria. After that, if any of his race survived, there would be a mission for all future generations.

Only the power of Earth could have sent the alien ship from Sugfarth, loaded with cannon and bombs, to fight against fellow aliens. Earth had declared neutrality, and then struck! For such a villainy, a million years was not too long to seek vengeance!

IX

Night had fallen in the park beyond the huge Foreign Office building and the air was damp and cool. Duke shivered in the shadows that covered his bench. He should head back to his room, but he had no desire to listen again to the meaningless chatter that came through the thin walls. Time didn't matter to him now, anyhow.

He swore and reached for a cigarette, brushing the crumpled newspaper from his lap. He'd been a fool to think Flannery would bother with him, just as he'd been a fool to turn down Queeth's offer. He'd wasted his day off from the messenger job.

Footsteps sounded down the walk that led past his bench, and he drew deeper into the shadows. The steps slowed and a man moved to the other end of the bench. Duke drew heavily on his cigarette, tossed it away, and started to get up.

"Drink?" There was a hand holding a flask in front of him. He hesitated, then took it, and let a long slug run down his throat. In the faint light he could make out the face of Director Flannery. The man nodded. "Sorry I was out when you came, O'Neill. One of the guards saw you out here, so I came over."

"You should have been in," Duke said, handing the flask back. "I've changed my mind since reading about some of your deals in the *Journal.* Well, thanks for the drink."

One of Flannery's prosthetic hands rested on Duke's shoulder, and the pressure was surprisingly heavy. "When a man takes a drink with me, captain, he waits until I finish mine." He tipped up the flask and drank slowly before putting it away. "I suppose you mean the Cathay-Kloomiria mess?"

"What else?" Mess was a mild word. The Sugfarth ship had seemed to make victory for Cathay certain the first few days, but the war had entered a new phase now. Cathay couldn't maintain the big ship, and it was practically useless. It had simply served to reduce Kloomiria to a position where both sides were equal. The war showed signs of settling down to another prolonged, exhausting affair.

"Yeah, I read the editorial." Flannery sighed. "We did let a couple of fools make Cathay think we'd bail her out. At the time, it seemed wise. The son of old Var was due to assume rule in a little while and he was strongly pro-human. We

wanted to hold things off until he took over and scrapped the war plans. When he was killed—well, we pulled out before Var was any stronger."

"And sent Queeth's crowd in to do your blood-letting for you?" Duke sneered.

"That was their own idea," Flannery denied. He lighted a cigarette and sat staring at the end of it, blowing out a slow stream of smoke. "All right, we made a mess of Cathay. We'll know better next time. Care to walk back with me?"

"Why? So one of your trained psychopropagandists can indoctrinate me? Or to get drunk and cry over your confession?"

"To keep me from sinking to your level and pushing your nose down your throat!" Flannery told him, but there was no real anger in his voice. He stood up, shrugging. "Nobody's forcing you, O'Neill. Say the word and I'll drive you home. But if you want that explanation, my working office seems like a good place to talk."

For a moment, Duke wavered. But he'd reached the end of his own research, and he'd come here to find the answers. Leaving now would only make him more of a fool. "O. K.," he decided. "I'll stay for the big unveiling."

Flannery grimaced. "There's no great secret, though we don't broadcast the facts for people and races not ready for them. We figure those who finish growing up here will soak up most of it automatically. Did you get around to the film file on interstellar wars at the library?"

Duke nodded, wondering how much they knew about his activities. He'd spent a lot of time going over the film for clues. It was so old that the color had faded in places. The rest would have been easier to take without color. Most wasn't good photography, but all was vivid. It was the record of all the wars since Earth's invention of the high-drive —nearly two hundred of them. Gimsul, Hathor, Ptek, Sugfarth, Clovis, and even Meloa—the part he hadn't seen, beyond Kordule where the real damage lay; Ronda had been wrong, and cannibalism had been discovered, along with much that was worse. Two hundred wars in which victor and vanquished alike had been ruined—in which the supreme effort needed to win had left most of the victors worse than the defeated systems.

"War!" The word was bitter on Flannery's lips. "Someone starts building war power—power to insure peace, as they always say. Then other systems must have power to protect themselves. Strength begets force—and fear and hatred. Sooner or later, the strain is too great, and you have a war so horrible that its very horror makes surrender impossible. You saw it on Meloa. I've seen it fifty times!"

They reached the Foreign Office building and began crossing its lobby. Flannery glanced up at the big seal on the wall with its motto in

twisted Latin—*Per Astra ad Aspera*—and his eyes turned back to Duke's, but he made no comment. He led the way to a private elevator that dropped them a dozen levels below the street, to a small room, littered with things from every conceivable planet. One wall was covered with what seemed to be the control panel of a spaceship, apparently now used for a desk. The director dropped into a chair and motioned Duke to another.

He looked tired, and his voice seemed older as he bent to pull a small projector and screen from a drawer and set them up. "The latest chapter of the film," he said bitterly, throwing the switch.

It was a picture of the breakup of the Outer Federation, and in some ways worse than the other wars. Chumkt rebelled against Kel's leadership and joined the aliens, while a civil war sprang up on her surface. Two alien planets went over to Kel. The original war was forgotten in a struggle for new combinations, and a thousand smaller wars replaced it. The Federation was dead and the two dozen races were dying.

"When everything else fails, the fools try federation," Flannery said as the film ended. "We tried it on Earth. Another race discovered the interstellar drive before we did and used it to build an empire. We've found the dead and sterile remains of their civilization. It's always the same. When one group unites its power, those nearby must ally for protection. Then there's a scramble for more power, while jealousies and fears breed new hatreds, internally and externally. And finally, there's ruin—because at the technological level of interstellar travel, victory in war is absolutely, totally impossible!"

He sat back, and Duke waited for him to resume, until it was obvious he had finished. At last, the younger man gave up waiting. "All right," he said. "Earth won't fight! Am I supposed to turn handsprings? I figured that much out myself. And I learned a long time ago about the blessed meek who were to inherit the Earth—but I can't remember anything being said about the stars!"

"You think peace won't work?" Flannery asked mildly.

"I know it won't!" Duke fumbled for a cigarette, trying to organize his thoughts. "You've been lucky so far. You've counted on the fact that war powers have to attack other powers nearby before they can safely strike against Earth, and you've buffered yourself with a jury-rigged economic trading system. But what happens when some really bright overlord decides to by-pass his local enemies? He'll drop fifty planet bombs out of your peaceful skies and collect your vassal worlds before they can rearm. You won't know about that, though. You'll be wiped out!"

"I wouldn't call our friends vassals, or say the system was jury-rigged," Flannery objected. "Ever hear of paradynamics? The papers call it the ability to manipulate rela-

tionships, when we let them write a speculative article. It's what lets us rebuild worlds in less than half a century—and form the first completely peaceful politico-economic culture we've ever known. Besides, I never said we had no weapons for our defense."

Duke considered it, trying to keep a firm footing on the shifting quicksand of the other's arguments. He knew a little of paradynamics, of course, but only as something supposed to remake the world and all science in some abstract future. It had been originated as a complex mathematical analysis of nuclear relationships, and had been seized on for some reason by the sociologists. It had no bearing he could see on the main argument.

"It won't wash, Flannery. Without a fleet, it won't matter if you have the plans of every weapon ever invented. The first time a smart power takes the chance, you'll run out of time."

"We didn't!" Flannery swung to the control board that served as his desk, and his fingers seemed to play idly with the dials. From somewhere below them, there was a heavy vibration, as if great engines had sprung into life. He pressed another switch.

Abruptly, the room was gone. There was a night sky above them, almost starless, and with a great, glaring moon shining down, to show a rough, mossy terrain that seemed covered endlessly with row after row

of rusting, crumbling spaceships. Atomic cannon spilled from their hatches, and broken ramps led down to the ground. Down one clearer lane among the countless ships that surrounded him, Duke saw what might be a distant fire with a few bent figures around it, giving the impression of age.

Beside him, Flannery sat in his chair, holding a small control. There was nothing else of the office visible.

The director shook his head. "It's no illusion, O'Neill. You're here—fifty odd thousand light-years from Earth, where we transferred the attacking fleet. You never heard of that, of course. The dictator-ruler naturally didn't make a report when his fleet simply vanished without trace. Here!"

The liquor burned in Duke's throat, but it steadied him. He bent down, to feel the mossy turf under his hand.

"It's real," Flannery repeated. "Paradynamics handles all relationships, captain. And the position of a body is simply a statement of its geometrical relationships. What happens if we change those relationships —with power enough, that is? There is no motion, in any classic sense. But newspapers appear two high-drive days away minutes after they're printed. We arrive here. And fleets sent against Earth just aren't there any more!"

He pressed a button, and abruptly the walls of his office were around them again—the office that was suddenly the control room of a building that was more of a battleship than any Duke had ever seen.

He found himself clutching the chair, and forced himself to relax, soaking up the shock as he had soaked up so many others. His mind faced the facts, accepted them, and then sickly extended them.

"All right, you've got weapons," he admitted, and disgust was heavy in his voice. "You can defend yourself. But can the galaxy defend itself when somebody decides it's a fine offensive weapon? Or are all Earthmen supposed to be automatically pure, so this will never be turned to offensive use? Prove that to me and maybe I'll change my mind about this planet and take that job of yours!"

Flannery leaned back, nodding soberly. "I intend to," he answered. "Duke, we tried making peaceful citizens of our youngsters here a century ago, but it wouldn't work. Kids have to have their little gang wars and their fisticuffs to grow up naturally. We can't force them. Their interests aren't those of adults. In fact, they think adults are pretty dull. No adventure. They can't see that juggling a twenty-million gamble on tooling up for a new competitive product is exciting; they can't understand working in a dull laboratory to dig something new out of nature's files can be exciting and dangerous. Above all, they can't see that the greatest adventure is the job of bringing kids up to be other adults. They regret the passing of

dueling and affairs of honor. But an adult civilization knows better—because the passing of such things is the first step toward a race becoming adult, because it is adopting a new type of thinking, where such things have no value. You didn't hit me when I called you names, because it made no sense from an adult point of view. Earth doesn't go to war for the same reason. Thank God, we grew up just before we got into space, where adult thinking is necessary to survival!"

There had been the kids and their seemingly pointless argument on the street. There had been the curiously distant respect the Meloans had shown him, as if they guessed that only his exterior was similar. There were a lot of things Duke could use to justify believing the director. It made a fine picture—as it was intended to.

"It must be wonderful to sit here safely, while agents do your dangerous work, feeling superior to anyone who shows any courage," he said bitterly. "I suppose every clerk and desk-jockey out there feeds himself the same type of rationalization. But words don't prove anything. How do you prove the difference between maturity and timidity or smugness?"

"You asked for it," Flannery said simply.

The button went down on the control again. The air was suddenly thin and bitingly cold as they looked down on a world torn with war, where a hundred ships shaped like half-disks and unlike anything Duke had seen were mixed up in some maneuver. The button was pushed again, and this time there was a world below that had a port busy with similar ships, not fighting now. A third press brought them onto the surface of a heavy world that seemed to be composed of solid buildings and factories, where the ships were being outfitted with incomprehensible goods. A thing like a pipe-stem man looked up from a series of operations, made a waving motion to them, and abruptly disappeared.

"Did you really think we could be the only adult race in the universe?" Flannery asked. "You're looking at the Allr, the closest cultural gestalt to us, and somewhere near our level. Now—"

Something squamous perched on a rock on what seemed to be a barren world. Before it floated bright points of light that were obviously replicas of planets, with tiny lines of light between them, and a shuttling of glints along the lines. The thing seemed to look at them briefly. A tentacle whipped up and touched Flannery, who sat with his hands off the control box. Without its use, they were abruptly back in their office.

Flannery shivered, and there was strain on his face, while Duke felt his mind freeze slowly, as if with physical cold. The director cleared his throat. "Or maybe we should look at more routine things, though you might consider that we have to get ready for the day when our advancing culture touches on other cultures.

Because we can't put it off forever."

This time, they were in a building, like a crude shed, and there were men there, standing in front of a creature that seemed like a human in armor—but chitinous armor that was part of him. The alien suddenly turned, though Duke could now see that they were in a section behind one-way glass. Nevertheless, it seemed to sense them. Abruptly, something began pulling at his mind, as if his thoughts were being drained. Flannery hit the button again. "Telepathic race, and very immature," he said, and there was worry in his voice. "Thank God, the only one we've found, and out of our immediate line of advance."

There were other scenes. A human being who walked endlessly three feet off the floor, fighting against some barrier that wasn't there, with his face frozen in fear, while creatures that seemed to be metallic moved about. "He found something while working on one of our paradynamic problems," Flannery said. "He transported himself there and has been exactly like that ever since —three years, now. So far, our deskjockeys here haven't been able to discover exactly what line he was working on, but they're trying!"

They were back in the office, and the director laid the control box on the big panel and cut off the power. He swung back to face Duke, his face tired.

"You'll find a ship waiting to take you to Throm, and a man on board who'll use the trip to brief you, if you decide to take the job, Duke. As I said, it's up to you. If you still prefer your wars, come and see me next week, and maybe I can get the recruiting law set aside in your case, since you're really a citizen of Meloa. Otherwise, the ship takes off for Throm in exactly three hours."

He led the way back to the elevator, and rode up to the lobby. Duke moved out woodenly, but Flannery was obviously going no farther. The old man handed over what was left of the flask, shook Duke's hand quickly, and closed the elevator door.

Duke downed the liquor slowly, without thinking. Finally, a flicker of thought seemed to stir in his frozen mind. He shook himself and headed down the lobby toward the Earth outside. A faint vibration seemed to quiver in the air from below, and he quickened his steps.

Outside, he shook himself again, signaled a cab, and climbed in.

"The first liquor store you come to," he told the driver. "And then take me to the government space port, no matter what I say!"

X

It was quiet in the underground office of the director, except for the faint sound of Flannery's arms sliding across each other in an unconscious massaging motion. He caught himself at it, and leaned back, his tired facial muscles twitching into a faint smile.

Strange things happened to a man

when he grew old. His hair turned gray, he thought more of the past, and prosthetic limbs began to feel tired, as if the nerves were remembering also. And the work that had once seemed vitally important in every detail winnowed itself down to a few things, with the rest only bothersome routine.

He pulled a thermos of coffee from under the desk and turned back to the confusion of red-coded memoranda on his desk. Then the sound of the elevator coming down caught his attention, and he waited until the door opened.

"Hello, Harding," he said without turning around. Only one man beside himself had the key to the private entrance. "Coffee?"

Harding took a seat beside him, and accepted the plastic cup. "Thanks. I tried to call you, but your phone was shut off. Heard the good word?"

Flannery shook his head. With the matter of the strange ship that had been reported and the problem of what to do with the telepaths both coming to a head, he'd had no time for casual calls. There was no question now that the telepaths had plucked the knowledge of how to build an interstellar drive from the observers' minds, in spite of all precautions. And once they broke out into the rest of the galaxy—

"Var died of a heart attack in the middle of a battle," Harding announced. "And Cathay and Kloomiria sent each other surrender notices the minute word was official! The damnedest thing I ever heard of. Edmonds came with me, and he's upstairs now, planning a big victory celebration as soon as we can let the word out. It should finish his reorientation."

"I'll probably get word on it by the time someone has it all organized into a nice, official memo," Flannery said. "Back him up on that celebration. It's worth a celebration to find out both worlds are that close to maturity. Coming over for bridge tonight?"

Harding shook his head. "I'll be up to my elbows in bills for the relief of Cathay and Kloomiria. It's a mess, even if it could be worse. Maybe tomorrow."

He dropped the cup onto the desk and turned to the elevator, while Flannery hunted through the memoranda. As he expected, he found a recent one announcing Var's death. He rubbed his arms together as he read it, but there was no new information in it.

Then, reluctantly, he picked up his phone and started to call. Scanning for information, just as another bundle of memos came through a small door in the panel. At the sight of the top photo, he put the phone back on its cradle. His face tautened and his arms lay limp as he read through it.

The picture was that of one of the half-disk Allr ships. The rumors of the strange ship were true enough. One of the Allr races had crossed the gulf between the two expanding cultures, and had touched several

worlds briefly, to land in the biggest city on Ptek, the trading center for a whole sector. It had been there two days already, before being reported to Earth!

To make matters worse, it had come because its home world had been visited by a foreign ship—from the description, apparently from Sugfarth; there was no longer any chance of cutting off the news, since it would be circulating busily through both cultures. And with it must be going a thousand wild schemes by trading adventurers for exploration!

He'd expected it to happen some day, maybe in fifty years, after he was out of the office. By then enough of the worlds should have reached maturity to offer some hope of peaceful interpenetration. But now—

Victory, he thought bitterly. A small victory, and then this. Or maybe two small victories, if O'Neill worked out as well on Throm as he seemed to be doing, and if he realized he'd never be satisfied until he could return to Earth to face the problems he now knew existed. Flannery had almost hoped that it would be O'Neill who would handle the problem of cultural interpenetration. The man had ability.

But all that was in the past now, along with all the other victories. And in the present, as always, there were larger and larger problems, while full maturity lay forever a little farther on.

Then he smiled slowly at himself. There were problems behind him, too—ones whose solutions made these problems possible. And there would always be victory enough.

What was victory, after all, but the chance to face bigger and bigger problems without fear?

Flannery picked up the phone, and his arms were no longer tired.

THE END

COVER SYMBOL

In the physical sciences there are a number of processes which in order to happen at all, must be prevented from happening. This month's cover symbol represents a moderated nuclear reactor. The primary function of the nuclerator is to restrain the reaction taking place.

Normal human abilities and emotions have similar characteristics: to function as a human being you must *not* use the abilities you as a human being *must* have in order to survive. And if your abilities are not normal? Meet Wade Harper in "Call Him Dead"—he just wants to be left alone!

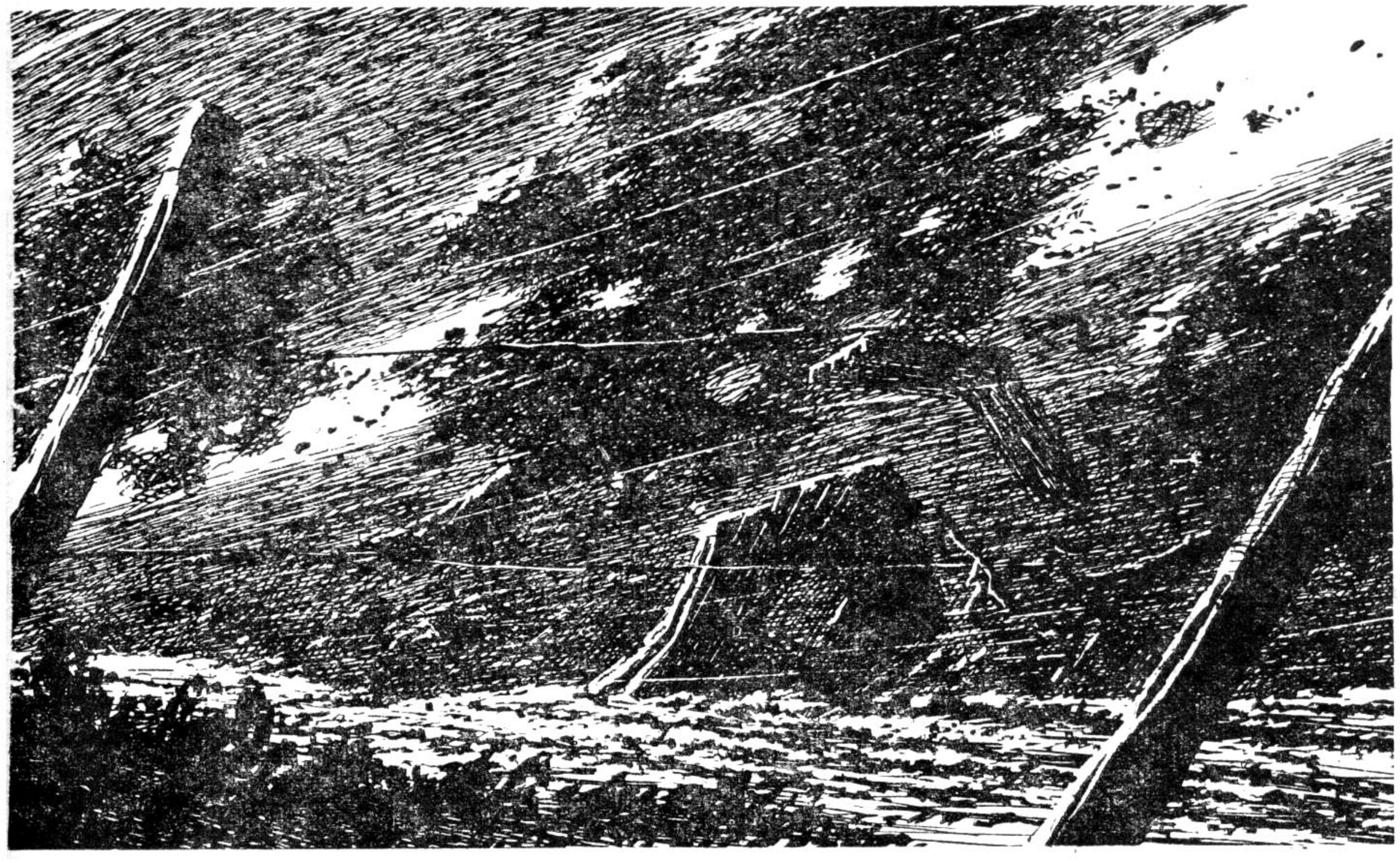
PAGAN

It's understandable that the farmer hated the creature —his wife and child were taken. He refused to ask where, or to what end. . . .

BY ALGIS BUDRYS

Illustrated by van Dongen

The big thing howled out of the sky, burst the tops of the oaks into flame, and thundered into the south-range of Colpaugh's farm with a sound like a dynamited vault. The oaks tore themselves out of the heaving ground and toppled on their sides, ripping through the underbrush, smoking with the aftermath of fires that had been blown out an eye-blink after they started. The range feedshed, buttressed by the hundred-pound sacks of mash that filled it from wall to wall, resisted being swept away in a body. It flew into a thousand discontinuous fragments of wood that flaked away into the air as though the feedbags had shucked off a tattered overcoat. The bags held out a fraction longer. Then they burst, and a spume of yellow-



white dust erupted away from the impact locus and boiled out across the farm.

There had been four chicken shelters spotted on the range. One of them was smashed into the ground ahead of the big thing. The other three were flipped into the air, caught like sails, and hurled away, streaming the singed bodies of leghorn pullets out behind them. There was one brief wail from the thousands of laying hens in their lines of coops. Then the radiating wave tore against the basically flimsy structures and eddied them away like rows of horrified fubbish mounting a beach.

The main house was two hundred yards away. In order to reach it, the compression wave had to first demolish the tool shed and the garage with the three-quarter-ton pickup truck in it, the main feedhouse, and the battery house where the newly-hatched chicks were developing in their electrically-warmed brooders. The two-and-one-half-ton truck, loaded, stood in the yard. That, the battery house, and the feedhouse, deflected much of the blast.

The lights went out, and Colpaugh was showered with broken glass. Pipes snapped, and there was a gush of water before the tank upstairs was ripped away from the rest of the plumbing. There was a splintering chop, and the house slewed on its foundations and fell out of plumb. Upstairs, where a wall had been removed to make one large bedroom out of two, the roof first rose, then caved in. All the beams were

cracked. The first-floor ceilings bulged downward.

Silence.

Colpaugh gulped air down his dry mouth. He got one foot under himself, threw the weight of something off his shoulders, and stood up.

"Mary?"

"George . . . George, I—"

He lurched awkwardly into the parlor, fighting the slope of the floor, the darkness, and the debris. His wife was a groping shape in front of him. He struck a match, and her eyes reflected blankly. "Are the children all right?"

He looked around, then turned and made his way into the living room. The TV set lay on its side, its face in shards. He flipped the match away from his scorching fingertips and struck another. The two children were huddled on the floor. As he bent over and touched them urgently, the boy began to cry. The girl threw her arms around her brother and clutched him.

"You kids O. K.? Come on now, it's all over—you both all right?"

The children clasped each other, both of them sobbing now. Colpaugh heard his wife behind him. He got back to his feet and turned to her. "I guess they're all right. Take care of 'em. And get 'em out of the house. Might collapse."

"Where are you going?"

"Outside. Got to see what that was."

"George, stay here!"

"Mary, you take your hand off my arm. I dunno what that was, but I gotta find out. Wasn't any explosion. Might have been a plane. Now take care of the kids and wait for me in the yard."

He pushed his way through the tangle of furniture in the dining room, got through the kitchen, and yanked open the door of the closet on the enclosed back porch. He took down his big flashlight, turned away, and turned back.

No, he thought. No, that wasn't any plane. It was too big. Even a B-36 wouldn't do something like this. How did he know? Had he ever been near a B-36 crash? No.

But it wasn't right. It wasn't right, and that's all there was to it.

He picked up his shotgun, loaded it, and dropped some extra shells in his pocket. He felt a little silly, and that made him hold the gun even more aggressively. He found an opening in the tangle of boards that had become the wall of the porch, cut himself climbing through a nest of window glass, and realized he was bleeding from a dozen superficial cuts. He let them be.

The yard had been scoured clean. He noticed that—the absolutely hard-packed clay without its cover of looser sand—before he really registered the change in what had been a familiar scene. He was not ready to believe he could look out to the south range from his back stoop. There was a hump and tangle in front of him where the main feed-house had been, but he could see over that, now.

He could see into the center of the south range, where something that was big and glowing thrust out of the crater its nose had splashed out of the soil. There was a circle of darkness in the glow, and then there was a beam of violet light probing up out of that circle, which was a doorway. Something gray and lumpy moved in the doorway.

Colpaugh felt a tugging at the skin of his jaw. It was a corner of his mouth, moving down into an ugly snarl.

Inside the big thing, there was a mechanical humming. A metal spar telescoped into the air through the doorway and silhouetted itself against the stars. The violet beam, twitching from side to side, touched it briefly. Colpaugh saw a subsidiary arm on the spar begin to revolve, glinting with a blue-white cat's-eye glowing of its own. A high-pitched, pinging sound came from it at regular intervals. There were other things, like leaves and thorns, sprouting from the metal stalk.

A steady, thrumming, undertone of vibration began to mutter against Colpaugh's eardrums. He flipped the safety catch on the shotgun and moved forward.

The gray, lumpy thing that had moved in the doorway's mouth now lowered itself to the ground. It looked like a nine-foot man who had been attacked by some fungoid disease which had thickened his limbs and torso unevenly, and made a puffy lump of his head. It moved stiffly and slowly, advancing with ponderous hesitation, like a diver underwater. It was walking toward Colpaugh.

Colpaugh scurried across the yard and behind the twisted wreck of the big truck. He crouched, brought the gun up to his shoulder, and waited. He realized he was breathing in convulsive, nervous gasps, but that hardly seemed important.

It took the thing about five minutes to get abreast of the wrecked feedhouse. Colpaugh waited, motionless, listening to the sound it was making. It was something like a wheeze, or a grunt of extreme effort. It came at intervals, a *"huh . . . hoh . . . huh!"* of exhalation.

Mary and the children climbed out through the broken timbers of the back porch. Mary looked around, failed to see anything in the shadows, and called: "George! George, where are you?"

Colpaugh's throat froze. He strangled on a shout, producing nothing more than a husky croak. The thing was suddenly moving very fast, laboring with what was obviously supreme effort, but closing in on Mary and the children.

Colpaugh finally got it out, like a man in a nightmare: *"Mary!* Mary, look *out!"* and he jumped from behind the truck, into the thing's path.

There was no more than a yard between them. He fired both barrels into the monster's stomach, stumbling backward from the recoil.

The monster grunted, *"Hunh!"* Then it swung one arm out like a clumsy club that crashed against the

side of Colpaugh's head with an impact that was not spongy at all.

As he fell, the shotgun flying away from him, he heard Mary screaming behind him, but he was losing consciousness.

"Hey! Hey, mister!"

Colpaugh sobbed a breath into his lungs, thrashed over on his back, and looked up. A man with a steel helmet on his head was squatted down beside him. The barrel of a carbine stuck up over one shoulder, and there were other men behind him, but it was too dark to make out many details.

"Wha—?"

"Keep it low, Mac." A hand covered his mouth momentarily. "My name's Dugan. Lieutenant, National Guard. What's out in that field?"

"It's a range."

"Huh?"

"A range. You keep pullets on it during the summer."

He sat up suddenly, throwing the lieutenant off-balance and sprawling him out. *"Where's my wife?"*

"Huh? Wife? Your wife out here with you?"

Colpaugh was looking around urgently. "The kids, too." He realized what had happened and jumped to his feet. "The thing got 'em!"

The lieutenant scrambled up. *"Keep it low!"* he whispered urgently.

Colpaugh shook him off and searched for his shotgun. He remembered where it must have fallen and, on his hands and knees, began feeling the ground. The lieutenant stopped him only by grabbing his shoulder and refusing to let go.

"Now, look here, Mac, maybe you know what you're doing, but nobody else does. So suppose you hold off for a minute and fill me in. Whatever's happened to your wife and kids will get fixed that much faster if we can help you."

Colpaugh touched the gun's stock, lunged forward against the restraint of the lieutenant's hand, and clutched it. He sat down, broke it, extracted the empty shells, and reloaded. Between motions, he grunted out his explanation.

The lieutenant whistled. "You put two loads of buckshot in his middle and he just grunted?"

Colpaugh stopped short and looked down at his shotgun. "That's right," he said wonderingly, "I did, didn't I?" He let the gun slide off his lap.

"Look, about your wife and kids—"

"What?"

"We didn't know what to expect here," the lieutenant pressed on, patiently. "All we knew was a . . . call it a flying saucer . . . came down and crashed. It was tracked for about a half hour before it hit, and we were heading here without waiting for any more news. So when we pulled into your yard, and I saw you lying there, I ran over. Right away. For all we know, your wife and kids might have run away from the thing—or maybe it's lying around here somewhere, dead. Could

be, you know. I'll check. You stay right here."

Colpaugh looked at him woodenly. "How come you believed me, if you didn't find them?"

The lieutenant grunted. "Take a look over into the field—the range."

Colpaugh turned his head that way for the first time since he'd been shaken awake.

The big thing still loomed up against the stars. The doorway was closed. At any rate, it looked closed. There was no longer any circle of darkness, because the big thing wasn't glowing any more. The metal spar was gone. But there was a row of lights, like portholes, and the lights dimmed occasionally, as though something was moving back and forth just behind the portholes.

"Lieutenant . . . Lieutenant, sir!"

The lieutenant cursed and whispered hoarsely back into the darkness. "Keep it down! I'm over here."

A soldier trotted up. "Sorry, sir. We found something."

A shower of ice fell into Colpaugh's stomach.

"Well?" the lieutenant asked.

"Sir, Lewicki's down by the field the thing's in, with the camera. He's been followin' these drag marks—you know, sir, like somethin' got dragged—like a cloth bag, maybe. Anyway, sir, he just passed the word back he's found a woman's shoe."

"Smoke?"

Colpaugh shook his head. He sat twisted in the jeep's seat, his head rigid, except for the one, brief, emphatic, numb motion.

"Look—it might not be the best thing in the world for you to keep watching that screen."

Colpaugh ignored him.

The soldier had moved his camera in beside the big thing, and pointed it at what seemed to be the main porthole. Inside, the big thing was full of metal fixtures that glittered oddly in the violet-tinged light. There were machines and controls of all kinds that meant nothing to Colpaugh.

This was the only camera feeding in to this screen. There were others handling the traffic into Gustafsen's farmhouse, back across the road, where the big brass had set up headquarters. The lieutenant now only had charge of this small part of what had become a full-fledged perimeter. There was a helicopter patrol over the big thing, and a flight of jet fighter-bombers up above them. Colpaugh realized he was probably the only unevacuated civilian in the whole county.

None of it was doing any good, though. The big thing just lay out in the range, without doing anything.

If the brass back in Gustafsen's house had seen anything of Mary and the kids through their cameras, they hadn't passed word down to Colpaugh, and they hadn't showed up in the compartment covered by the jeep's camera.

Colpaugh realized he was shivering. It was pretty cold.

The monster had moved in and

out of camera range several times. At least, everybody figured it was the same one, because they'd seen only one, and it was definite, now, that Colpaugh's shots hadn't kept it from getting back to its ship.

Ship, Colpaugh reminded himself. They're calling it a ship, now. From *where?*

The monster was back on the screen. Dimly, Colpaugh felt the ache in his teeth as his jaws closed down.

It didn't act hurt. That was pretty much taken for granted now. Colpaugh tried to figure out what could stand up to two barrels of buckshot at a range of one yard, but you couldn't get very far with that kind of question. You just let it lay.

It moved a lot easier inside its ship. There didn't seem to be anything like the slowness it had out in the open. It was moving back and forth across the compartment, fiddling with things. It looked like it was setting up some kind of machine.

Colpaugh heard the lieutenant speaking into a microphone, and there were creaks and clicks all around him as the soldiers got set in case something new happened. Colpaugh didn't take his eyes off the screen.

The monster went out of the compartment and brought in the boy, who looked sleepy and dazed. The monster was holding him by one arm. A table unfolded out of the wall, and the monster laid the boy down on it. He swung a projector out from a stand, focused it on the boy, and moved a broad, splay-fingered hand over its controls. A beam of red light, sparkling with an internal stream of silvery motes, struck the boy in the face.

Colpaugh was vaguely aware that there was blood running down his fingers. The lieutenant took an instant to punch his hand loose from its death-grip on the sharp angle of the seat brace before he began barking orders into his microphone. Presumably, he'd gotten orders of his own through the earphones on his head.

The boy began to change.

A spotlight hit the ship's air lock, and a dozen soldiers sprang up from the soil below it and began attacking it with power tools. Other lights cut in, until the big thing was clearly lighted throughout its exposed length, gleaming harshly in the shadowless illumination.

The soldiers rebounded, the tools flying out of their hands. The men sprawled briefly in the air, then fell bonelessly.

A hell of small-arms' fire concentrated on the air lock, and a grenade bounced up against the hull. The streams of tracer arced over the ship, and the grenade failed to explode. The light faded down through yellow and died. Technicians began yelling to each other, but the lights did not come on again. All the guns jammed.

Colpaugh got one last look at the television screen before it, too, contracted to a vanishing pinpoint and went out.

He began to scream and kick the splintering panel.

"All right, now?"

The lieutenant was bending over him. A medical corpsman withdrew his hypodermic and closed Colpaugh's unresisting fingers over a dab of cotton. "Hold that there for a minute, please," he said. Colpaugh let it slip out from under his fingers, and the corpsman pressed a new one over the puncture. "Now, *hold* it there, Mac," he said, but it didn't do any good. The corpsman, instead of getting annoyed, nodded to himself, refilled his syringe, and gave Colpaugh another shot.

"Funny," Colpaugh muttered. "You take a kid . . . good-lookin' kid . . . raised him . . . gave him the best I could . . . and just like that, you squirt him with a little red light and he changes into a monster." He scratched his head fuzzily, looked at his fingers, saw his palm was bandaged, grinned apologetically at the lieutenant, and shrugged. "Must be a pretty smart monster . . . I mean the first one, not the new one . . . to do a thing like that. Just a little red light, and it's like bread dough standing on a radiator with the yeast working."

"Yeah," the lieutenant said shortly. He looked quickly at the corpsman, and the corpsman shrugged.

"Look, Colpaugh," the lieutenant went on, "we're pulling out. Nobody knows what's going on any more. None of the equipment works. We're losing men, too—they're fighting each other with their bayonets. Everybody's seeing monsters in the shadows. I just got word from a runner. They're going to drop a pony bomb. We're all pulling back on foot—they're giving us an hour to get back and dig in. So come on. Think you can walk?"

Colpaugh sighed. "I don't know," he said. "I mean, I guess so. I mean, if you can't ride, well, I guess you have to walk, don't you?"

"I guess so," the lieutenant agreed uncomfortably. He and the corpsman lifted Colpaugh out of the jeep and stood him on his feet. Colpaugh twisted his head uneasily. "It's still dark."

"It's only about midnight, or maybe one," the lieutenant explained.

"Funny."

"Uh-huh. Now, come on, Colpaugh, we've got to get clear before that bomb comes down. They're not going to hold it up for any stragglers."

"Well, well, sure, lieutenant, that makes sense." He began to walk along between the officer and the corpsman. "I guess we kind of have to give up on Mary and the girl, don't we?"

The lieutenant nodded dimly in the darkness.

Colpaugh nodded too, in affirmation. "It's O. K., lieutenant. I mean, you can't expect to . . . to—" He began to gulp for air as the tears ran down his cheeks. "It just doesn't balance. A chance of maybe doin' something— Well, you've *got* to drop the bomb, that's all!"

Very dimly, through the night between him and the completely darkened ship, he heard a voice calling him.

"George! George, are you still out there?"

He stopped convulsively, the lieutenant spinning around with him. "Who is that?"

Colpaugh strained. "I . . . sounds like . . . like Mary."

"George!" The voice was a little louder.

The corpsman had stopped with them. "Might be one of the men, checking for his buddy," he pointed out. "George isn't an uncommon name."

Colpaugh shook his head. "No. Shut up."

"George! I'm over behind the feedhouse. I've got to talk to you."

The lieutenant clamped his hand around his arm. "Easy, Colpaugh. Easy. Very easy. Might be a booby trap."

"That's Mary!" Colpaugh whispered harshly.

"You don't know that."

"Think I don't know my wife's voice?"

"Yes, but—"

"George, *please!*"

Colpaugh rammed his hand into the lieutenant's face, twisted away, and ran toward the ruined feedhouse. He wasn't sure whether the lieutenant was following him or not.

He was grunting as he ran, and he realized that what he was mumbling was, "Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary," over and over again. As he got to the feedhouse, he shouted it aloud: "Mary! Where're you at?"

"Stay there a minute, George," she said. "I'm over here on the other side."

"Well, I'm coming over there!" What was she playing around for?

"No, George—not yet. You shouldn't."

He knew his wife. When she said it like that, she had a very good reason.

Maybe the monster was holding her there?

"You all right, Mary?"

"*Yes,* George. Yes, I'm fine. Now, George, I want you to just listen to what I've got to say. Promise me that?"

"Sure."

"And you won't try to come over here before I'm finished?"

"Not if you don't want me to." He twisted his lips in discomfort. There was something wrong that he couldn't figure out. Something he ought to be smart enough to know. He tried to pick at it, but he couldn't. He was too mixed up. Somebody else, now, might be able to. But he wasn't somebody else. He was George Colpaugh, and this was his wife, and he didn't know what to do.

What about their daughter?

"How's Peggy?"

"Peggy's fine," Mary said impatiently. "She's with me. Now, listen, George, please. We're short for time."

So the girl was all right. At least, it sounded like she was all right. He tried to see into the shadows, but the broken feedhouse was too complex a shape of darkness for anything else to show up against it.

"George, you're all wrong about the Ond."

"The who?"

"The Ond. The . . . monster, I guess you're calling him. The soldiers are all wrong too, not just you."

"Wrong? What d'you mean, wrong? We all saw what he did to Jimmy. He dragged him into that ship thing of his and he— Don't you know what he did?"

Mary didn't say anything for a minute. "Yes, I know, George," she

answered finally. "But there's no use talking about that now. There's something more important."

"What's more important than that?" he demanded loudly.

"*George!* He's my son, too. I didn't answer you lightly. There *is* something more important than that. Why do you think the Ond came here at all? He can't even stay outside his ship very long in our air, and he doesn't have much chance of ever getting back to where he lives. And he knew all that before he came here."

Colpaugh took a deep, angry breath. "I'm not much on knowing what makes monsters tick."

"No, George," Mary agreed sadly, "I don't guess anybody is. But he's good, George. He was willing to come here because he believed in what he was doing—because he knew that his people had something every living person has a right to—because he felt it was his duty. It takes somebody pretty special to do a thing like that."

"Yeah, it takes somebody pretty special to do what he did to Jim, all right."

"Stop that, George!"

"Colpaugh!" It was the lieutenant, shouting from behind the overturned two-and-one-half-ton truck. "You've got to get out of here—if you're still able."

Colpaugh jerked his head toward the sound.

"Don't listen to him, George. You don't have the time."

"Mary! We're *all* running out of time!" Colpaugh shouted, suddenly remembering. "They're going to drop an atom bomb."

Mary sighed. "It won't go off. Things like that don't work if you've got what the Ond's got."

"What's that?" Colpaugh growled.

"It's a . . . well, it's like being tuned in. There's a power . . . a . . . a something that's all around us, wherever we are, and if you know the right ways to get to it, it'll protect you and do things for you—George, I can't describe it in the words we're used to. But if you know how to get to it, you never die, and you're never hungry or thirsty or sleepy. You're never tired, and—George, I *can't* really tell you about it. But will you trust me? Will you have faith in me and come with me and Peggy and share it? The Ond's going to show everybody in the world how to get to the power. It would be nice if our whole family was the first."

What did she mean "our *whole* family?" What about Jim?

"Mary, I've had about as much of this mysterious stuff as I'm going to take. Now I'm coming over to where you are."

"*No,* George! There's still one thing, about me—"

Colpaugh moved forward. He rounded the heap of timber, peering into the shadows.

There was a big one, and a little one beside it, standing there, waiting for him. Peggy said, "Please come with us, Daddy."

He stumbled back, realizing that he should have known—that this was where he'd been stupid.

He'd let Mary get too close.

"George . . . George, will you come with us?"

He kicked the big one where its knee should have been, because the little one was close, too. The big one stumbled a little, but the little one got its hands around his upper right arm.

"Please, Daddy—we don't *want* to make you!"

He screamed hoarsely and twisted, frantic and gasping, away from its touch. At that moment he felt the bone snap.

"Hang on, Colpaugh!" the lieutenant yelled, and jumped the big one from behind. Mary whirled and tried to knock him away, and her talons caught him across the eyes. The lieutenant fell back, his hands over his face.

But that was Colpaugh's chance. He flung himself at the big one's mid-section and toppled it off balance. He grabbed the lieutenant's forearm. "Come on!" he grunted. "Come on, run!"

Colpaugh and the lieutenant stumbled up the road, helping each other along. Colpaugh kept his left hand under his right elbow, and it wasn't too bad, except that the lieutenant couldn't help jostling him once in a while.

"How's the eye?" Colpaugh asked.

"I don't know. Think they're still chasing us? They're pretty fast. I guess they're a special brand—adapted to Earth."

Colpaugh shook his head. "I guess they figure if I won't join 'em of my own free will, they'll wait until they get me in a roundup."

"You figure they can do that? Just have drives and herd people up in bunches?"

"They'll catch a few here and there to begin with, I guess. When there's enough of them, they'll set up a system for doing it in big bunches. Doesn't take a lot of help to drive chickens where you want them."

"Maybe she was lying about that power?" the lieutenant said.

"Maybe. But I put two loads of buckshot in that first one. And all of the lights and guns wouldn't work. I don't think that bomb's going to go off."

"Then what're we bothering to run for?"

Colpaugh shook his head. "I don't know," he said dully. "If Mary was telling the truth, there's nothing to stop them from doing anything they please."

They moved on silently for a few minutes. Then the lieutenant said hesitantly: "Look—I'm out of line, saying this, but allowing she was telling the truth, that doesn't really sound like too bad a deal. If tuning in on that power gives you all of those things . . . well, to tell you the truth, Colpaugh, you're in rotten shape. A few hours ago, you had a farm, a wife, two kids, and a future. Now you've got nothing—you've got

the clothes on your back, and nothing else. You need hospitalization, but you probably won't get it. And a month, or six months, from now, you'll be one of them anyway. Man, I'm a hundred times better off than you are, and I can feel the temptation myself.

"They're your wife and kids, Colpaugh."

"They've been changed," Colpaugh mumbled.

"Well, even so, what I'm trying to say," the lieutenant went on uncomfortably, "I don't suppose it's bad, once you're like them. There's probably good sense to the way they're built. If they don't eat or drink, maybe that skin of theirs is designed to soak up energy, or something. And they're going to get us all in the end, anyway. And, let's face it—isn't what they're offering what everybody's always wanted? Think about it, Colpaugh—here you are, half-dead from one shock reaction after another, nothing to look forward to—all you have to do to fix everything, even get your family back—is turn around and walk back to the ship."

Colpaugh stopped, turned his head painfully, and looked back down the road through his haggard eyes.

"Makes sense, doesn't it?" he mumbled. "Back there's security, rest, and I guess you could call it food and drink. Back there's my wife, my kids, and my home. If I keep going, I'll be alone—no friends, no love, and maybe gangrene. Gangrene's no way to die."

He looked at the lieutenant. "What about you? How come you're willing for me to go back, but you want to keep going—and if we both expect a mess big enough so an ordinary compound fracture can't get tended to, what's the say about your eye?"

The lieutenant looked down at the road.

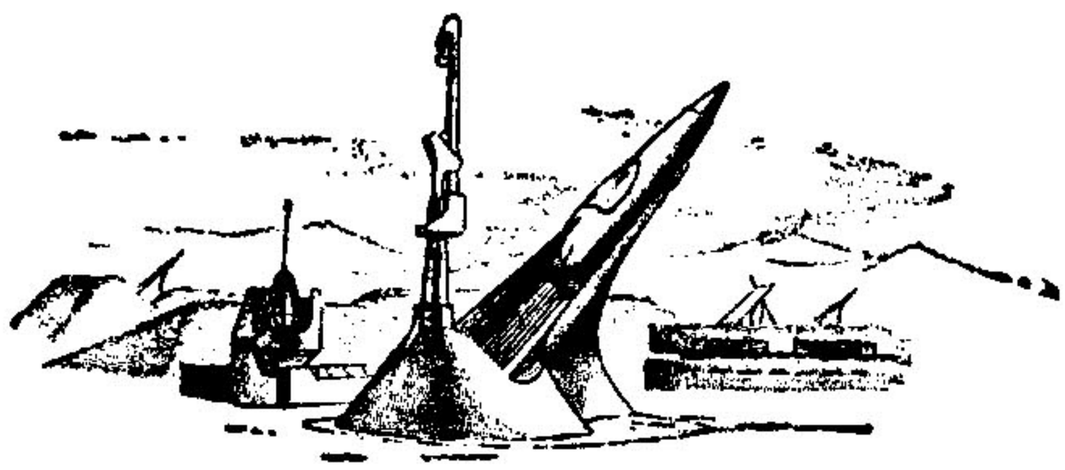
"No, tell me," Colpaugh said. "Don't duck it. How come you can be sensible about me, but not you? Why won't you go back?"

The lieutenant licked his lips and slowly raised his head. "They'd change me."

Colpaugh managed a dry, crooked grin. "Uh-huh."

They went on in the direction they'd been going.

THE END



ONE-SHOT

You can do a great deal if you have enough data, and enough time to compute on it, by logical methods. But given the situation that neither data nor time is adequate, and an answer must be produced . . . what do you do?

BY JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by van Dongen

On the day that the Polish freighter *Ludmilla* laid an egg in New York harbor, Abner Longmans ("One-Shot") Braun was in the city going about his normal business, which was making another million dollars. As we found out later, almost nothing else was normal about that particular week end for Braun. For one thing, he had brought his family with him—a complete departure from routine—reflecting the unprecedentedly legitimate nature of the deals he was trying to make. From every point of view it was a bad week end for the CIA to mix into his affairs, but nobody had explained that to the master of the *Ludmilla.*

I had better add here that we knew nothing about this until afterward; from the point of view of the storyteller, an organization like Civilian Intelligence Associates gets to all its facts backwards, entering the tale at the pay-off, working back to the hook, and winding up with a sheaf of background facts to feed into the computer for Next Time. It's rough on the various people who've tried to fictionalize what we do—particularly for the lazy examples of the breed, who come to us expecting that their plotting has already been done for them—but it's inherent in the way we operate, and there it is.

Certainly nobody at CIA so much as thought of Braun when the news first came through. Harry Anderton, the Harbor Defense chief, called us at 0830 Friday to take on the job of identifying the egg; this was when our records show us officially entering the affair, but, of course, Anderton had been keeping the wires to Washington steaming for an hour before that, getting authorization to spend some of his money on us (our clearance status was then and is now C&R—clean and routine).

I was in the central office when the call came through, and had some difficulty in making out precisely what Anderton wanted of us. "Slow down, Colonel Anderton, please," I begged him. "Two or three seconds won't make that much difference. How did you find out about this egg in the first place?"

"The automatic compartment bulkheads on the *Ludmilla* were defective," he said. "It seems that this egg was buried among a lot of other crates in the dump-cell of the hold—"

"What's a dump cell?"

"It's a sea lock for getting rid of dangerous cargo. The bottom of it opens right to Davy Jones. Standard fitting for ships carrying explosives, radioactives, anything that might act up unexpectedly."

"All right," I said. "Go ahead."

"Well, there was a timer on the dump-cell floor, set to drop the egg when the ship came up the river. That worked fine, but the automatic bulkheads that are supposed to keep the rest of the ship from being flooded while the cell's open, didn't. At least they didn't do a thorough job. The *Ludmilla* began to list and the captain yelled for help. When the Harbor Patrol found the dump-cell open, they called us in."

"I see." I thought about it a moment. "In other words, you don't know whether the *Ludmilla* really laid an egg or not."

"That's what I keep trying to explain to you, Dr. Harris. We don't know what she dropped and we haven't any way of finding out. It could be a bomb—it could be anything. We're sweating everybody on board the ship now, but it's my guess that none of them know anything; the whole procedure was designed to be automatic."

"All right, we'll take it," I said. "You've got divers down?"

"Sure, but—"

"We'll worry about the buts from

here on. Get us a direct line from your barge to the big board here so we can direct the work. Better get on over here yourself."

"Right." He sounded relieved. Official people have a lot of confidence in CIA; too much, in my estimation. Some day the job will come along that we can't handle, and then Washington will be kicking itself—or, more likely, some scapegoat—for having failed to develop a comparable government department.

Not that there was much prospect of Washington's doing that. Official thinking had been running in the other direction for years. The precedent was the Associated Universities organization which ran Brookhaven; CIA had been started the same way, by a loose corporation of universities and industries all of which had wanted to own an ULTIMAC and no one of which had had the money to buy one for itself. The Eisenhower administration, with its emphasis on private enterprise and concomitant reluctance to sink federal funds into projects of such size, had turned the two examples into a nice fat trend, which ULTIMAC herself said wasn't going to be reversed within the practicable lifetime of CIA.

I buzzed for two staffers, and in five minutes got Clark Cheyney and Joan Hadamard, CIA's business manager and social science division chief respectively. The titles were almost solely for the benefit of the T/O—that is, Clark and Joan do serve in those capacities, but said service takes about two per cent of their capacities and their time. I shot them a couple of sentences of explanation, trusting them to pick up whatever else they needed from the tape, and checked the line to the divers' barge.

It was already open; Anderton had gone to work quickly and with decision once he was sure we were taking on the major question. The television screen lit, but nothing showed on it but murky light, striped with streamers of darkness slowly rising and falling. The audio went *cloonck . . . oing, oing . . . bonk . . . oing . . .* Underwater noises, shapeless and characterless.

"Hello, out there in the harbor. This is CIA, Harris calling. Come in, please."

"Monig here," the audio said. *Boink . . . oing, oing . . .*

"Got anything yet?"

"Not a thing, Dr. Harris," Monig said. "You can't see three inches in front of your face down here—it's too silty. We've bumped into a couple of crates, but so far, no egg."

"Keep trying."

Cheyney, looking even more like a bulldog than usual, was setting his stopwatch by one of the eight clocks on ULTIMAC's face. "Want me to take the divers?" he said.

"No, Clark, not yet. I'd rather have Joan do it for the moment." I passed the mike to her. "You'd better run a probability series first."

"Check." He began feeding tape into the integrator's mouth. "What's your angle, Peter?"

"The ship. I want to see how heavily shielded that dump-cell is."

"It isn't shielded at all," Anderton's voice said behind me. I hadn't heard him come in. "But that doesn't prove anything. The egg might have carried sufficient shielding in itself. Or maybe the Commies didn't care whether the crew was exposed or not. Or maybe there isn't any egg."

"All that's possible," I admitted. "But I want to see it, anyhow."

"Have you taken blood tests?" Joan asked Anderton.

"Yes."

"Get the reports through to me, then. I want white-cell counts, differentials, platelet counts, hematocrit and sed rates on every man."

Anderton picked up the phone and I took a firm hold on the doorknob.

"Hey," Anderton said, putting the phone down again. "Are you going to duck out just like that? Remember, Dr. Harris, we've got to evacuate the city first of all! No matter whether it's a real egg or not—we can't take the chance on it's *not* being an egg!"

"Don't move a man until you get a go-ahead from CIA," I said. "For all we know now, evacuating the city may be just what the enemy wants us to do—so they can grab it unharmed. Or they may want to start a panic for some other reason, any one of fifty possible reasons."

"You can't take such a gamble," he said grimly. "There are eight and a half million lives riding on it. I can't let you do it."

"You passed your authority to us when you hired us," I pointed out. "If you want to evacuate without our O. K., you'll have to fire us first. It'll take another hour to get that cleared from Washington—so you might as well give us the hour."

He stared at me for a moment, his lips thinned. Then he picked up the phone again to order Joan's blood count, and I got out the door, fast.

A reasonable man would have said that I found nothing useful on the *Ludmilla,* except negative information. But the fact is that anything I found would have been a surprise to me; I went down looking for surprises. I found nothing but a faint trail to Abner Longmans Braun, most of which was fifteen years cold.

There'd been a time when I'd known Braun, briefly and to no profit to either of us. As an undergraduate majoring in social sciences, I'd taken on a term paper on the old International Longshoreman's Association, a racket-ridden union now formally extinct—although anyone who knew the signs could still pick up some traces on the docks. In those days, Braun had been the business manager of an insurance firm, the sole visible function of which had been to write policies for the ILA and its individual dock-wallopers. For some reason, he had been amused by the brash youngster who'd barged in on him and demanded the lowdown, and had shown me considerable lengths of ropes not normally in view of the public—nothing incriminating, but enough to give me a better insight into how the union

operated than I had had any right to expect—or even suspect.

Hence I was surprised to hear somebody on the docks remark that Braun was in the city over the week end. It would never have occurred to me that he still interested himself in the waterfront, for he'd gone respectable with a vengeance. He was still a professional gambler, and according to what he had told the Congressional Investigating Committee last year, took in thirty to fifty thousand dollars a year at it, but his gambles were no longer concentrated on horses, the numbers, or shady insurance deals. Nowadays what he did was called investment—mostly in real estate; realtors knew him well as the man who had *almost* bought the Empire State Building. (The *almost* in the equation stands for the moment when the shoestring broke.)

Joan had been following his career, too, not because she had ever met him, but because for her he was a type study in the evolution of what she called "the extra-legal ego." "With personalities like that, repectability is a disease," she told me. "There's always an almost-open conflict between the desire to be powerful and the desire to be accepted; your ordinary criminal is a moral imbecile, but people like Braun are damned with a conscience, and sooner or later they crack trying to appease it."

"I'd sooner try to crack a Timkin bearing," I said. "Braun's ten-point steel all the way through."

"Don't you believe it. The symptoms are showing all over him. Now he's backing Broadway plays, sponsoring beginning actresses, joining playwrights' groups—he's the only member of Buskin and Brush who's never written a play, acted in one, or so much as pulled the rope to raise the curtain."

"That's investment," I said. "That's his business."

"Peter, you're only looking at the surface. His real investments almost never fail. But the plays he backs *always* do. They have to; he's sinking money in them to appease his conscience, and if they were to succeed it would double his guilt instead of salving it. It's the same way with the young actresses. He's not sexually interested in them—his type never is, because living a rigidly orthodox family life is part of the effort towards respectability. He's backing them to 'pay his debt to society'—in other words, they're talismans to keep him out of jail."

"It doesn't seem like a very satisfactory substitute."

"Of course it isn't," Joan had said. "The next thing he'll do is go in for direct public service—giving money to hospitals or something like that. You watch."

She had been right; within the year, Braun had announced the founding of an association for clearing the Detroit slum area where he had been born—the plainest kind of symbolic suicide: *Let's not have any more Abner Longmans Brauns born down here.* It depressed me to see it happen, for next on Joan's agenda

for Braun was an entry into politics as a fighting liberal—a New Dealer twenty years too late. Since I'm mildly liberal myself when I'm off duty, I hated to think what Braun's career might tell me about my own motives, if I'd let it.

All of which had nothing to do with why I was prowling around the *Ludmilla*—or did it? I kept remembering Anderton's challenge: "You can't take such a gamble. There are eight and a half million lives riding on it—" That put it up into Braun's normal operating area, all right. The connection was still hazy, but on the grounds that any link might be useful, I phoned him.

He remembered me instantly; like most uneducated, power-driven men, he had a memory as good as any machine's.

"You never did send me that paper you was going to write," he said. His voice seemed absolutely unchanged, although he was in his seventies now. "You promised you would."

"Kids don't keep their promises as well as they should," I said. "But I've still got copies and I'll see to it that you get one, this time. Right now I need another favor—something right up your alley."

"CIA business?"

"Yes. I didn't know you knew I was with CIA."

Braun chuckled. "I still know a thing or two," he said. "What's the angle?"

"That I can't tell you over the phone. But it's the biggest gamble there ever was, and I think we need an expert. Can you come down to CIA's central headquarters right away?"

"Yeah, if it's that big. If it ain't, I got lots of business here, Andy. And I ain't going to be in town long. You're sure it's top stuff?"

"My word on it."

He was silent a moment. Then he said, "Andy, send me your paper."

"The paper? Sure, but—" Then I got it. I'd given him my word. "You'll get it," I said. "Thanks, Mr. Braun."

I called headquarters and sent a messenger to my apartment to look for one of those long-dusty blue folders with the legal-length sheets inside them, with orders to scorch it over to Braun without stopping to breathe more than once. Then I went back myself.

The atmosphere had changed. Anderton was sitting by the big desk, clenching his fists and sweating; his whole posture telegraphed his controlled helplessness. Cheyney was bent over a seismograph, echo-sounding for the egg through the river bottom. If that even had a prayer of working, I knew, he'd have had the trains of the Hudson & Manhattan stopped; their rumbling course through their tubes would have blanked out any possible echo-pip from the egg.

"Wild goose chase?" Joan said, scanning my face.

"Not quite. I've got something, if I can just figure out what it is. Remember One-Shot Braun?"

"Yes. What's he got to do with it?"

"Nothing," I said. "But I want to bring him in. I don't think we'll lick this project before deadline without him."

"What good is a professional gambler on a job like this? He'll just get in the way."

I looked toward the television screen, which now showed an amorphous black mass, jutting up from a foundation of even deeper black. "Is that operation getting you anywhere?"

"Nothing's gotten us anywhere," Anderton interjected harshly. "We don't even know if that's the egg—the whole area is littered with crates. Harris, you've got to let me get that alert out!"

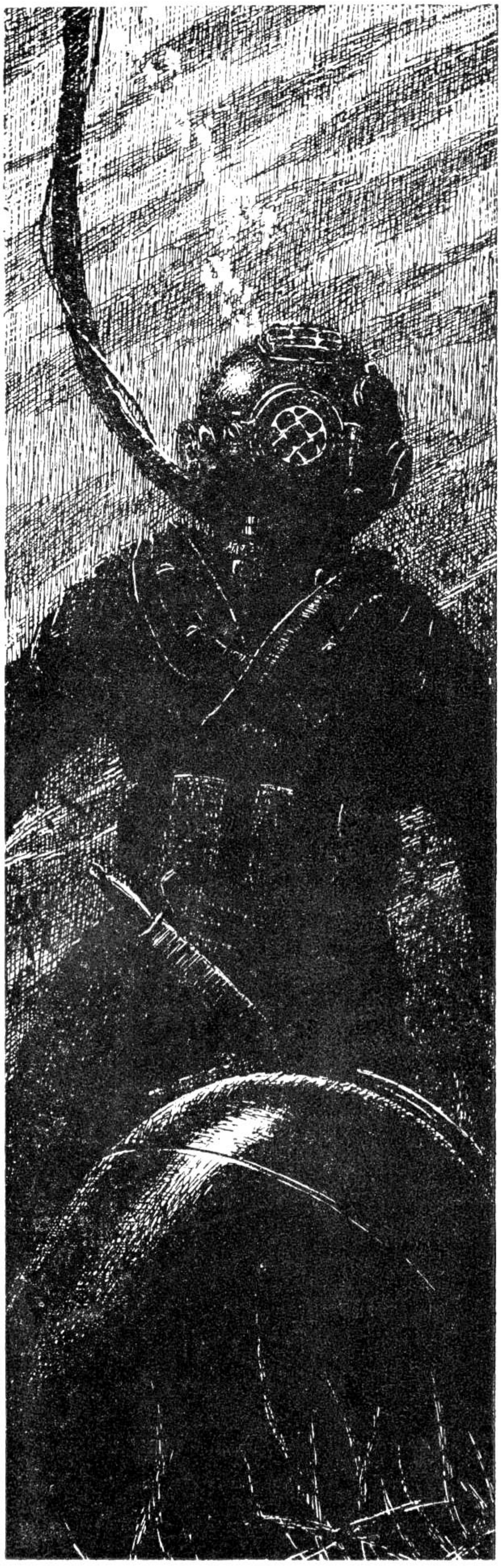
"Clark, how's the time going?"

Cheyney consulted the stopwatch. "Deadline in twenty-nine minutes," he said.

"All right, let's use those minutes. I'm beginning to see this thing a little clearer. Joan, what we've got here is a one-shot gamble; right?"

"In effect," she said cautiously.

"And it's my guess that we're never going to get the answer by diving for it—not in time, anyhow. Remember when the Navy lost a barge-load of shells in the harbor, back in '52? They scrabbled for them for a year and never pulled up a one; they finally had to warn the public that if it found anything funny-looking along the shore it shouldn't bang said object, or shake it either. We're better equipped than the Navy was



then—but we're working against a deadline."

"If you'd admitted that earlier," Anderton said hoarsely, "we'd have half a million people out of the city by now. Maybe even a million."

"We haven't given up yet, colonel. The point is this, Joan: what we need is an inspired guess. Get anything from the prob series, Clark? I thought not. On a one-shot gamble of this kind, the 'laws' of chance are no good at all. For that matter, the so-called ESP experiments showed us long ago that even the way we construct random tables is full of holes —and that a man with a feeling for the essence of a gamble can make a monkey out of chance almost at will.

"And if there ever was such a man, Braun is it. That's why I asked him to come down here. I want him to look at that lump on the screen and—play a hunch."

"You're out of your mind," Anderton said.

A decorous knock spared me the trouble of having to deny, affirm or ignore the judgment. It was Braun; the messenger had been fast, and the gambler hadn't bothered to read what a college student had thought of him fifteen years ago. He came forward and held out his hand, while the others looked him over frankly.

He was impressive, all right. It would have been hard for a stranger to believe that he was aiming at respectability; to the eye, he was already there. He was tall and spare, and walked perfectly erect, not without spring despite his age. His clothing was as far from that of a gambler as you could have taken it by design: a black double-breasted suit with a thin vertical stripe, a gray silk tie with a pearl stickpin just barely large enough to be visible at all, a black Homburg; all perfectly fitted, all worn with proper casualness—one might almost say a formal casualness. It was only when he opened his mouth that One-Shot Braun was in the suit with him.

"I come over as soon as your runner got to me," he said. "What's the pitch, Andy?"

"Mr. Braun, this is Joan Hadamard, Clark Cheyney, Colonel Anderton. I'll be quick because we need speed now. A Polish ship has dropped something out in the harbor. We don't know what it is. It may be a hell-bomb, or it may be just somebody's old laundry. Obviously we've got to find out which—and we want you to tell us."

Braun's aristocratic eyebrows went up. "Me? Hell, Andy, I don't know nothing about things like that. I'm surprised with you. I thought CIA had all the brains it needed—ain't you got machines to tell you answers like that?"

I pointed silently to Joan, who had gone back to work the moment the introductions were over. She was still on the mike to the divers. She was saying: "What does it look like?"

"It's just a lump of something, Dr. Hadamard. Can't even tell its shape—it's buried too deeply in the mud." *Cloonk . . . Oing, oing . . .*

"Try the Geiger."

"We did. Nothing but background."

"Scintillation counter?"

"Nothing, Dr. Hadamard. Could be it's shielded."

"Let us do the guessing, Monig. All right, maybe it's got a clockwork fuse that didn't break with the impact. Or a gyroscopic fuse. Stick a stethoscope on it and see if you pick up a ticking or anything that sounds like a motor running."

There was a lag and I turned back to Braun. "As you can see, we're stymied. This is a long shot, Mr. Braun. One throw of the dice—one show-down hand. We've got to have an expert call it for us—somebody with a record of hits on long shots. That's why I called you."

"It's no good," he said. He took off the Homburg, took his handkerchief from his breast pocket, and wiped the hatband. "I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"It ain't my *kind* of thing," he said. "Look, I never in my life run odds on anything that made any difference. But this makes a difference. If I guess wrong—"

"Then we're all dead ducks. But why should you guess wrong? Your hunches have been working for sixty years now."

Braun wiped his face. "No. You don't get it. I wish you'd listen to me. Look, my wife and my kids are in the city. It ain't only my life, it's theirs, too. That's what I care about. That's why it's no good. On things that matter to me, *my hunches don't work.*"

I was stunned, and so, I could see, were Joan and Cheyney. I suppose I should have guessed it, but it had never occurred to me.

"Ten minutes," Cheyney said.

I looked up at Braun. He was frightened, and again I was surprised without having any right to be. I tried to keep at least my voice calm.

"Please try it anyhow, Mr. Braun —as a favor. It's already too late to do it any other way. And if you guess wrong, the outcome won't be any worse than if you don't try at all."

"My kids," he whispered. I don't think he knew that he was speaking aloud. I waited.

Then his eyes seemed to come back to the present. "All right," he said. "I told you the truth, Andy. Remember that. So—is it a bomb or ain't it? That's what's up for grabs, right?"

I nodded. He closed his eyes. An unexpected stab of pure fright went down my back. Without the eyes, Braun's face was a death mask.

The water sounds and the irregular ticking of a Geiger counter seemed to spring out from the audio speaker, four times as loud as before. I could even hear the pen of the seismograph scribbling away, until I looked at the instrument and saw that Clark had stopped it, probably long ago.

Droplets of sweat began to form along Braun's forehead and his upper lip. The handkerchief remained crushed in his hand.

Anderton said, "Of all the fool—"

"Hush!" Joan said quietly.

Slowly, Braun opened his eyes. "All right," he said. "You guys wanted it this way. *I say it's a bomb.*" He stared at us for a moment more —and then, all at once, the Timkin bearing burst. Words poured out of it. "Now you guys do something, do your job like I did mine—get my wife and kids out of there—empty the city—do something, *do something!*"

Anderton was already grabbing for the phone. "You're right, Mr. Braun. If it isn't already too late—"

Cheyney shot out a hand and caught Anderton's telephone arm by the wrist. "Wait a minute," he said.

"What d'you mean, 'wait a minute'? Haven't you already shot enough time?"

Cheyney did not let go; instead, he looked inquiringly at Joan and said, "One minute, Joan. You might as well go ahead."

She nodded and spoke into the mike. "Monig, unscrew the cap."

"Unscrew the cap?" the audio squawked. "But Dr. Hadamard, if that sets it off—"

"It won't go off. That's the one thing you can be sure it won't do."

"What is this?" Anderton demanded. "And what's this deadline stuff, anyhow?"

"The cap's off," Monig reported. "We're getting plenty of radiation now. Just a minute— Yeah. Dr. Hadamard, it's a bomb, all right. But it hasn't got a fuse. Now how could they have made a fool mistake like that?"

"In other words, it's a dud," Joan said.

"That's right, a dud."

Now, at last, Braun wiped his face, which was quite gray. "I told you the truth," he said grimly. "My hunches don't work on stuff like this."

"But they do," I said. "I'm sorry we put you through the wringer—and you too, colonel—but we couldn't let an opportunity like this slip. It was too good a chance for us to test how our facilities would stand up in a real bomb-drop."

"A real drop?" Anderton said. "Are you trying to say that CIA staged this? You ought to be shot, the whole pack of you!"

"No, not exactly," I said. "The enemy's responsible for the drop, all right. We got word last month from our man in Gdynia that they were going to do it, and that the bomb would be on board the *Ludmilla.* As I say, it was too good an opportunity to miss. We wanted to find out just how long it would take us to figure out the nature of the bomb--which we didn't know in detail—after it was dropped here. So we had our people in Gdynia defuse the thing after it was put on board the ship, but otherwise leave it entirely alone.

"Actually, you see, your hunch was right on the button as far as it went. We didn't ask you whether or not that object was a live bomb. We asked whether it was a bomb or not. You said it was, and you were right."

The expression on Braun's face was exactly like the one he had worn while he had been searching for his decision—except that, since his eyes were open, I could see that it was directed at me. "If this was the old days," he said in an ice-cold voice, "I might of made the colonel's idea come true. I don't go for tricks like this, Andy."

"It was more than a trick," Clark put in. "You'll remember we had a deadline on the test, Mr. Braun. Obviously, in a real drop we wouldn't have all the time in the world to figure out what kind of a thing had been dropped. If we had still failed to establish that when the deadline ran out, we would have had to allow evacuation of the city, with all the attendant risk that that was exactly what the enemy wanted us to do."

"So?"

"So we failed the test," I said. "At one minute short of the deadline, Joan had the divers unscrew the cap. In a real drop that would have resulted in a detonation, if the bomb was real; we'd never risk it. That we did do it in the test was a confession of failure—an admission that our usual methods didn't come through for us in time.

"And that means that you were the only person who did come through, Mr. Braun. If a real bomb-drop ever comes, we're going to have to have you here, as an active part of our investigation. Your intuition for the one-shot gamble was the one thing that bailed us out this time. Next time it may save eight million lives."

There was quite a long silence. All of us, Anderton included, watched Braun intently, but his impassive face failed to show any trace of how his thoughts were running.

When he did speak at last, what he said must have seemed insanely irrelevant to Anderton, and maybe to Cheyney too. And perhaps it meant nothing more to Joan than the final clinical note in a case history.

"It's funny," he said, "I was thinking of running for Congress next year from my district. But maybe this is more important."

It was, I believe, the sigh of a man at peace with himself.

FEEDING TIME

One might properly say that the girl went to psychiatrists because she suffered from dangerous delusions. But not quite in the usual terms....

BY JAMES E. GUNN

Illustrated by van Dongen

Angela woke up with the sickening realization that today was feeding time. She slipped out of bed, hurried to the desk, and leafed nervously through her appointment book. She sighed with relief; it was all right—today was her appointment.

Angela took only forty-five minutes for make-up and dressing: it was feeding time. As she descended in the elevator, walked swiftly through the lobby, and got into a taxi, she didn't even notice the eyes that stopped and swiveled after her: feeding time.

Angela was haunted by a zoo.

She was also haunted by men, but this was understandable. She was the kind of blond, blue-eyed angel men pray to—or for—and she had the kind of measurements—36-26-36—that make men want to take up mathematics.

But Angela had no time for men—not today. Angela was haunted by a zoo, and it was feeding time.

Dr. Bachman had a gray-bearded, pink-skinned, blue-eyed kindliness that was his greatest stock in trade. Underneath, there was something else not quite so kindly which had been influential in his choice of professions. Now, for a moment, his professional mask—his *persona,* as the Jungians call it—slipped aside.

"A zoo?" he repeated, his voice clear, deep, and cultured, with just a trace of accent; Viennese without a doubt. He caught himself quickly. "A zoo. Exactly."

"Well, not exactly a zoo," said

Angela, pursing her red lips thoughtfully at the ceiling. "At least not an ordinary zoo. It's really only one animal—if you could call him an animal."

"What do you call him?"

"Oh, I never call him," Angela said quickly, giving a delicious little shiver. "He might come."

"Hm-m-m," hm-m-med Dr. Bachman neutrally.

"But you don't mean that," Angela said softly. "You mean if he isn't an animal, what is he? What he is—is a monster."

"What kind of monster?" Dr. Bachman asked calmly.

Angela turned on one elbow and looked over the back of the couch at the psychoanalyst. "You say that as if you met monsters every day. But then I guess you do." She sighed sympathetically. "It's a dangerous business, being a psychiatrist."

"Dangerous?" Dr. Bachman repeated querulously, caught off guard a second time. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, the people you meet—all the strange ones—and their problems—"

"Yes, yes, of course," he said hurriedly. "But about the monster—?"

"Yes, doctor," Angela said in her obedient tone and composed herself again on the couch. She looked at the corner of the ceiling as if she could see him clinging there. "He's not a nightmare monster, though he's frightening enough. He's too real; there are no blurred edges. He has purple fur—short, rather like

the fur on some spiders—and four legs, not evenly distributed like a dog's or a cat's but grouped together at the bottom. They're very strong—much stronger than they need to be. He can jump fifteen feet straight up into the air."

She turned again to look at Dr. Bachman. "Are you getting all this?"

Hastily, the psychoanalyst turned his notebook away, but Angela had already caught a glimpse of his doodling.

"Goodie!" she said, clapping her hands in delight. "You're drawing a picture."

"Yes, yes," he said grumpily. "Go on."

"Well, he has only two arms. He has six fingers on each hand, and they're flexible, as if they had no bones in them. They're elastic, too. They can stretch way out—as if to pick fruit that grows on a very tall vine."

"A vegetarian," said Dr. Bachman, making his small joke.

"Oh, no, doctor!" Angela said, her eyes wide. "He eats everything, but meat is what he likes the best. His face is almost human except it's green. He has very sharp teeth." She shuddered. "Very sharp. Am I going too fast?"

"Don't worry about me!" snapped the psychoanalyst. "It is your subconscious we are exploring, and it must go at its own speed."

"Oh, dear," Angela said with resignation. "The subconscious. It's going to be another one of those."

"You don't believe this nightmare has any objective reality?" Dr. Bachman asked sharply.

"That would make me insane, wouldn't it? Well, I guess there's no help for it. That's what I think."

Dr. Bachman tugged thoughtfully at his beard. "I see. Let's go back. How did this illusion begin?"

"I think it began with the claustrophobia."

Dr. Bachman shrugged. "A morbid fear of confined places is not unusual."

"It is when you're out in the open air. The fear had no relationship to my surroundings. All of a sudden, I'd feel like I was in a fairly large room which had a tremendous weight of rock or masonry above it. I was in the midst of a crowd of people. For moments it became so real that my actual surroundings faded out."

"But the feeling came and went."

"Yes. Then came the smell. It was a distinctive odor—musty and strong like the lion house in the winter, only wrong, somehow. But it made me think of the zoo."

"Naturally you were the only one who smelled it."

"That's right. I was self-conscious, at first. I tried to drown out the odor with perfume, but that didn't help. Then I realized that no one else seemed to smell it. Like the claustrophobia, it came and went. But each time it returned it was stronger. Finally I went to a psychiatrist—a Dr. Aber."

"That was before the illusion became visual?"

"That was sort of Dr. Aber's fault —my seeing the monster, I mean."

"It is to be expected," Dr. Bachman said.

"When nothing else worked, Dr. Aber tried hypnosis. 'Reach into your subconscious,' he said. 'Open the door to the past!' Well, I reached out. I opened the door. And that's when it happened."

"What happened?" Dr. Bachman leaned forward.

"I saw the monster.'

"Oh." He leaned back again, disappointed.

"People were close, but the monster was closer. The odor was stifling as he stared through the door—and saw me. I slammed the door shut, but it was too late. The door was there. I knew it could be opened. And he knew it could be opened. Now I was really afraid."

"Afraid?"

"That the monster might get through the door."

The psychoanalyst tugged at his beard. "You have an explanation for this illusion?"

"You won't laugh?"

"Certainly not!"

"I think, through some strange accident of time, I've become linked to a zoo that will exist in the distant future. The monster—wasn't born on Earth. He's an alien—from Jupiter, perhaps, although I don't think so. Through the door I can see part of a sign; I can read this much."

Angela turned and took the notebook from his surprised fingers and printed quickly:

M'RA
(Larmis
Nativ
Vega

"Just like in the zoo," she said, handing the book back. "There's a star named Vega."

"Yes," said the psychoanalyst heavily. "And you are afraid that this . . . alien will get through the door and—"

"That's it. He can open it now, you see. He can't exist here; that would be impossible. But something from the present can exist in the future. And the monster gets hungry—for meat."

"For meat?" Dr. Bachman repeated, frowning.

"Every few weeks," Angela said, shivering, "it's feeding time."

Dr. Bachman tugged at his beard, preparing the swift, feline stroke which would lay bare the traumatic relationship at the root of the neurosis. He said, incisively, "The monster resembles your father, is that not so?"

It was Angela's turn to frown. "That's what Dr. Aber said. I'd never have noticed it on my own. There might be a slight resemblance."

"This Dr. Aber—he did you no good?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to think that," Angela protested quickly. "He helped. But the help was—temporary, if you know what I mean."

"And you would like something more permanent."

"That would be nice," Angela admitted. "But I'm afraid it's too much to hope for."

"No. It will take time, but eventually we will work these subconscious repressions into your conscious mind, where they will be cleansed of their neurotic value."

"You think it's all in my head?" Angela said wistfully.

"Certainly," the psychoanalyst said briskly. "Let us go over the progress of the illusion once more: First came the claustrophobia, then the smell, then, through Dr. Aber's bung . . . treatment, I should say, the dreams—"

"Oh, not dreams, doctor," Angela corrected. "When I sleep, I don't dream of monsters. I dream"—she blushed prettily—"of men. The thing in the zoo—I can see him whenever I close my eyes." She shivered. "He's getting impatient."

"Hungry?"

Angela beamed at him. "Yes. It's almost feeding time. He gets fed, of course. By the keeper, I suppose. But that's just grains and fruits and things like that. And he gets hungry for meat."

"And then?"

"He opens the door."

"And I suppose he sticks through his elastic fingers."

Angela gave him a look of pure gratitude. "That's right."

"And you're afraid that one day he will get hungry enough to eat you."

"That's it, I guess. Wouldn't you be—afraid, that is? There's all the legends about dragons and Minotaurs and creatures like that. They always preferred a diet of young virgins; and where there's all that talk—"

"If that were your only concern," Dr. Bachman commented dryly, "it seems to me that you could make yourself ineligible with no great difficulty."

Angela giggled. "Why, doctor! What a suggestion!"

"Hm-m-m," hm-m-med the psychoanalyst. "So! To return. Every few weeks comes feeding time. And you, feeling nervous and afraid, come to me for help."

"You put it so well."

"And now it's feeding time."

"That's right." Angela's nostrils dilated suddenly. "He's getting close to the door. Don't you smell him, doctor?"

Dr. Bachman sniffed once and snorted. "Certainly not. Now tell me about your father."

"Well," Angela began reluctantly, "he believed in reincarnation—"

"No, no," the psychoanalyst said impatiently. "The important things. How you felt about him when you were a little girl. What he said to you. How you hated your mother."

"I'm afraid there won't be time. He's got one of his hands on the door already."

Despite himself, Dr. Bachman glanced back over his shoulder. "The monster?" His beard twitched nervously. "Nonsense. About your father—"

"The door's opened!" Angela cried

out. "I'm scared, doctor. It's feeding time!"

"I won't be tricked again," the psychoanalyst said sternly. "If we're to get anywhere with this analysis, I must have complete—"

"Doctor! Watch out! The fingers —Dr. Bachman! Doctor! Doc—!"

Angela sighed. It was a strange sigh, half hopelessness and half relief. She picked up her purse.

"Doctor?" she said tentatively to the empty room.

She stood up, sniffing the air gingerly. The odor was gone. So was Dr. Bachman.

She walked toward the door. "Doctor?" she tried once more.

There was no answer. There never had been an answer, not from seventeen psychiatrists. There was no doubt about it. The monster did like psychiatrists.

It was a truly terrifying situation she was in, certainly through no fault of her own, and a girl had to do the best she could. She could console herself with the thought that the monster would never take her for food.

She was the trapdoor it needed into this world. Eat her, and feeding time was over.

She was perfectly safe.

As long as she didn't run out of psychiatrists.

THE END

THE ANALYTICAL LABORATORY

PLACE	STORY	AUTHOR	POINTS
1.	The Long Way Home (Pt. 2)	Poul Anderson	2.00
2.	Allamagoosa	Eric F. Russell	2.72
3.	Millennium	Everett B. Cole	3.00
4.	Tie		
	Risk	Isaac Asimov	3.18
	Watch Your Step	Algis Budrys	3.18

I had a feeling, when we put the May 1955 issue together, that we had a collection of darned good yarns. The reader votes indicate agreement. Note that short stories very seldom win high places, largely because they don't hold the reader long enough to make a deep impression—but the quite-short "Allamagoosa" won second place. And any issue in which Isaac Asimov and Algis Budrys tie for fourth place—*must* have been good!

THE EDITOR.

THE REFERENCE LIBRARY

BY P. SCHUYLER MILLER

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

With what will seem to old-timers like incredible restraint, and to some youngsters as unjustified aggressiveness, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach has waited until now to publish a volume of his own short science fiction: "Tyrant of Time" (*Fantasy Press, Reading;* 253 *pp.* $3.00). Chances are, he should have waited just as long to publish my own "Titan," but to paraphrase Lloyd's inscription on my copy of this book of his: "O well—we like 'em."

The nine stories collected here represent about a third of Lloyd Eshbach's published fiction in the years 1930 to '41—with one late revival in 1950—as nearly as I can tell from the two Day—Donald of Oregon and Bradford of New York—indexes. More specifically, they range between the title story from *Wonder Stories* of July '32 (as "The Time Conqueror") and "The Light from Beyond" from *Thrilling Wonder,* Summer '44 (as "God of Light"). This period just about spans my own writing activity. It is what we look back on as "the good old days," when writing was easy, selling not too difficult, the pay poor, and chances of getting paid worse.

In the years B.A.—Before *Amazing*—science fiction was a specialized brand of fantasy. Of the book-writers, Wells, Verne, Burroughs, Merritt and Taine were about the only ones to gain much notice. But all the best

writers and all the best all-fiction magazines — "pulps" — tried their hand at it from time to time, for variety's sake or just to blow off steam or exorcise a strange dream or a nightmare.

I suppose the first of the great science-fiction editors was Bob Davis of the Munsey chain, but particularly of *All-Story, Argosy,* and their various combinations. There we met A. Merritt, there Edgar Rice Burroughs got his hearing, there Ray Cummings became a fixture, Ralph Milne Farley took over Venus as successfully as Burroughs had Mars and was promptly jostled by Otis Adelbert Kline while many a skilled purveyor of adventure yarns moved Malaya to a strange planet and changed a witch doctor to the High Priest of Oob.

There, also, one could count on such highly professional stories as the "Darkness" series of 1929-'30 by a writer whose "The Other Side of Here," just as smoothly and tightly written, just as good reading, is the original half of a new Ace "Double"—with A. E. van Vogt's complete "Weapon Makers," retitled "One Against Eternity," for 35¢. The writer, of course, was—and is—Murray Leinster.

These two new books seem to me to be as typical of the good old days as anything you can pick up. The writers who sold to Bob Davis were competing with some of the top action-story writers in the world. There was no real fantasy-science-fiction market or cult: what Davis called "different" stories, and gave a hearing, had to be as good in the eyes of the average reader, whose main fare was adventure and westerns—with a little mystery—as the other serials and shorts—and they were. What developed in those fondly remembered magazines was a school of skilled professional writers who knew every way of building suspense, handling action, sustaining mystery and achieving conviction. Murray Leinster got his practical training in that hard, competitive school, and he's never forgotten a thing he learned there.

Meanwhile another kind of science-fiction was being developed by another editor—Hugo Gernsback—in another chain of magazines. If Bob Davis was publishing the lineal descendants of H. G. Wells' first fantastic romances, Gernsback had revivified the traditions of Jules Verne—*science* fiction, some of it written to sugarcoat scientific lessons, some to dramatize new discoveries or conjectures. The stories were published in popular science magazines like the *Electrical Experimenter* and *Science and Invention*: I believe *Popular Science* even tried a couple at one time.

Then Gernsback launched *Amazing Stories* in April, 1926, and the S-F Era began.

The immediate result, once the first backlog of reprints was beginning to thin, was an expanding market for something that only a handful of people knew how to write—Leinster, Merritt, Cummings, Bur-

roughs. *Weird Tales* had started three years earlier and begun to develop its own circle of writers, and some of them were able to substitute Martians for ghouls. But the ultimate result was that a lot of youngsters who liked to *read* science fiction decided to try to *write* it—and to their amazement, found that they could sell darn near everything they wrote. That the pay was slim and hard to collect meant very little: the thrill was to get in print. And since the pay *was* poor, even for depression days, that meant that the real professionals stayed out of the field and let us greenhorns burgeon like so much quack grass.

We had one thing—ideas—and for a long time that was all we needed. Those were the days of gimmicks and gadgets and "thought variants." Use a scientific fact or theory that no one else had used, and you sold a story. Think of a new invention, or a new approach to an old one, and you got an acceptance. It was claimed, with humorous intent but some justice, that Edmund Hamilton could sell the same story over and over simply by giving his villains one more tentacle each time. (It would work with his heroes, too, for he was probably the first to accept bug-eyed-monsters of outlandish shapes and colors into the brotherhood of what "Doc" Smith later took over as Civilization.)

These stories of Eshbach's are typical of the stories we wrote then: pretty fair ideas, but amateurishly handled. You see, from the first science fiction was what it has remained—a literature of untrammeled ideas.

Look 'em over yourself and you'll see what I mean. In the long novelette, "Tyrant of Time," a brain is preserved through the whole future of humanity and becomes a tyrant over various societies. "Dust" uses an excellent gimmick: the idea that spores of long-vanished lunar plants can spring to life once they get air and water—radiocarbon tests have given a 3,000-year age to some viable lotus seeds from a Japanese dugout canoe. "The Meteor Miners" speaks for itself: a then novel setting, plus the plot of the old-timer who is brushed aside but makes a comeback. In "The Light from Beyond" you have the same mixture of Merritt and Arthur J. Burks that you'll find in Jack Williamson's first yarns—and my own. "The Place of Orchids" is more of the same, plus some thoughts about the possible effects of radium on mutations (good enough for John Taine's best books, wasn't it?).

The last three tales, "The City of Dread," "Singing Blades," and "The Cauldron of Life" are fantasies—the two latter, to me, the best things in the book.

We had the ideas and we had the market: what we lacked was skill and practice. I would be willing to bet that for most of us our only professional training as writers came from a high school English teacher somewhere. Certainly those who had taken technical courses in college had

very little time for academic work, and the stories we were selling would probably not have earned a passing grade in a freshman composition class. Our models weren't the great short-story writers of the times—Hemingway and the rest, on whom the literati builded. Ours were the pulp writers whose stuff we read and enjoyed. If we were crude and juvenile, I think it is because we had only two goals: to get crazy ideas off our chests, and to entertain.

I say that our training was gained in high school, because our style was built largely out of the elements our enforced readings in Nineteenth Century literature had persuaded us was good. In high school you got an "A" for lavish use of adjectives, and did we pile 'em on! You talked about people—what they looked like and what they did—but only the pulps drew character through action. To me, the early Burroughs tales were and are darn good yarns. I liked, and still like, much that Ray Cummings wrote, identical as the plots became.

Some of us learned a little. I think the two 1940 fantasies from the short-lived *Strange Stories* show that Lloyd Eshbach was. I hope I did. We all know that John Campbell did, making the transition from his own space-operas to the "Don A. Stuart" classics, then turning his talent and energy to building the same qualities in other writers. Jack Williamson is another who came up the long, hard way by keeping at it—and where is there a greater contrast than between Edmund Hamilton's "world-wrecker" yarns in *Weird Tales* and his moving and completely adult "What's It Like Out There?"

In "Tyrant of Time" you have a pretty fair sample of middle of the road science fiction from the "good old days," written by an amateur. In "The Other Side of Here," you have another example of the kind of story which was standard in those days—a city struck down, beautiful women disappearing, holes opening into nowhere, a hero and heroine chased by the very people they are trying to help. The difference is that this one is done by the man who is probably the most professional of professional science-fiction writers, Murray Leinster. It would have been great stuff twenty years ago: it's merely smooth stuff now.

DEEP SPACE, by Eric Frank Russell. Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa. 1954. 249 pp. $3.00.

Here is one of the most satisfying one-author collections of the past year, and one of Fantasy Press' all-time best selections. Four of the best of the nine stories included were first published here in ASF. They are "The Undecided," in which the very strange crew of an Earth ship outwits the attack of hostile natives on a far world; "Last Blast," in which the crew of a Moon depot are brought back by the alien conquerors

of an Earth on which all green things have been destroyed; and two of the top yarns in the book, "Homo Saps," in which a crew of Martian traders learn some very strange things about camels, and "The Timid Tiger," a memorable lesson in xonic relations on Venus. These last two stories may just have to give way to "A Little Oil," from *Galaxy,* for top place . . . I don't know why they haven't been touted in the more ambitious anthologies.

As for the rest, the first and last are variants on the Adam and Eve theme: the opening story, "First Person Singular," is a short novel or long novelette (who can separate 'em these days?) of the first peopling of Earth; the closing tale, "Second Genesis," brings a roving spaceman home to an abandoned Earth after two thousand years. You may class this, and "Rainbow's End," which reveals some strange refugees from Earth on Callisto, as fantasy. And "The Witness" is the story of the trial of an extraterrestrial for trespass, illegal immigration and assorted other crimes, which gives us a very strange courtroom procedure but a very human treatment.

There's not a bad story in the book, and I'd rate all but the two "Genesis" tales as tops.

LUCKY STARR AND THE OCEANS OF VENUS, by Paul French. Doubleday & Co., Garden City, N. Y. 1954. 186 pp. $2.50.

In this third volume of the adventures of the young scientist hero, David "Lucky" Starr and his Martian midget friend Bigman Jones, we have a yarn that's pushing right up into the Heinlein class. And since (I'm told) "Paul French" is an off-hours name for Isaac Asimov, it should be no surprise to find a combination of mystery with science fiction that's in the "Caves of Steel" class.

Lucky Starr heads for Venus when a friend and fellow member of the Science Council appears to be a renegade, and when a tide of sabotage seems to be sweeping over the yeast farms of the subsea colonies. He probes and pries against invisible opponents who are able to control men's minds—is himself trapped under a miles-broad subsea monster—digs a basic clue out of a bowl of axle grease—and brings this series of Doubleday teen-agers well into the top category where adults will have to start watching it as they do the Heinlein books.

NORTHWEST OF EARTH, by C. L. Moore. Gnome Press, New York. 1954. 212 pp. $3.00.

Here is the second, and I believe the last collection of C. L. Moore's "Northwest Smith" and "Jirel of Joiry" stories from the revered old *Weird Tales* years in the '30s. Smith is a sort of Conan of the future, though perhaps not quite so hard,

who contends with various vicious entities on and off the familiar planets and in parallel realms without end. Jirel is a woman warrior out of an equally mythical medieval France, who comes up hard and often against what passes for magic in her case. Both series, shuffled together in these Gnome Press collections—"Shambleau and Others" was the first book—are full of the lush, colorful tapestry of words which Merritt did best of all, and which we lack in most modern science fiction, except for some of Arthur C. Clarke's off-trail visions. Personally, I enjoy them—though I think the stories would have been more effective distributed through an anthology, than one after the other.

Incidentally, rumor has it that the reason for the higgledy-piggledy mixture of Northwest and Jirel is that the final story—one of two or three from fan magazines—would bring them together, but this was vetoed by Miss Moore, who contended that if they weren't good enough for professional publication when they were written, they're not that good now. If their standards weren't so infernally high, maybe we'd be seeing more Moore-Kuttner-Padgett stories.

ASSIGNMENT IN TOMORROW, edited by Frederik Pohl. Hanover House, Garden City, N. Y. 1954. 317 pp. $2.95.

Here is one of the best anthologies of 1954, and one of the best selections by this editor. It includes stories as old—and still good—as Lester del Rey's "Helen O'Loy," one of the first classics of the android robots, which was here in 1939, and H. L. Gold's memorable—and oft-reprinted—"A Matter of Form" (ASF, 1938—short novel length and one of the best in the book), with others as new as Alfred Bester's tour-de-force of alien psychology, "5,271,009" from a 1954 *F&SF*. *Galaxy* seems to have printed most of the stories first, though several magazines are represented and Jack Williamson's "The Peddler's Nose" is also from this magazine. It's the one about a lush from far space who has no realization of what harm a few toys can do a primitive culture like ours.

I particularly liked Theodore Sturgeon's "Mr. Costello, Hero," a devastating portrait of a human wolf running loose in a bureaucratic sheepfold, Kurt Vonnegut's "The Big Trip Up Yonder," which shows some of the possible consequences of our advances in geriatrics, and "Mother" by that always amazing writer Philip José Farmer—whose classic "The Lovers" is long, long overdue from some publisher—as well as the Gold and Bester stories. Ray Bradbury is here with the one about humanity hiding from an invincible race of invaders, "Subterfuge." Algis Budrys has a comedy of counterfeiting, "The Frightened Tree." Jerome Bixby provides his glimpse of madness, "Angels in the Jets," and C. M.

Kornbluth has another ruthless vista of future bureaucratic autocracy in "The Adventurer."

To finish the listing—sixteen stories is about the limit in length for which that is feasible here—we have James Schmitz's yarn of the questioning of an alien, "We Don't Want Any Trouble," Richard Wilson's inter-dimensional "Back to Julie," and Peter Phillips' weird insight on time travel and spooks, "She Who Laughs." And, for good measure, Fletcher Pratt's nice little account of nemesis, "Official Record," and Fredric Brown's "Hall of Mirrors," which is also a novel twist on time travel.

THE BIG BALL OF WAX, by Shepherd Mead. Simon & Schuster, New York. 1954. 246 pp. $3.50.

Here's fun with the future in a bawdier, more obvious and less melodramatic parallel to "The Space Merchants."

Lanny Martin, who tells the story of what happened during the crucial period around Momsday, 1992, is a merchandising executive in Consolidated Chemical's Katie Park head office. He is sent to St. Louis to find out why—in this happiest of all merchandising worlds—business is falling off. What he finds is Molly Blood and XP.

Molly is a Marilyn Monroe type evangelist whose cult has the finer features of Ashtaroth's, thanks to the genius of an attic electronics expert who has found out how to produce experiences directly in the sensory centers of the brain. Molly's backers have a wonderful racket and know it, but it's too big for them to handle. A small group of worried thinkers are trying to kill the whole thing, having visions of a race spending twenty-four hours a day with XP helmets on, living through recorded experiences of someone else. And Lanny is out to get ConChem the captive audience to end all captive audiences.

Shepherd Mead is probably best known for his satire on business, "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying." Now he puts his satire into broad fiction. It's not the carefully worked out future that Pohl and Kornbluth gave us . . . more a running series of sight gags. I suspect the advertising world is much less concerned over it than over "Space Merchants." As science fiction—since it suggests a possible future—it's somewhere between that classic and "Mr. Adam."

OPERATION: OUTER SPACE, by Murray Leinster. Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa. 1954. 208 pp. $3.00.

I can't think of anyone who can successfully dispute Murray Leinster's title of "dean of American science fiction." In fact, I'd make it international. He's had his heights and a few deep depths; under assort-

ed pen-names—including his own voting name—he has shown far more versatility than any other writer in the field; and he's been at it far longer. On the whole he can be relied upon for solid, middle-of-the-road, workmanlike stories that won't stir the lit'ry folk greatly but will win a lot of new converts. A prime example is this brand-new yarn for Fantasy Press.

In a mild way "Operation: Outer Space" has elements of the advertising satire in "Space Merchants" and "Big Ball of Wax," but they're incidental to a good adventure yarn. Jed Cochrane is producer of a popular solidograph show who is sent to the Moon to set up a production which will confirm the boss' son-in-law in his conviction that he's a genius. Jed does a little more than that: his own flash of advertising imagination shows the way to make a minor invention into a major one, and he then makes a dream of his own solid by launching the first starship. In the rest of the story a particularly ill-assorted band of adventurers explore two far worlds, with a hard business head battered but unbloodied by some choice neuroses. It's no classic, but it's good reading.

TO WALK THE NIGHT, by William Sloane. Dodd, Mead & Co., New York. 1954. 307 pp. $2.75.

Here is one of the great classics of modern science fiction, reissued after seventeen years and even better than it was in 1937. Then reviewers could not make out whether it was a detective story or a ghost story: now it takes its proper place.

This is a story that begins with an old astronomer burning fiercely in his unscorched chair, that begins again with a young mathematician blowing his brains out, that has every element of mystery and suspense yet is never melodramatic, never cheap or obvious. It is a novel of character, of real people, in which the personality of the strange woman out of nowhere, Selena Le Normand, is at once the heart of the mystery and its clearest clue.

It's a pity that William Sloane left off writing and concentrated on publishing after this book and "The Edge of Running Water," also to be reissued this spring. I don't think that is the book this is, but you're making a big mistake if you haven't read either of them and don't get them now.

UNDERSEA QUEST, by Frederik Pohl & Jack Williamson. Gnome Press, New York. 1954. 189 pp. $2.50.

STEP TO THE STARS. by Lester del Rey; THE WORLD AT BAY, by Paul Capon. John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia. 1954. 210 pp. $2.00.

Robert Heinlein's and Andre Norton's juvenile science-fiction books are acknowledgedly in a class by

themselves, as good or better than many novels billed as adult fare. Isaac Asimov's "Lucky Starr" yarns as "Paul French" are improving, and Murray Leinster's "Space Tug" series has been solidly realistic. The long Winston library has been decidedly erratic, with some very good books and a few very poor ones. Now Gnome Press, having sent its "Space Rover" series into space, has launched a new teen-age series of the subsea adventures of Jim Eden.

As you might expect from the names of its collaborators, "Undersea Quest" is full of color and strong adventure, as Jim Eden, forced out of the Subsea Academy, tries to regain his inheritance and find out what has happened to his inventor uncle in the bubble-cities of the great deeps. It's not Heinlein-Norton, but it's the kind of book that should predispose Captain Video fans to our kind of science fiction.

So should Lester del Rey's "Step to the Stars," one of the best of the twenty-six Winston s-f books. Evidently drawing on his own experience, he gives us a vividly realistic picture of the problems and perils of a youngster trying to work up to the level of mature men on the planet's first space station. The best parts have the reality of some of Arthur C. Clarke's semi-documentaries.

Of very different caliber is "The World at Bay," by Paul Capon, an English writer who according to the publisher is a novelist of "considerable reputation." Be that as it may, he seems to have been a stranger to modern science fiction for this yarn about an invasion by villainous aliens in miniature spacestations is only a notch above the old "Boys' Own" formula which nowadays makes boys wince, and strong men grow pale.

CONQUEST BY MAN, by Paul Herrmann. Harper & Brothers, New York. 1955. 455 pp. Ill. $6.00.

Here is a rather more credulous counterpart of Willy Ley's and Sprague de Camp's "Lands Beyond," written by a German geographer in the same tradition of encyclopedic scholarship typified by our two friends. It covers some of the same ground, but draws on many different sources and delves into many byroads which Ley and de Camp left untraveled.

Apparently the GIs were merely expressing an age-old truism when they scribbled "Kilroy was here." This book is an account of the Kilroys of the world, from cave days down to the great age of the Portuguese navigators, when America was officially discovered. The drive behind it all—and the main reason most of it has gotten into the histories very indirectly, if at all—was, in Dr. Herrmann's opinion, business.

The story the author tells is well documented, especially from German and Scandinavian sources. He is, as I've noted, more credulous about

many things than the authors of "Lands Beyond." For example, he ignores seemingly good and not too recent archeological evidence that the Zimbabwe ruins, at least in part, were of medieval age (beads and other European trade-goods *under* the walls). He entangles himself in some evident contradictions as a partisan of the Heyerdahl theory of an east-to-west peopling of Polynesia by white people (having said early on that that the Polynesians had the chicken, pig and dog as their only domestic animals, all of which were of Asiatic origin, though the Peruvians—like most Indians—also had dogs).

Especially interesting to me is the long and thoroughly documented account of the Viking habitation of Greenland, as a backdrop to their probable operations on the mainland of North America. Markland, it seems, soon became an essential source of timber for the Greenland colony: they could get wood for ship-building nowhere else but in Europe. And the story closes far later than I had supposed: a storm-tossed Icelandic bishop who came within sight of Herjulfsness in 1534 saw people there, at a time when the French were already exploring the St. Lawrence and Basque and Breton fishermen were visiting the Atlantic coast quite regularly. Wherever the short-lived camps in Vinland may have been, it seems to have been Markland that was regularly visited from Greenland, and there, somewhere in eastern Canada, that good evidence of the Norse visits may some day be found.

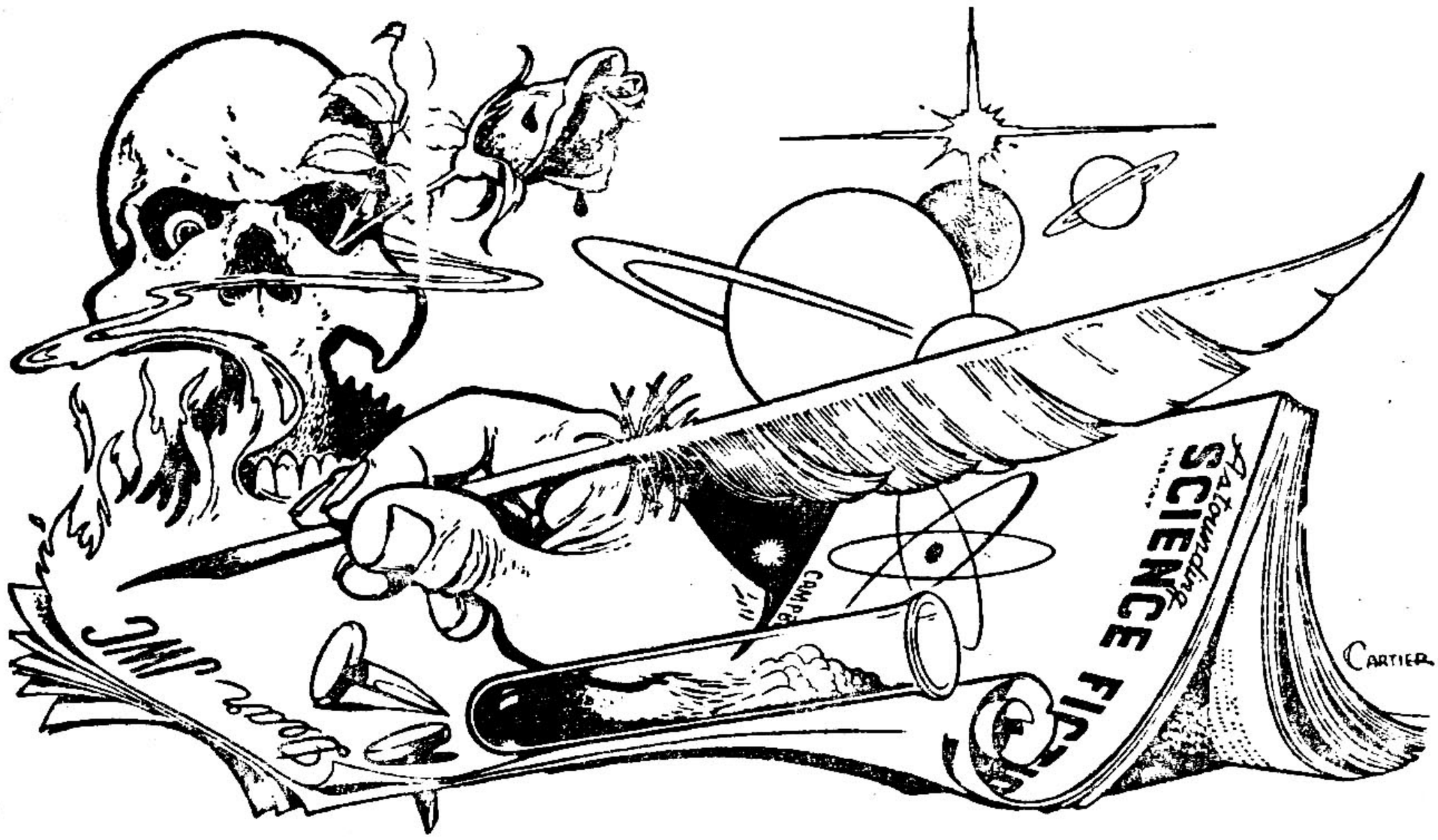
With pagans in fashion again in Hollywood and in the historical yarns, there's an untouched gold mine in the story of the Greek opening of the Black Sea country and the trade network of central and eastern Europe. Most of it is well written, and if you liked "Lands Beyond," don't pass up "Conquest by Man."

NOTE FOR CINEMANIACS:

Walter W. Lee, Jr., 1205 South 10th Street, Coos Bay, Oregon, has a thirty-three-page checklist of science fiction, fantasy and horror films in the Spring '55 issue of his fanzine "IT." His list is limited to feature-length productions, with only the most outstanding of the serials, shorts and cartoons, but there's a good historical and critical introduction. (I'd like to see a lot more credit given to the RKO team of Val Lewton, producer, and Jacques Tourneur, director, for their really adult series of fantasies and mysteries in the early '40's.)

I won't guess at the number of entries in the list: Lee is adding to it and correcting errors as he goes along. For each film you get date, producer, sometimes director and/or stars, and frequently a couple of lines of synopsis. Dittoed, it's twenty-five cents from the author-editor-publisher-printer. As with the Day bibliographies, lists like this are where the serious fans really shine.

THE END



BRASS TACKS

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Re "The Right to Breed," April '55, we find that Kingsbury shows a disgusting lack of knowledge of genetics and evolution.

He bases his article on the assumption that in a population with birth control the frequency of "bad" will increase to such a point that extinction will occur. This is contrary to all the facts of population genetics. The Hardy-Weinberg Law proves that the genetic make-up of a population will remain constant from generation to generation.

The only way a gene can spread is through mutation and selection. (By spreading, we mean increasing in proportion—frequency—rather than in absolute numbers.) Since mutation rates are very low—on the order of 10^{-4} to 10^{-8}—they are not very effective by themselves. In a controlled population, therefore, there would be no more danger of "bad" mutations spreading than in a much larger, uncontrolled population.

As for selection, here Kingsbury's argument falls flat. His concept of the word fits in only with older ideas of "the survival of the fittest," et cetera, popular in Darwin's time, rather than with the modern evolutionary ideas. The former pictured selection as a negative force which eliminated the "unfit" through constant struggle; we now realize that selection acts not only through competition-elimination, but through coöperation and other very subtle biological factors, especially ecological.

Now Kingsbury assumes that man

is just another animal, subject to the same biological factors. He neglects man's ability to alter some of these factors—especially to control his environment and his evolution. According to George G. Simpson, in "The Meaning of Evolution," man's evolution can in the future be an entirely different sort of process, sociological rather than biological. It will be an orderly, rational process, one that can be accomplished only by birth control and other factors.

In any case, attempts such as Kingsbury's to establish war as the method of selection must inevitably fail. He claims that the conqueror would have better genetic ability to stay alive than the vanquished. A brief consideration of the factors affecting victory in a war shows this to be untrue. In general, the conqueror is that nation with the largest population, greatest manufacturing capacity, most abundant natural resources, et cetera.

In addition it should possess an economy and philosophy directed at war, like that of Nazi Germany; this would be a lousy society.

In any case, with constant war man's natural resources would eventually be exhausted, thus leaving the human race in worse straits than before.

Kingsbury's use of the word "immoral" in this context is absolutely meaningless. While neither defining the word, nor proving that birth control is "immoral," he claims that genetics does what no science can do, i. e., make value judgments.

We hope that in the future your writers will acquire at least a basic knowledge of the subjects they profess to discuss. In connection with this we refer you to Th. Dobzhansky's "Genetics and the Origin of Species," and to Simpson's book (above).—Burton S. Guttman, and Leo Wolf, 700 Queen Avenue North, Minneapolis 11, Minnesota.

It was Spencer, not Darwin, who pulled that "survival of the fittest" line. It's caused a lot of false arguments, too. The more appropriate line, I believe, would be "the survival of the most fitting," which means something quite different.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Instead of blowing out candles I'll celebrate my twenty-second birthday by writing my first letter to the magazine I've had the pleasure of growing with, these last thirteen years. Ever since I first timidly reached up to pilfer from my father's fiercely guarded treasure-stack of dusty old ASF's I have been reading science fiction; sometimes very sporadically, sometimes over intensely, but always with the feeling afterwards that I had ingested something more than verbal hookah smoke.

There is something that intrigues me particularly about the line of thinking that has been eddying in and around the articles, your editorials, and Brass Tacks of late. Specifically: "thinking about thinking".

is getting very, very "warm" to *something* as it warms to its subject. Is the "cult" of science-fiction readers finally becoming self-conscious to the essence and importance of their potential—is this twenty-five-year period of group meditation about to bring forth a brain-child all its own?

If I may blow some gusts of air on the fire that readers Tilton and Lucoff have fueled and kindled so well—imagine a plot with me: A far-off civilization having decided that life was too good to "escape" from, has for some time possessed as a social institution a means of taking from the best of the planet's minds their most visionary dreams, culled from all sources, and communicating these to a vast audience for their relaxation, titillation, and inspiration. To oversimplify, the conjugation of this and the audience of a wide variety of more or less specialized types of individuals breeds more specific ideas of a how-to-*do*-it nature. But since they all have in common the desire to realize certain progressive inventions in the pure and applied sciences and have discovered the folly of pride in authorship and selfish secretiveness for personal "glory" they quite naturally invent for the greater part as one macro-organism, using the aforementioned means of communication as their common nervous system.

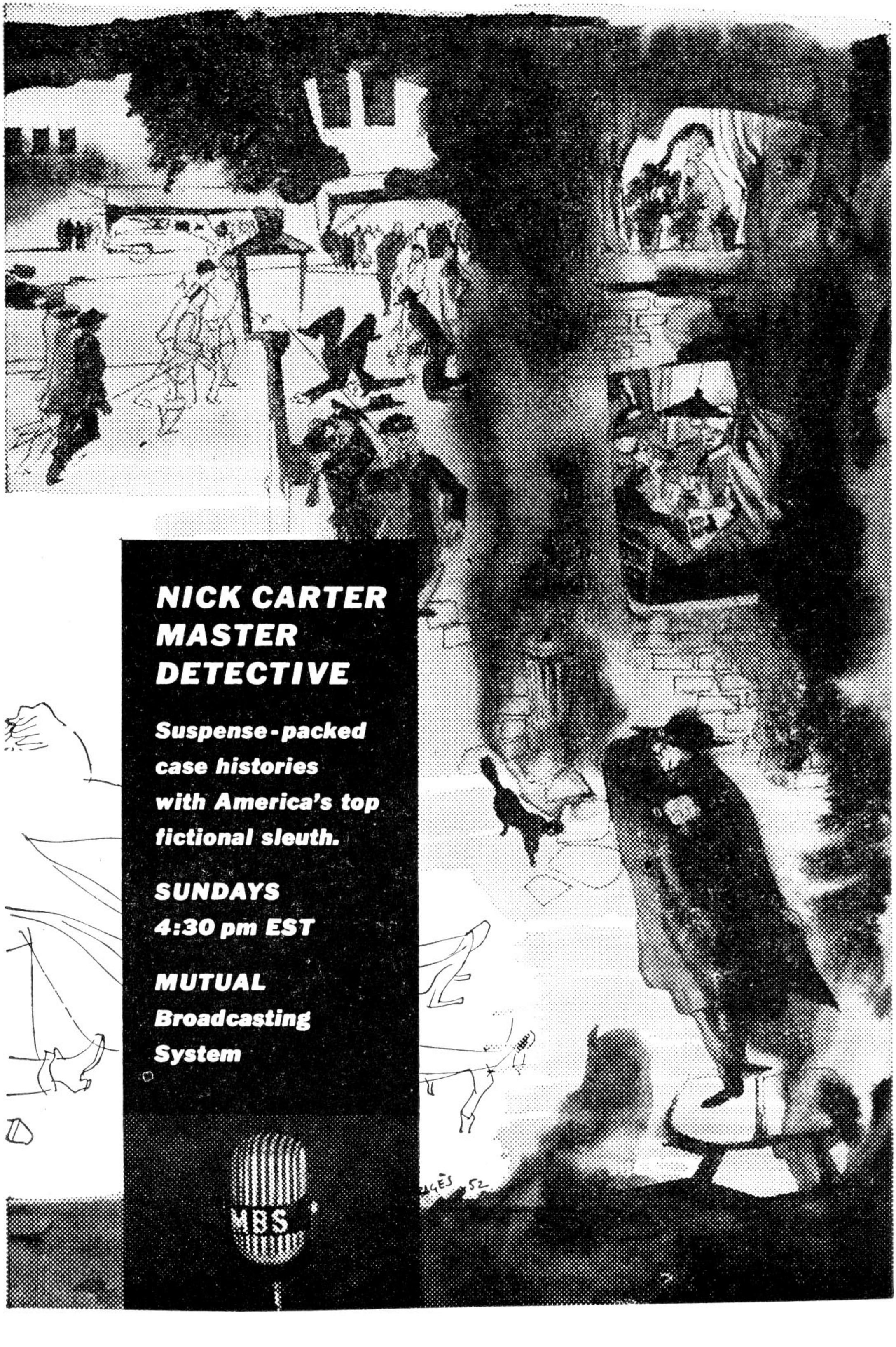
Well, John, I would like to write this story, but I would hopefully suggest that it would be a tarnished example of the "contemptibly familiar." Except for some small disparities, isn't this "our mag"—including readers? All we need for the present is an efficient second stage. Those small disparities seem to grow larger while I wait for signs of action. Whose move?

At the moment I am quite struck with the similarity between reader Tilton's problem and my own of a few months back. In dreaming up a Cinerama screen home TV (binaural sound, of course!) I was considering, among many other attacks, the possibility of projecting an ultraviolet spot back onto a mixed phosphor surface. Here the questions were: What are the best known UV sources? The best known variable diffractor? UV phosphors? Are there phosphors of sufficient variation in frequency response not to overlap—magenta, cyan, and yellow? Now it appears that Mr. Tilton's idea has made mine obsolete while yet in the incubator.

Here's one to revolutionize electronics, and with it cybernetics, automazation, and civilization. Project: to vacuum "spray" germanium or silicon through a stencil—IBM card type—onto a card, circuits being printed on at strategic intervals and stencils changed for pnp et cetera. Computers by the page, by the book, make themselves! Well?

As a matter of fact, I intend to do research on this myself some time within the next eight years of college. But I would really love to see someone beat me to it. Enter *this* in J. of S. S.

One more entry: In almost any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discussion of mathematical paradoxes I've seen or been in, the notion of infinity is used. For some time, I have strongly suspected "infinity" to be entirely useless in any logic, except to show the fallacy of this kind of "intuition." Isaac Asimov's article dealing with "possible" (another overtaxed and misunderstood word —think about it)! molecules serves to illustrate only too well to me the lack of need in any real finite one each universe—the only kind that a living organism is affected by—for any number over about 10^{97} to measure (count) distance; 10^{100} to count "*things*" and perhaps 10^{120} to enumerate processes, combinations, events—those things depending upon the dimension time. One might state an axiom, thus: "There can exist no meaningful number greater than the total number of events in (one cycle of)? the universe." Call this number G. Then, "The set of Whole numbers has G elements, and is finite." And, "Only those rational numbers that use elements of the set of whole numbers once and only once are real." Also, "The smallest number greater than the null case is unity." One could certainly develop a consistent and intuitively satisfying mathematics on this scheme if they were to include quantization as an axiom. Or could they? I'll be working on its *most* interesting group theory.

There must be many of us who most devoutly wish to see the "infinities" put in the bottomless, topless, sideless box which already contains the unicorn, the simultaniety, and the "spoor of spooks." Shall it be an aid to the imagination—nothing more, and nothing less? —Gregory Comstock, Juneau, Alaska.

How many real relationships can be counted between 10^{100} real things? Asimov got a fairly sizable number of relationships with far fewer things!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I have just finished reading Mark Clifton's "Sense from Thought Divide" and was very pleasantly surprised to find it a continuation of an earlier story which I enjoyed very much.

Having read Astounding for many years, I look forward to meeting its authors each month, but was most impressed by the ideas presented in Mr. Clifton's story. One complaint of course is that he left me up in the air. Having done so, I do hope that in the near future he will write another story extending still further this same theme. If he had not thought of this already, I would like to request that he do so as I, for one, will now be looking forward to another story by him.

Needless to say, that I enjoy Astounding, and would like to thank you for the effort and work put into it. —Paul M. Sanford, Room 410, YMCA, 2200 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland 15, Ohio.

Where but up in the air could a story of levitation leave you?

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Reading Isaac Asimov's article in your February edition on the probability of the occurrence of a common protein molecule, reminds me of another problem in probability I ran across. I was browsing through the library in my university days when I came to this book on the subject.

I'm a little hazy on the exact details, but it went something like this: If a quart of water is placed on a source of heat such that it would be brought to a boil in fifteen minutes, and, if the process were repeated over and over continuously, the probability that the molecules would arrange themselves in crystalline form, that is, freeze, instead of boil, is once in $10^{10^{19}}$ years. Now that is a number that is a number. It doesn't look like much at first, but it makes Mr. Asimov's 4×10^{619} small by comparison. I doubt that you'd be willing to write $10^{10^{19}}$ out as you did 4×10^{619}. As I recall, it would be "one" followed by 10,000,000,000,000,000,000 zeros, naughts, or ciphers. Looking at the number 4×10^{619} as printed in Mr. Asimov's article, I estimate that in the same size figures you could print 3276 zeros on a page, or 6552 on both sides of a sheet. Without a large economy-size slide rule, it took a long time to figure, but I make it 1,526,251,526,251,526 sheets to print the number $10^{10^{19}}$. (So what if I missed by even a 1000 sheets?)

Your February edition had eighty-two sheets in it. So I next figure that it would take 18,612,823,490,872 copies of the February edition to print my number. If each copy of the edition is squeezed to one-quarter inch thick, the stack would be 97,-

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920,993.744 miles high. It seemed only proper to run that out to three decimal places because, after all, a stack of Astounding Science Fiction magazines even 0.744 miles high is an unusual sight.

But still, it's like the man says, even if water never froze or never will freeze when heated, that doesn't prove it can't happen. And even if it happens only once in $10^{10^{19}}$ years, one never knows, it may happen the next time you put water on to boil for coffee.

Looking around, I'd say that the equivalent of putting the quart on to boil every fifteen minutes is going on all the time. So how many times could it have happened in the past, or how many times can it happen in the future? Well, as I understand it, infinity expressed in years divided by $10^{10^{19}}$ is still infinity. So maybe that accounts for the ice ages. Which makes me feel badly because I was in North Dakota during that last sub-zero spell. And to think we'll have another ice age in 10^{10} years, maybe. There's a probability. —Gilbert Campbell Hanes, 1118½ E. Platte Avenue, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Freeze can be expected any cold July day, then?

Dear John:

This is to compliment you on your choice of a book reviewer and to compliment him on his department; in my opinion far and away the best in the whole fantasy field.

His criticisms of the weaknesses and shortcomings of my stuff have been helpful—I am working on them in a thing I am doing now. What touched off this note, though, is the fact (see April ASF pp. 142-3) that "Sky" Miller is the *only* critic who has realized that there was anything besides "space opera" in the Lensman series. —Edward E. Smith.

It should be fairly clear that "Children of the Lens" is, as well as "space opera," a real effort to analyze the problem a parent faces in raising a child inherently superior to himself.

(*Continued from page 7*)

scientific researcher, to make a decent living, must accept government restrictions. To be professional, he must be orthodox.

You'll find all the top-rank creative thinkers, gentlemen, carefully avoiding anything that you can get hold of and regulate. Like Copernicus, they're smart enough to get themselves installed in some nice, respected profession, where a reasonable income can be made without much application of their abnormally great talents, while they do their researches in comfortable and anonymous privacy. Einstein no doubt mourned his foolish decision to give up the comfortable patent-office job he originally held.

When our culture gets over *saying* it wants creative thinkers, and starts demonstrating that it will *pay* creative thinkers—they'll come out of hiding. Ordinary people may be able to fool themselves about such things, may be able to genuinely believe they mean it when they say they want creative thinkers. But don't be silly; you can't fool the men who are ten to a hundred times as brilliant as any normal human being. They're much too smart to stick their necks out so the society can have the fun of lopping it off. The good, normal average citizen may think that fame is a wonderful thing, and all anybody needs; that's because he hasn't the ability to achieve it. The abnormally brilliant individuals who have the ability know better. "To hell with the spotlight of fame; I want cash enough to live comfortably, on a par with a major business executive, and carry out the researches I want," is the perfectly rational position of the truly creative thinker.

The distribution of money the government spends for research shows the answer quite clearly; billions for engineering, and practically nothing for creativity. Since the government is, essentially, expressing the feelings of the people of the culture, it's a good, jack-leg estimate of about how much the culture actually wants creative thinkers.

The culture wants creative thinkers just about as much as a boy wants a dentist. He needs the dentist; he may even intellectually know he

needs the dentist. But you can't readily imagine a twelve-year-old boy saving up his quarters so he can go to the dentist.

Creative thinkers hurt; they invariably cause acute pain, and getting a cultural system to pay for the privilege of being severely wounded, seriously injured, and possibly destroyed is just a little bit tough these days. We're about to undergo a second Industrial Revolution; electronics and cybernetics are seeing to that. It will be acutely painful; nobody enjoyed the process the last time, and they won't this time. Of course, we, now, know that having the aching tooth of human labor extracted was immensely beneficial—but we don't want the one that's aching now removed.

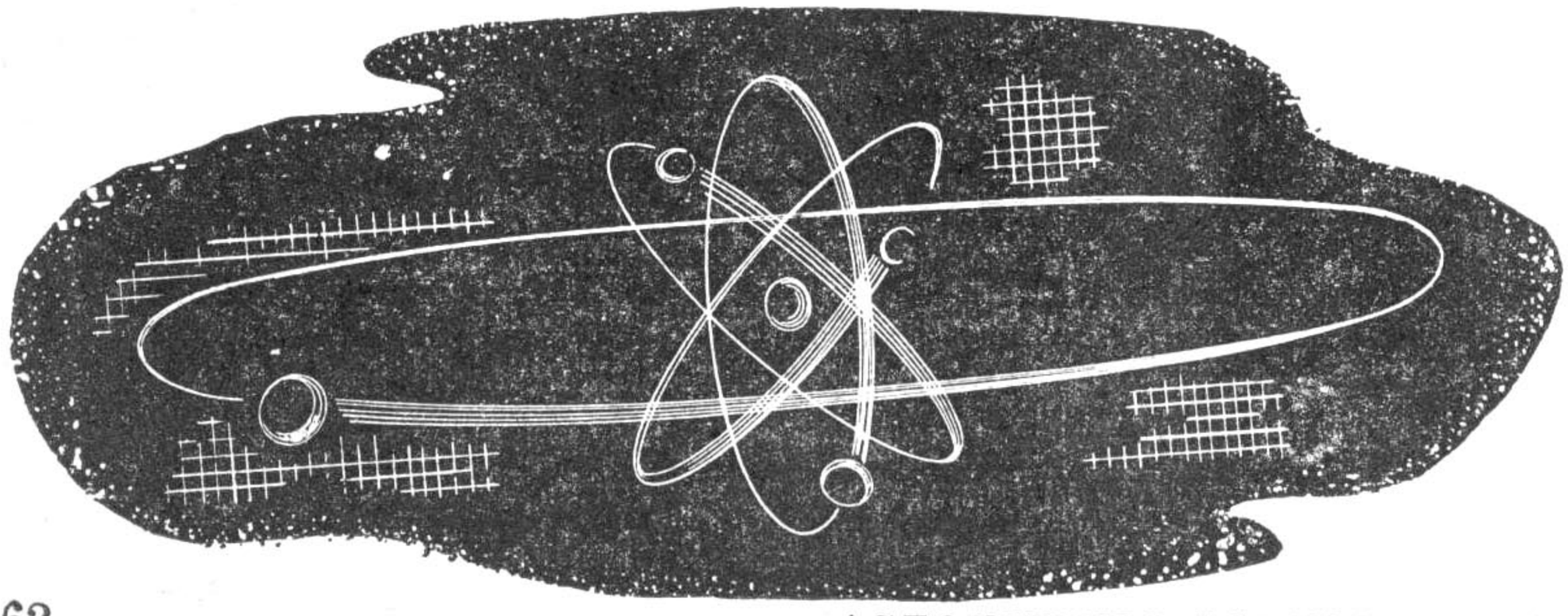
A creative thinker is, by definition, an individual who introduces a new pattern of thinking. Whatever has been, after his work is not. It will have been modified into something not-what-it-was. The resistance an individual puts up to having his way of thinking and living changed is perfectly reflected by the immense resistance a culture puts up. A Chinese would starve rather than eat moldy, fermented milk; an American would starve rather than eat a moldy, fermented, year's-old egg. But the American likes cheese, and the Chinese likes cheesy eggs. Each would fight violently against the idea of having his beliefs altered to such an extent that he *liked* that horrible, mold-spoiled garbage.

When the culture grows up enough to accept the hurt of having its aching attitudes extracted by competent creative thinkers, it may be willing to pay them for the immense service they render.

In the meantime, remember this: Philosophy doesn't pay! Not real creative philosophy. Sure, you can get a job teaching what *other* creative thinkers did; nobody minds that. But don't expect to be paid for doing really creative work—save in the usual terms, familiar to Galileo and many another.

And remember Einstein's advice, given after a long lifetime as one of the world's top creative thinkers: Be a plumber! That way you get paid, have a limited workday, and can do your creative thinking in comfortable privacy.

THE EDITOR.



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