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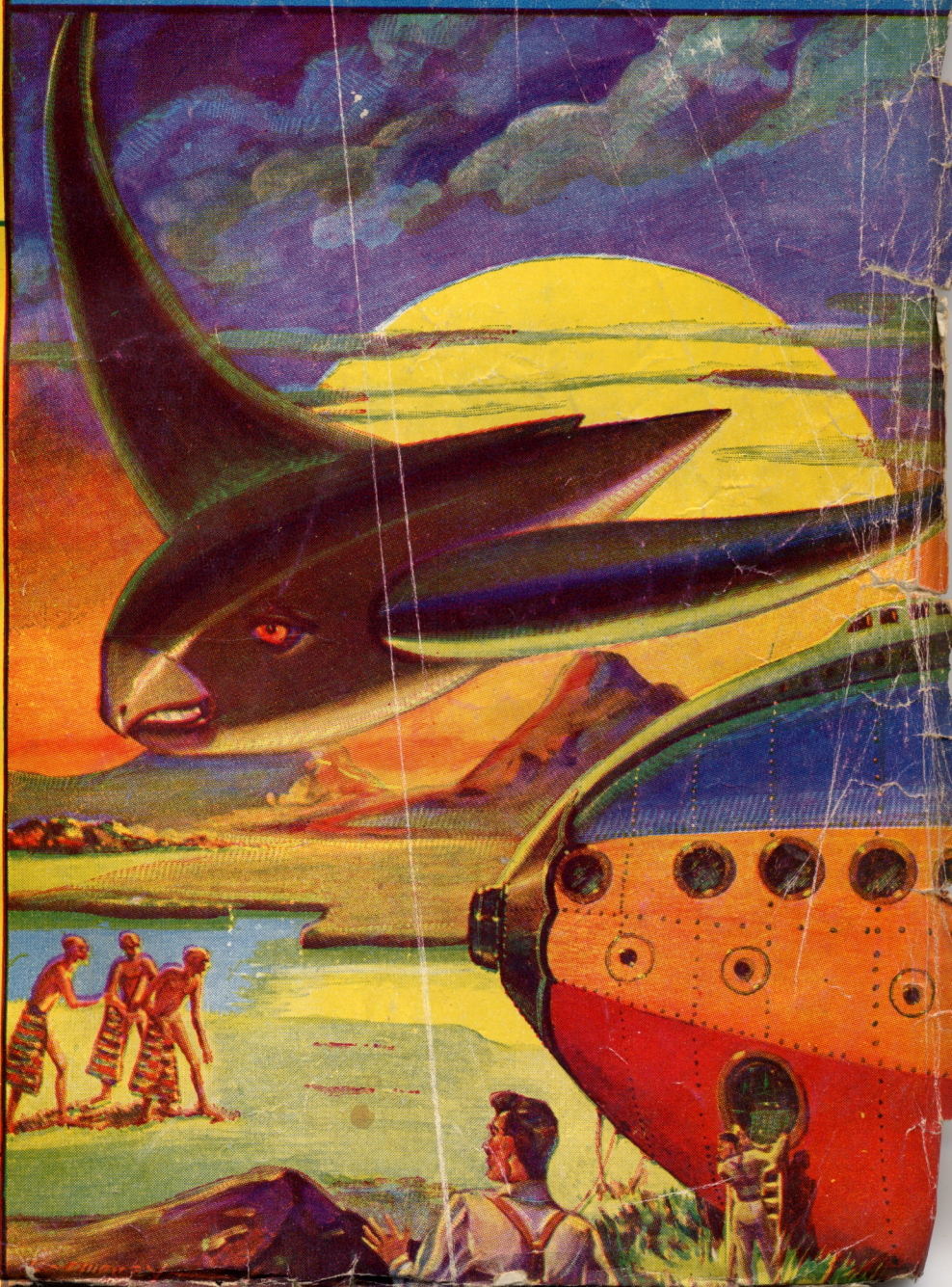

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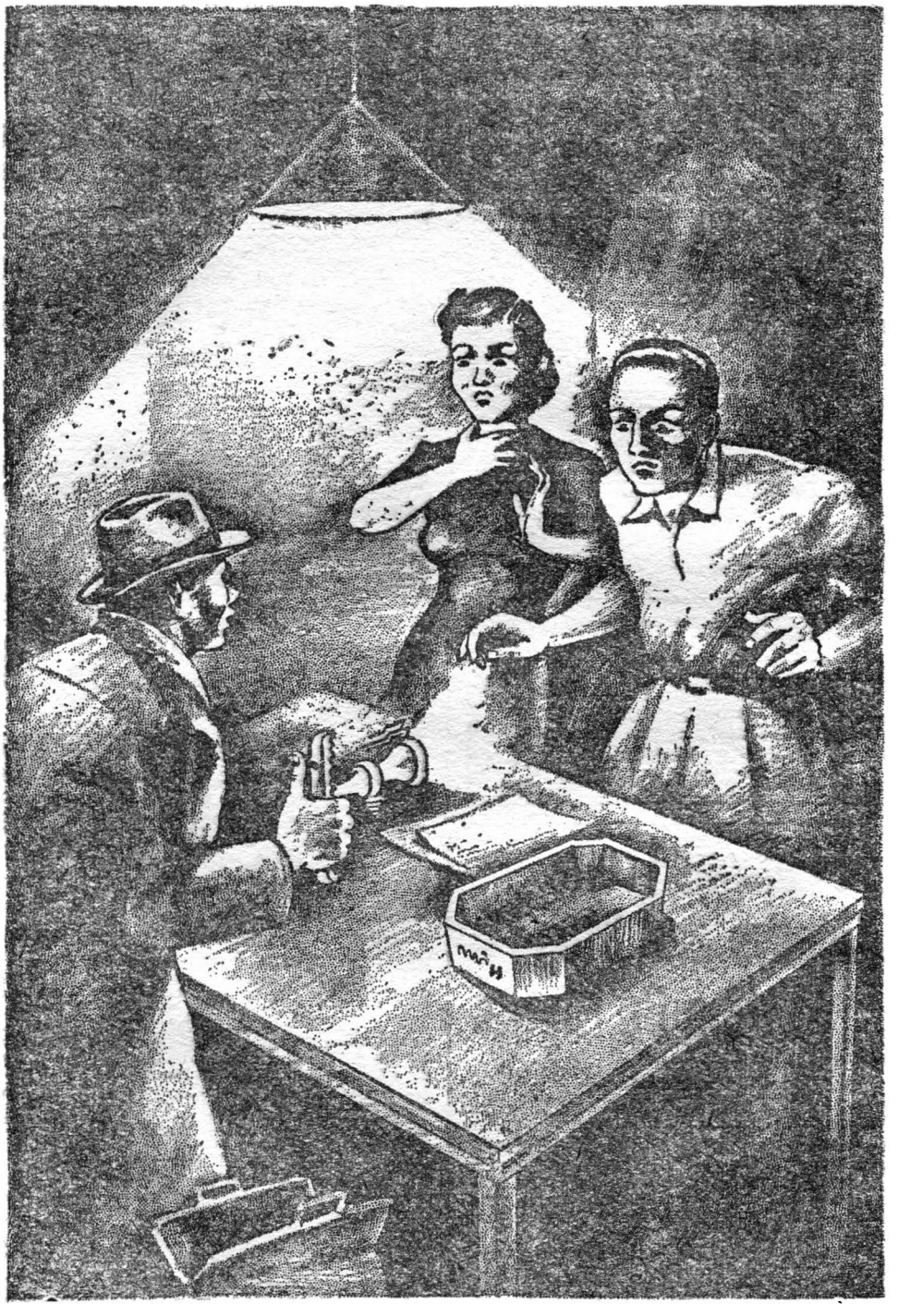


"All right, snoopie, here it is." Sharp lifted a strange implement from his bag and pointed it. "Duck," Penny shouted, "That's it!"

LORD of the SILENT DEATH

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

DEATH came out of a box and stalked through the streets of Chicago.

Samuel Morton found the box in Asia Minor, in a niche in the tomb of a forgotten Sumerian king, and not being able to open it, brought it back to this country with him. Morton was an archeologist, on the staff of the Asia Museum, located in South Chicago.

After months of effort, he succeeded, one hot August afternoon, in opening the box. But the death that lurked in it did not strike then. It waited.

Morton was alone that night, in the basement of the museum, trying to decipher the hieorglyphics engraved on the lid of the box—hieroglyphics written in no known language—when the silence came. The first sound to disappear was the rattle of the street cars on the surface line a block distant.

Morton was too engrossed in his work to notice that he could no longer hear the cars.

Then the soft rustle of the blower fan pushing cool air into the hot basement went into silence.

He still didn't notice the cessation of sound, did not realize that incredible death was creeping closer to him every second.

Even when the energetic tick of the alarm clock sitting on a mummy case was no longer audible, Morton did not sense that death was near. He was lost in his work.

But when he could no longer hear the scratch of his pen on the paper, he realized that something was happening. He looked up.

Morton was a solidly built, craggy giant. His face burned a deep brown by the sun of the Arabian desert, a shock of white hair that for days was undisturbed by brush or comb, he sat in his chair, every sense suddenly alert. His eyes raced over the room, seeking the cause of the uncanny silence.

He saw nothing.

But he recognized the presence of danger and reached for the telephone. It was the last move he ever made. As his fingers closed around the instrument, the silence hit him.

It had the effect of a physical blow. The smack of a prizefighter's fist would not have rocked him more. As he gasped one word into the telephone, his body seemed to be lifted clear out of the chair. His muscles, tensing involuntarily, hurled him upward, like a grotesque jack-in-the-box that has been suddenly released. He hit the chair as he fell, crashing it to the floor with him.

His body writhed, a slow, tortuous twisting. Muscles swelled in his throat as he screamed in pain. But no sound came.

The threshing of his heavy body on the concrete floor produced no sound. The scream was blotted into utter silence.

Before the muscular writhing had ceased, his flesh began to change color. The tan of his face, stamped with lines of torture, became a reddish pink. Thousands of microscopic pinpoints of color spread in a creeping tide over his body.

The silence held. Viciously, as though making certain no more life

was left in his body, the silence held.

When it lifted, went into nothingness, vanished, not more than a minute had passed.

But in that minute Samuel Morton had died.

The Lord of the Silent Death had emerged from the cell which had held him imprisoned for ages.

"ROCKS" MALONE—the name "Rocks" came from his calling—lived two blocks from the Asian Museum. But that wasn't his fault. He would have lived nearer if he could have found a room. In fact, for one deliriously happy month, he had slept on a cot in the basement of the museum. Then Sharp, the thin-faced business manager who had charge of the property and the finances, had caught him and given him the bounce.

"Malone, get to hell out of here," Sharp said. "Of all the damned fools we have around here, you are probably the worst. I should think you would get enough archeology just by spending fourteen hours a day here."

"Aw, hell, I'm not hurting anything. Why can't I sleep here if I want to?" Rocks had answered.

"Because it is against the regulations, and you know it. Go on, now, before I report you to the Board."

Grumbling, Rocks had taken his cot and left. And Sharp had reported him to the board anyhow, but that august body, in view of his youth and the pathetic interest he had in archeology, had not reprimanded him. They were archeologists themselves and they knew how the science gets into the blood and bones of a man. Secretly, they had rather approved of Rocks trying to sleep in the basement, so he could be near his beloved relics of dead and gone civilizations. They were grooming him for a place with the next expedition. "As likely a lad as I have ever seen," old Andreas McCumber had said about him. In his day McCumber had dug into half the buried cities in Asia Minor and it was his boast that he knew a man who had the makings of an archeologist when he saw one. "Of course he's young yet. But a little seasoning will cure that." Rocks was twenty-three, but to McCumber, who was past seventy, twenty-three was only late boyhood. "Besides," McCumber had rumbled in his beard at the board meeting. "Penny will—ah—comb my whiskers—if she—ah—discovers that I have permitted him to sleep in the basement."

Penny was McCumber's granddaughter.

But Rocks had already located a room about two blocks from the museum and had moved in.

That was why the police found him so quickly.

It was an August night, as hot as hades, and Rocks was sleeping with both feet practically out the window, to take advantage of the late breeze. He awakened to the sound of his landlady's protesting voice.

"But I tell you, Officer, you can't want Mr. Malone. He's a fine boy and I will vouch for him personally. I'm sure he hasn't done anything wrong."

"I'm not saying he's done anything wrong, madam," a bass rumble answered. "But the officer on the beat said he lived here."

A rap sounded on the door. Rocks took his feet out of the window and said, "Come in."

A blue-coated figure thrust his head in. "You Malone?" he inquired.

"Yes. What's wrong?"

"We want you over at the Museum."

Rocks was already grabbing for his clothes, jerking them on over his pajamas. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

The cop shook his head. He was still a little white around the gills. "We don't know what's happened. The sawbones wasn't there when I left. But we want you to identify a man."

"Why can't he identify himself?"

The officer wiped perspiration from his face. "Because he's dead."

"Dead!" The word leaped from

Rocks' lips. The first shiver of fear knifed through him. He was not yet wide awake and he hadn't fully comprehended what the officer wanted. But that single word shocked him to instant wakefulness.

In the basement of the museum they found three men talking earnestly in a corner. They weren't in uniform but their bearing fairly shouted "Detective!" They looked scared. Rocks didn't know it then, but these three men belonged to the homicide squad. They were accustomed to looking at violent death in all its forms. Stiffs didn't scare them.

But they *were* scared.

They had the uneasy alertness of the man-hunter who senses danger.

His escort turned Rocks over to them.

"I'm Kennedy; homicide bureau," said one of them. He had a heavy, impassive face and eyes that were drills of jet. "Sorry to bother you, Malone. You work here?"

"I'm on the staff."

"Good. The doc is already here. We want you to identify a body, if you can. Come this way."

Kennedy led Rocks to the large basement room, the other two plainclothesmen following behind.

This was the room where the specimens brought back from the four corners of Asia were uncrated and cleaned and prepared for display on the floors above. Loot from the tomb of forgotten kings, bits of pottery from Ephesus, a winged bull carved out of the stone of Nineveh, mummy cases from Egypt—for Egypt was included by the museum—beads from the valley of the Tigris-Euphrates, big and little, the relics of lost and dead centuries were piled here. Even in the daylight the place was ghostly.

Photographers were popping flashlight bulbs and taking pictures of the exact position of the body. As Rocks entered they took their last picture and stood aside and the doctor from the coroner's office bent over the body and began his examination.

Then Rocks saw the body on the floor. He recoiled. "My God! That's Samuel Morton."

His respect for Morton amounted almost to reverence. Morton was a world-wide figure in the field of archeology, and to Rocks Malone, he was little short of a god. Rocks had looked up to this man, had longed to be like him. On the next expedition, Rocks was to go along as Morton's assistant.

Now Morton was dead.

"What—what happened?" Rocks whispered.

The doctor stood up. His face was ashen.

"That's what I would like to know—what happened. This man has been dead less than an hour."

"At eleven-thirty Central phoned in there was a receiver off the hook here and said the operator thought somebody had tried to call the police," Kennedy interrupted.

"Heh?" the doctor queried. His professional aplomb had deserted him completely. "The important point is: what was the cause of death? To my knowledge there is no record in medical history of a death like this. Look."

"I've already looked," Kennedy said, turning away. "Once is enough."

Rocks looked again at the solid, craggy face he had known so well. The skin had always been tanned, but now it was red. Puffed and discolored. And *red*—like a chunk of raw beefsteak, like the carcass of a skinned animal. The first impression he got was that the skin had been removed. But he bent over, fighting against the sickness in his stomach, and saw that the skin had not been removed. It had been punctured, in literally thousands of places. Morton's face looked like thousands of pins had been stuck in it. When the pins had been removed, the blood oozed through.

A later report by the medical examiner disclosed that there was not a spot on Morton's body that was not full of microscopic holes—millions of them. Even the soles of his feet, pro-

tected by his shoes, showed the same horrible markings.

But it was the coat that held Rocks' eyes. Where the doctor had taken hold of it, the cloth had crumbled. Rocks tested it. The cloth fell away in his fingers, fell into a dark ash. The cloth looked all right, until it was touched. Then it crumbled into a dust as fine as powder.

The hottest fire would not leave so fine an ash.

"What do you think killed him, Doc?" Kennedy asked.

The doctor brushed perspiration from his face. "Really, I could not hazard an opinion. There is nothing like this in medical records. It's appalling. I trust—ah—that it is not some new kind of plague. No, it couldn't be that. No disease would destroy his clothing. I can't even begin to guess what happened, but the body must be removed for a complete examination."

Rocks was so sunk in grief that he scarcely noticed the men who lifted all that was mortal of the old archeologist on to a stretcher.

Kennedy came to him and said sympathetically. "Don't take it so hard, Malone. Morton, I guess, was a friend of yours."

Rocks told the detective what the archeologist had meant to him. Kennedy's eyes softened. "I'm sorry, Malone. We'll do everything we can to discover what happened, but frankly I don't know which way to turn. I've been talking on the phone to some of the men who are in charge of the museum. McCumber was one, Sharp was another. They're on their way over here."

The detective hesitated. "Malone, maybe you can help us."

"I'll do anything I can."

"Good. When I talked to Mr. Sharp, he said, 'I knew something like this was going to happen. I knew it!' When I asked him what he meant he said something about a box that Morton had brought back with him from Asia."

"Box?" The touch of an eerie chill raced down Rocks' spine. "Yes. There it is, sitting on the scale we use to weigh specimens."

The lid was open.

"He—he must have opened it this afternoon," Rocks said.

He wondered what Morton had found in that box. Treasure—or something else? It was empty now, the lid back, the cunning combination lock visible.

But what had been in the box they did not know, until Sharp got there and told his story.

CHAPTER II

SHARP, the business manager, was a prim-faced nervous individual. He had an eye tick. It was working overtime now. He spoke rapidly, the words running over each other.

"Yes, yes, I'll tell you exactly what happened. It was horrible, terrible." He mopped his face. Mr. Morton had just succeeded in opening this box when I entered."

"How long had the box been here?" Kennedy interrupted.

"I—ah—about three months have elapsed since Mr. Morton returned from his last expedition. He brought it back with him."

"Three months to open it?" Kennedy said doubtfully. "Why didn't he use a torch on it?"

"I think I can answer that," McCumber said. The old archeologist had arrived a few minutes after the business manager. He had received the news of the death of his associate calmly but it was obvious that he was deeply affected. He and Morton had been fellow workers for more than forty years. Now Morton was dead, and McCumber's sorrow was too deep for expression. It didn't show on his face. But when he entered the basement, he leaned rather heavily on his granddaughter's arm. Penny, who always drove his car for him, had driven him down. Now she stood, pale and silent, beside his chair.

"There were several reasons why we didn't use a cutting torch," McCumber said. "Foremost was the fact that, whatever the contents of the box were, we did not wish to damage them. Secondly, we felt that in time we would discover the secret of opening it. And in the third place, force would have ruined the delicate hieroglyphics inscribed on it. We especially did not want to do that."

The detective turned again to Sharp. "Will you tell us what was in the box, sir?"

The business manager moistened his lips. A hush fell over the group. The officer in uniform twisted uneasily. The two detectives tried to show nothing, but their forced expressions showed the fear that gnawed at them. Kennedy's black eyes were lances of apprehension.

Rocks Malone moved across the room and stood beside Penny, a gesture purely protective. His mind was in a turmoil as he waited for Sharp to speak. Was there a connection between that box and Morton's death? What kind of a connection? His eyes strayed toward it. Under the lights he could see the hieroglyphics delicately carved on it.

What was the message that the unknown writer had tried to convey with those wavy lines? Had he cut a warning sign, a—Hands Off—Danger—symbol to warn against opening it? Had—But Sharp was speaking.

"I had come down to the basement to discuss with Mr. Morton certain items in the budget for his next expedition. He had just opened the box. He said, 'Oh, I say, Sharp, come here, will you? I want you to tell me what you see in this box.'

"To be frank, I was curious about the contents myself. I, and I imagine everyone connected with the museum, had been of the opinion that perhaps the box contained treasure, possibly jewels, which in the present state of our finances, would be of great help to us."

Sharp hesitated, seeking words. From the night came the rattle of a street car and the clang of the motorman's bell. The blower fan rustled as it pushed air into the basement. On the mummy care the alarm clock—set to remind Morton when it was time to quit work and go home—ticked noisily.

"What was in it?" Kennedy husked.

Sharp took a deep breath. "At first, I saw nothing, and the immediate impression I gained was that it was empty. Then, as I bent over to peer into the box, I caught a glimpse of its contents."

Everyone in the room leaned forward as Sharp hesitated. He said,

"I don't know what that thing in the box was. I can't ever hazard a guess. But a beam of light leaped at me from the box, and the light originated at a spot that was several inches above the bottom. In other words, *it came from nothingness.*

"As I straightened up, the light vanished. Morton said, 'Did you see that damned thing?' I asked him what it was. He didn't know but he seemed puzzled and perturbed and he asked me to look again.

"Then I began to see more clearly. There was something in the box, *something that was almost invisible.*"

"Invisible?" Kennedy breathed huskily.

"Yes. Almost invisible. From certain positions we could see the contents of the receptacle—a smoky, misty mass. That's the only way I can describe it. A smoky mass. It was unreal, and just trying to look at it strained the eyes."

"What happened then?" Kennedy said.

"Morton thrust his hand into the box. *And his hand disappeared!*"

"What!"

"His fingers, up to the knuckles, simply disappeared. No, they weren't cut off. The effect was similar to thrusting the hand into a basin of murky water. Morton instantly jerked his hand out, and it was uninjured,

except that the fingers were stained a faint red. The point is—there was something in the box that was almost invisible, and an object thrust into it was rendered invisible, too.

"Morton was tremendously puzzled. I can't recall his exact words, but he seemed to be of the opinion that the contents of the box were extra-dimensional."

"Extra-dimensional?" Kennedy interrogated.

"Something like that," Sharp admitted. "Oh I know it sounds utterly fantastic. I was of the opinion that Morton did not know what he was talking about, but later events showed me that I was wrong."

"What happened next?" the detective queried.

"This happened," Sharp answered. The man was trembling. The handkerchief with which he tried to mop his face fluttered in an unsteady hand.

"Either something came out of that box, or something came through that box and escaped into the basement!"

Sharp's eyes went over the room, jerking from object to object like a man who suspects the presence of an incredible enemy and is warily watching for that enemy to strike.

The action sent cold chills up Rocks Malone's back. Something had come out of that box. It might still be here in the museum. Sharp thought it might be. He was looking for it.

"Through the box?" McCumber spoke. "I don't understand. How could anything come through it?"

"I don't understand either," the business manager answered. "I'm only telling you what Morton thought. He said the box might be a gateway between this world and a higher dimensional world. If the box is such a gateway, then something came through it. If it is not a gateway, then something came out of the box and escaped into the basement."

His eyes ran from face to face of his hearers.

"How do you know something came out?" McCumber persisted. He seemed to have taken over the questioning from Kennedy.

"Because I saw it," Sharp answered.

In the silence of the basement Rocks could hear several men breathing heavily.

"It lifted up, out of the box," Sharp continued. "It was a mass of grayish smoke, of shifting planes and impossible angles. It rose straight up and seemed to pause in the air. While it hung in the air—and I cannot begin to suggest an explanation for this—I suddenly seemed to lose my hearing. I couldn't hear a sound. There was utter, complete silence. It was the oddest sensation I have ever experienced."

Again the handkerchief wiped sweat from his face.

"Then—like a finger snap—the thing vanished. It disappeared into thin air. And when it vanished, I recovered from my deafness."

Rocks felt Penny's fingers searching for his hand. Her hand slid into his. She was trembling.

The detectives were pale, their faces bloodless. How much they had really understood of Sharp's description was open to doubt. Only a mathematical physicist could have grasped all the possibilities he had opened, and the cops weren't physicists. But they were alert. One had half-drawn his run. They were warily looking around the room.

"What did you do then?" McCumber persisted.

"We naturally spent some time searching the basement. When we found nothing, I began to suspect we were the victims of an illusion, that nothing had really come out of the box, that our imaginations were playing us tricks. Consequently, since it was already late in the afternoon, I departed. I thought nothing more of the matter until the police called me and told me that a man was dead here. Then I instantly realized that something had come out of the box, something utterly foreign to the science of our present day, something of which

we have no knowledge, but which may be here now, watching us, waiting to pounce on its next victim—"

He subsided, and Kennedy, looking closely at him, shoved him a chair. "Here, sir. You had better sit down."

Sharp almost collapsed. "Thanks," he muttered.

"One further question," McCumber said. "Where was the box sitting when Morton opened it?"

"Why—" Sharp looked startled. "On that heavy table." He pointed to a table across the room.

"But it's on the scales now," McCumber said, nodding his head toward it.

"Yes, it is," Sharp answered. "Mr. Morton must have moved it after I left."

McCumber turned to the detectives. "Gentlemen, if I may suggest it, I think it would be wise to search the museum."

The detectives looked like they didn't enjoy the task, but they went about it efficiently, guns drawn. The others remained in the basement. Sharp kept up a running fire of nervous conversation, to which McCumber paid little attention. The old archeologist seemed to be lost in thought.

Kennedy returned. The detective was very pale. "We didn't find anything," he said. "We still don't know whether it's here or not. But we can't take a chance of that thing getting loose. We'll stay here, as a guard." He looked sharply at McCumber and the business manager. "If I may suggest it, this has been quite a strain on you. Perhaps it would be best if you went home and rested. However if someone who is familiar with the museum will stay—"

"I'll stay," said Rocks.

"No," Penny protested. "If that thing should attack you—"

Over her protests, Rocks stayed. However he walked out to the car with them. Sharp came out of the museum with them, but he had his own car, and drove off immediately.

McCumber settled himself in the seat, and Penny, still protesting, slid under the wheel.

"What do you think, sir?" Rocks queried. "Do you have any suggestions about looking for that—thing?"

"I'm afraid I don't, lad," the old man answered. "Nothing like it has ever been seen before." He reached into his pocket for his pipe. His questing fingers brought from the pocket not only the pipe but a spherical piece of glass that looked like a child's marble. He held it under the dash lamp. "A marble? Wonder where I picked that up?" Then he dropped it back into his pocket as he explored for his tobacco. "This much I can say, lad. Whatever it was that came out of that box, the museum, in a sense, is responsible. We brought the damned thing to this country. We've got to capture or destroy it before it does any more damage. If such a thing should escape into the city, the results might be terrible. I'll be down early in the morning, lad. I hate to go off like this, but the old body won't take punishment like it once would. You be careful."

"I will, sir."

"You darned well better be," said Penny, as she slipped the car into gear.

ROCKS returned to the museum. With Kennedy and the other detectives he again made a complete search of the building. The museum was filled with nooks and crannies where anything might hide. They found nothing.

They were again in the basement when the telephone on the main floor started ringing.

Who would be calling at this time of the night, Rocks wondered as he raced upward to answer it. Very few people knew the number.

He jerked the phone from its hook, and the voice in his ears almost took his breath away. It was Penny. She was screaming.

"Rocks, please come quickly. That

terrible thing is here. It's got grandfather. Hurry, please—"

He waited to hear no more.

"Come on," he yelled to the detectives. "That damned thing is loose again."

Sirens screamed in the night as the squad car raced to the home of Andreas McCumber. Rocks rode in the seat beside Kennedy, and urged the detective to drive faster.

"I'm doing seventy now," Kennedy grated.

"Then do eighty," Rocks answered. Blood was running down his chin where he had bitten his lips. In his mind was the single thought: has something happened to Penny?

CHAPTER III

PENNY'S parents were dead. She lived with her grandfather, in a huge old brick house on a side street.

They found her lying at the foot of the front steps. Rocks' heart leaped into his mouth when he saw the white form lying there, crumpled and twisted, in the rays from the light burning over the front door. Until that moment he had not fully known how much she meant to him.

"Penny," he whispered.

Had the same horrible death struck at her? Had she tried to flee only to find death racing after her, death coming faster than she could run?

He was trembling as he knelt beside her.

Then—she stirred in his arms. Her dress did not fall into dust at his touch, as Morton's clothing had. And her skin was white, not a hideous blotched red. Death had passed her by.

"Oh, Rocks," she whispered. "It was awful—"

Kennedy and his two men paused only long enough to make certain Penny was not injured. Then they went on into the house, and Rocks, even in the pressure of that moment, found time to admire their courage. Good boys, those cops were. They knew they might find something inside that house against which their guns would prove useless. But they drew the guns, and went in.

"Are you all right?" Rocks whispered.

"I—I think so. After I called you, I ran outside to call for help and I slipped and fell down the steps."

He picked her up and carried her inside, laid her on a divan. He did not ask about her grandfather. He could hear the detectives on the floor above. They had stopped racing through the house, jerking open doors. They were all gathered in one room and they weren't saying much.

Then Kennedy came down the stairs, with one of his men. "Malone," he called softly.

"Here," Rocks answered. Kennedy came in. His eyes were black agates in a mask of dough. He slipped his gun back into its holster and said to the man who followed him, "You stay here with the girl. Malone, will you come upstairs with me?"

Rocks nodded. The detective led the way upstairs.

McCumber lay on the floor. The skin of his face was a blotch of red. His clothing had fallen away into dust. He had been working at his desk. When death struck him he had fallen to the floor.

Kennedy took a sheet from the bed and placed it over the still form.

Penny, very pale but very resolute, came into the room.

"Are you strong enough to tell us what happened?" Kennedy asked gently.

"I came in to kiss him goodnight," she answered. "He was lying there on the floor. I started to run to the telephone—then I heard something." She shuddered. "It was—I didn't hear anything. You can't hear silence, I suppose. But I did hear it. My feet didn't make any sound on the floor. I know I screamed, but I couldn't ever hear the sound of my own voice. I ran to

call the museum, then I ran outside to call for help."

"Did you see anything in the room?"

"No. The desk light was burning and most of the room was in shadows, but if anything was here, I didn't see it. But—" she paused.

"What is it, miss?" Kennedy inquired gently.

"It isn't anything I'm sure of," she answered. "But I think that thing followed us home from the museum. I had the feeling that we were being followed."

"Did you see anything following you?"

She shook her head. "It was just an impression, a feeling."

"You had better go lie down," said Rocks. "We'll take care of everything." He looked at Kennedy. "Can she have a man to be on guard outside her door?"

"She sure can. I'll call headquarters and get a special detail here at once." Gently Rocks led her to her room. Better than anyone else, he knew how impossible it was to put into words anything that would make her feel better. Only time could do that. And now that the terrible death had struck twice, he knew that Penny might be in danger. No one could tell where it would strike again. Or why.

It was a death that came in silence. It came out of nowhere, struck, and passed back into nowhere, leaving no clews behind it. It had come out of a metal box found in the tomb of a king forgotten for six thousand years. It was older than the king. It was older than history. It came out of the black past of the planet with horrible, monstrous death. Sharp had seen it—a creature of planes and angles, flashing lights, a creature that disappeared at will, and reappeared elsewhere. It had been here in this home, and had struck down a man. It might be here still, watching, waiting.

Penny cried as she lay on her bed and wiped the tears away, and tried to think. How had it entered the house? The doors had been locked. Of course it could have secured entrance through an open window, but how had it passed so unerringly through the rooms, seeking out her grandfather? Why had it killed him? Did he threaten its existence?

Penny tried to think, and tried not to.

Rocks talked to Kennedy. The burly detective said, "If this was an ordinary murder, I would know how to handle it. The first thing we always look for is the motive. When we find that, we've got the killer. But there's no motive here—there's not anything. Frankly, Malone, I'm up a tree. We've got to find that thing, and destroy it, quickly. Supposing it should start wandering loose through the streets of Chicago—" The detective shuddered. "Malone, if you have any ideas, let's have them. I admit I don't know what to do."

Rocks had been thinking too. "This thing came out of that box back in the museum. If the secret of controlling it is anywhere, it's written on the lid of that box." He gritted his teeth. "I don't think we have a chance in a million of cracking that language, but right now it's the only thing I see to try."

"We'll go back to the museum," said Kennedy. "I can't help with the language, but I want another look around that place."

The authorities responsible in cases of sudden death had already arrived at the McCumber home. Kennedy left a special detail to guard Penny. He and Rocks went back to the museum.

Rocks went to work. He began to try to crack the hieroglyphics written on the lid of the box. That his task was all but impossible, he well knew.

He could read Sanskrit, Babylonian cunieform, and Egyptian picture writing with fair readiness. He could translate ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek. An archeologist had to know these languages.

He thought the writing on the box might be in one of these languages.

He began with Morton's notes.

Then the telephone rang again. Kennedy went to answer it. He came back very excited.

"That was the girl—Penny," he said. "She may have something. She described a piece of round glass and said her grandfather had found it in his pocket tonight as he left the museum. She wanted to know if we had found it. I didn't. Did you?"

"No," Rocks answered. "But I can't see how it is important."

"Nor can I," Kennedy answered. "But it might be. I'll call and see if it has been found. She also mentioned another thing, and this, I think, is really important."

"What was it?"

"She said her grandfather was writing at his desk when he was killed. The piece of paper on which he was writing was under a blotter and we missed it. She found it. The old man had written a single question on it."

Rocks had risen from his chair. Here, he realized, might be a clue that would lead them to the capture of the incredible creature that was loose within the city. "What was the question?"

"'Why did Morton weigh the box a second time?'" Kennedy said.

"Why did he—" Rocks sat down again. His eyes went across the room to the box. It was sitting on the scales where Morton had placed it.

"It's routine here," Rocks said slowly, "to weigh all specimens as soon as they are brought in. Many statuettes, etc., were constructed as hiding places for gems. We weigh them, compute their specific gravity, and thus determine if they contain a hollow place that might be worth investigating."

His eyes lit up. "Morton weighed that box before it was opened. He opened it, and something came out of it. But, from Sharp's description, they were in doubt as to whether something had really come out of the box. There was one way to prove something had come out of it—weigh it again and check its present weight with its weight when it was brought in."

Rocks leaped across the room to the scales, checked the weight of the box. It weighed 121 pounds. Quickly he found Morton's notes and located the weight of the box when it was first brought to the museum.

"Before it was opened it weighed an even 130 pounds," he said. "Now it only weighs 121. That proves that something came out of it."

Kennedy whistled. "Nine pounds of sudden death. Well, we don't need any proof to know that something came out of that box. We've got two dead men to prove it. Look," the detective finished, "I'm going back to McCumber's residence and see if I can locate that piece of glass. You keep trying to crack that language."

He went out of the room on the run. The motor of the squad car howled to sudden life outside as the detective left.

Rocks expected Kennedy to return. But he didn't come back that night. He called instead. "I'm at the undertaker's. They didn't find any piece of red glass. I've been over McCumber's house with a magnifying glass. It isn't there. Either the thing that killed him destroyed it, or somebody picked it up. You getting anywhere with that language?"

"No," Rocks groaned.

"Well, keep trying. My hunch is that everything depends on whether or not you solve those hieroglyphics. I've got some checking to do on this end. I'll call you if anything turns up." The detective hung up.

Rocks went back to the basement. His job was to crack the language. And what a job that was!

The night ended. Dawn came. The morning was passing. Rocks worked on.

The museum was closed that day. The police were not willing to take a chance on some visitor stumbling into a death that came in silence. Nor was the museum itself. Sharp called

in and gave explicit orders on that point.

Rocks drank strong coffee, and worked, and failed. The language was not similar to cunieform. It was not like any language he knew. Every time he realized that fact, he shivered. It had either been invented by a people so long lost in the past that history had no record of them, or it didn't belong on earth at all.

Yet someone, somewhere, had constructed that box, and had used it to safeguard something. Perhaps they had used it as a prison, to cage a creature they could not control, an entity unknown to the science of the present. Perhaps later peoples had created legends about it—Pandora's Box. Perhaps this was really Pandora's Box that Morton had brought back from Asia Minor.

The creature had waited in that box for uncounted centuries. Now a new race had opened the door of his prison.

Now the Lord of the Silent Death was free again.

Rocks Malone kept wondering when and where he would strike.

During the whole day there was not even a whisper of the incredible silence in which men's lives were blotted out.

But when the second night came—

CHAPTER IV

AT nine o'clock that night Rocks was ready to drop from exhaustion. He was not only so tired that the hieroglyphics blurred before his eyes, but he had failed. That hurt worse than anything else. Everything depended on his cracking the lost language, and he had failed.

At nine o'clock it happened.

There were three officers on duty at the museum. They had been sent there as a guard detail and they had brought in a radio so they could listen to the police calls. They had the radio in a room on the first floor, so it would not disturb Rocks.

At nine o'clock one of them came stumbling downstairs. His face was ashen. "Hell's broken loose," he said tersely. "It's coming in over the radio. Come on upstairs if you want to listen. You might as well forget that language now."

Over and over again the announcer was droning. "Calling all cars—Calling all cars— Drop everything and be on the alert. Tragedy in burlesque showhouse. Over three hundred people dead. Cause of death not known. Manager went in to investigate sudden silence. Found audience and cast of show dead. Bodies livid color, as if they had been burned. Clothing falls to ashes when touched. Sergeant Kennedy of the homicide division suggests there is a definite connection between the death of these people and the death of the two Asian Museum archeologists last night. Be on the alert. Take over main intersections and prevent panic. Story already broken in general radio news flash. Cordon being thrown around the theater area. All special details canceled, all squad cars call your stations for definite orders—Be on the alert—Calling all cars—"

Death was walking through Chicago, a horrible, incredible form of death.

Rocks Malone stood without moving, listening to the operator repeat his message. He could scarcely conceive the meaning of the words. "Over three hundred people dead—" Dim pictures flashed to his mind. Out of nowhere, out of nothingness, silence had come. Three hundred people had died. Before they knew what struck them, death had washed over them. Millions of microscopic needles had plunged through their bodies, points of agonizing pain. Then death—

Jerkily, the telephone rang. One of the officers grabbed it. He listened, said "Okay," huskily, and turned to his fellows.

"Station calling. We're to report back there immediately for emer-

gency duty. They're calling us off here. Come on."

The radio was still droning as they went out.

The telephone rang again. It was Penny this time.

"I'm coming down there," she said. "I'm scared. I'm coming down there with you."

"Stay away from here!" Rocks shouted. But she had already hung up. Desperately, he tried to call her back. There was no answer. She had already left. She was driving toward the museum, driving through a night in which death lurked.

Rocks groaned. He went back to the basement. There was nothing he could do. Nothing! The coffee pot was bubbling on its burner. He poured himself a cup of the scalding brew. It burned his throat but it cleared his head.

He went back to work. The language was out. He couldn't crack it. He didn't even have time to try to crack it any more. But there were Morton's notes. He hadn't studied them thoroughly. He had read only those portions of the notes that dealt with the language. He began to go over them again, starting with the section that dealt with the discovery of the box.

Jan. 10, 1940—Morton had written —Discovered today what is unquestionably the tomb of a Sumerian king. Located in a hillside. Cut out of solid rock. Landslide centuries ago had covered entrance. But even more important, in my opinion, than the tomb is the discovery of the strange metal box that we found in a niche at the back. We are unable to determine the metal of which the box is constructed. It is covered with mould but shows no sign of rust or corrosion, which is exceedingly unusual, for this tomb dates back into the past for at least six thousand years.

"Jan. 12, 1940. Box very heavy—must weigh more than a hundred pounds. Frankly, aside from its archeological interest, I am curious to know the contents of this box. There is a possibility of gold or gems. Guess I'm human after all, to be thinking about wealth. Am writing full details to the museum.

"Jan. 15, 1940. Unable to open box. Must have cunning combination lock. Also unable to decipher inscription on it. Don't know this form of writing. No record of it anywhere. This is exceedingly unusual. A completely forgotten language rediscovered."

Rocks Malone went through the notes, reading swiftly, searching, hoping for a clew. Outside in the night death was stalking. And there was a possibility that the clue to the death lay here, in the notes of the dead archeologist.

Penny came in. He went to meet her. She flew to his arms. "It's awful outside," she whispered. "Thousands of people must have heard the news broadcast. Half of them are trying to get to the theater where all those people were killed. The others are trying to get away. Oh, Rocks, have you discovered anything."

He shook his head. She looked again at his unshaven, haggard face, and said nothing.

He went back to the notes Morton had left. With Penny helping, he went through them, down to the last page. "It's no use," he groaned. "Morton didn't know anything about the thing that was in that damned box."

Then he turned the last page. Morton had written that page only yesterday, the day he died.

"Sept. 21, 1940. Succeeded in opening the box today. As I suspected it was closed by a combination lock. Deucedly clever thing, that lock. Not like any lock in use today. Patent rights on it might provide the museum with some of the cash it so badly needs.

"To my great astonishment, and regret, when I opened the box, I found it empty."

Rocks Malone started at the words Morton had written. Penny had been

reading over her shoulder. He heard her catch her breath.

EMPTY! The single word seemed to leap out at him. How on earth could Morton make a mistake like that!

There was another line of writing. "Weighed box. Find that it weighs nine pounds less than it did when I brought it here."

In the fleeting flash of a second, Rocks saw the whole picture. Or almost all of it. There were parts that needed clearing up. But he knew at last the real significance of the fact that Morton had weighed the box a second time.

"There's somebody coming!" Penny whispered.

A step had sounded on the stairs outside the room. The door opened. Sharp entered.

He had a traveling bag with him.

Rocks shoved the last page of Morton's notes out of sight, got to his feet. "Hello," he said. "Have you heard the radio?"

"I'll say I have," the business manager answered. "That's why I've got this bag along. I'm getting away from here while I have a chance. It's terrible—what happened to all those people at the theater. For all I know, it might happen to me next. Have you," he paused, "have you found anything that might—might lead to the capture of that horrible beast? That's why I stopped here, before I left town."

"No," Rocks answered. He walked across the basement toward the business manager. He was ten feet away, he was five feet away. He stopped. "One thing we have discovered. Morton's notes. He said in his notes that when he opened the box he found it empty. What do you suppose he meant by that?"

Sharp looked perplexed. "Why, I have no idea. Perhaps he decided that what we saw was an illusion after all."

"I think not," Rocks contradicted. "He would certainly have mentioned any creature such as you described if he had found such a thing in the box. No, I think he meant exactly what he said. When he opened the box, it was empty. That surprised him greatly. It also made him suspicious. So he weighed it, to determine if somebody had already opened it and removed its contents. *What did you find in that box, Sharp!*"

His words were hard and flat. There was no mistaking their challenge.

Behind him he heard Penny whisper. "Oh, Rocks—"

He knew he had made a mistake. He should have waited, let the law handle the situation, let men trained for the task do the job. But Morton had been his friend. And so had McCumber. And Morton and McCumber were dead. And Rocks Malone was not a man to wait for someone else to do what he considered his job.

Sharp stood without moving, his close-set eyes drilling into the young archeologist facing him. A second ticked into nothingness, and another, and another. He was estimating the situation, considering the odds and the chances.

"I'm waiting," Rocks said grimly. "This is what I found in it."

"All right, snoopy," Sharp snarled.

He jerked his bag open. His hand dived into it. It came out of the bag with the strangest looking instrument Rocks had ever seen. Constructed of pale silvery metal, fitted with a series of faceted lenses, it glinted evilly under the lights.

Because of the very nature of the instrument, Sharp handled it clumsily. But there was no mistaking its purpose. He brought it up. Penny screamed.

Rocks stepped forward. His left hand flicked out. All the weight of his body was behind that blow. He drove it straight at Sharp's chin. It would have made Joe Louis bat his expressionless eyes. It would have knocked Sharp's head almost off his shoulders —if it had landed.

That was the trouble. It didn't land. Sharp saw it coming. He ducked down and to one side, fumbling with the instrument he had taken from his bag.

The fist skidded across the top of his head. It sent him staggering backward.

"The next time," Rocks gritted. "I won't miss. I'll knock your damned head off, you dirty murderer." He charged.

Sharp brought the instrument up. Pale, scarcely visible flame lanced from it, like a heat wave moving through air. It spurted forward, soundlessly. As it leaped it seemed to absorb, to blot out all sound. There was a sudden heavy silence in the museum basement, the sort of silence that is so real it registers on the ear drums.

Rocks saw the instrument coming up. He kicked himself to one side, in a dancing step. The fringe of lambent flame barely touched him. But that touch sent needles of agony through his body, sucked the life out of him, turned his muscles into lumps of lead, threw him off balance, so that his charge, instead of striking Sharp, barely grazed him. His arms closed around the business manager's body. To keep himself from falling, Rocks clinched.

They wrestled. Sharp could not use the instrument. Rocks was so groggy he could barely hold on. Sharp dug into him with his elbows, kicked viciously at his shins.

If he could only hold on, Rocks thought. The agony was lessening. The groggy shadows were going from his mind. If he could only hold on for another minute.

He was holding on. He was winning. Soft living had made a weakling of Sharp. He would be no match for the rugged, youthful muscles of Rocks Malone, in a fair fight.

Then Sharp struck upward. His fist hit Rocks in the chin. Malone sagged downward. Shaking his head, he grabbed at Sharp again. And missed. And fell to the floor. Before he could move, Sharp had leaped around a table. He had brought the instrument up.

"All right," he husked. "You asked for it, with your snooping. You're going to get it. You and this girl."

Rocks staggered to his feet. He leaned against the edge of the table, panting, fighting for breath and strength. Sharp was across the table from him. He was aiming the instrument.

This time there would be no escaping it. It would point at him and those almost invisible tongues of light would flash out, the deadly silence would smash all sound into nothingness, and millions of microscopic needles would tear through his flesh.

Sharp fumbled for the firing button.

Penny, crouched on the other side of the room, grabbed the handiest object she could find, and threw it. It was the alarm clock. It struck Sharp full in the face, and the alarm, jarred by the impact, went off.

Probably the clang of the alarm bell started Sharp as much as the impact of the clock. Certainly it did not hit him hard enough to harm him. But it did startle him, scare him. He reeled backward.

Rocks cleared the table with a single leap. He went up into the air like a kangeroo and leaped, feet foremost, at Sharp. His feet struck the business manager full in the stomach. Sharp doubled up like a jackknife, and went to the floor. Rocks fell on top of him. He struck viciously with his fists. Sharp cried in pain and Rocks struck harder. The man was down, but he wasn't out. Rocks drew back his fist for the final blow.

It never landed. Down over his shoulder the barrel of a gun flashed. Where it had come from, Rocks did not know. It struck the business manager across the skull.

His head popped like the breaking of a rotten egg. He went limp.

Rocks looked up. Kennedy stood there. He was holding the pistol with which he had struck Sharp, in his hand. He looked to see if he would need to use it again. He saw he wouldn't.

He whirled the gun around on its trigger guard.

"Damn me for a fool," he said. "I could kick myself from here to the Loop and back again. I missed a trick and it cost three hundred people their lives."

"What trick?" Rocks gasped.

"I should have known this gazabo was lying," Kennedy snarled. "I should have known his long cock and bull story about some incredible creature coming out of that box was too fantastic for belief. I should have known he was lying, but damnit, the sight of Morton's body so addled my wits that I was willing to believe the story Sharp told. Oh, he was smooth enough about it. He knew how the weapon he found killed. He knew what it did to Morton's body, and he had to have a fantastic story to account for the way Morton looked. He solved the secret of that box soon after it was brought here. He had a reason for it too. He had been playing the market and he was down on his uppers. If there was a treasure in that box, he wanted first crack at it. He didn't find any treasure in it. Instead he found some kind of a damned weapon in it that came from God alone knows where. When he found Morton had opened the box and was about to catch up with him by weighing the box, he took the obvious out—by killing Morton, using the weapon he had found in the box. He killed McCumber because the old man knew there was something fishy about the box being on the scales. So he killed McCumber —to shut him up."

"But those people in the theater?" Rocks whispered.

Kennedy exploded. "He needed money, needed it bad. I dug this all up in my investigation today. He was trying to sell the weapon he had discovered to the agents of a foreign power. They wanted a demonstration before they would pay off. So he gave them a demonstration. He showed them how efficient a weapon he had for sale—by killing all the people in a theater."

The detective was furiously angry. "And I let myself get taken in by a story of a monster."

Rocks had already picked up the instrument Sharp had found in that box. He was studying it, looking it over. The principle on which it operated, he couldn't begin to guess, but he saw one thing that startled him enormously. He showed it to the detective.

"G r e a t Jehosophat!" Kennedy gasped. "A place for six fingers. Whoever built that damned thing had six fingers."

The Lord of the Silent Death was not an extra-dimensional monster. It was a weapon that killed in utter silence.

THE INSTRUMENT that came out of the box from the tomb of the forgotten Sumerian King is now in Washington, in the secret vaults of the War Department. The experts are studying it, trying to fathom how it works. They have begun to get hints of the principle involved. Only hints, but something to go on. They have discovered that it kills in two ways. The first, and obvious way, is by pointing it directly at its victim. At the theatre he had sprayed the power, full on, across the audience, then across the ensemble on the stage, then as he went out the back had caught all others.

The second way is worse. In Sharp's bag was found a sack of small round objects that look like marbles. All the owner of the weapon needs to do to kill an enemy is to drop one of those bits of glass in the enemy's pocket. Then he can go off several miles and start the weapon. The force it generates is concentrated in the bit of glass, and the silence is instantly generated, the bit of glass being destroyed in the process.

That was the method Sharp used to kill McCumber. As they left the

museum, Sharp dropped one of the bits of glass in the pocket of the old archeologist's coat. McCumber had found it, but had attached no significance to it.

The experts hope that the War Department of this country will never need such a weapon. But if it does, it will have it.

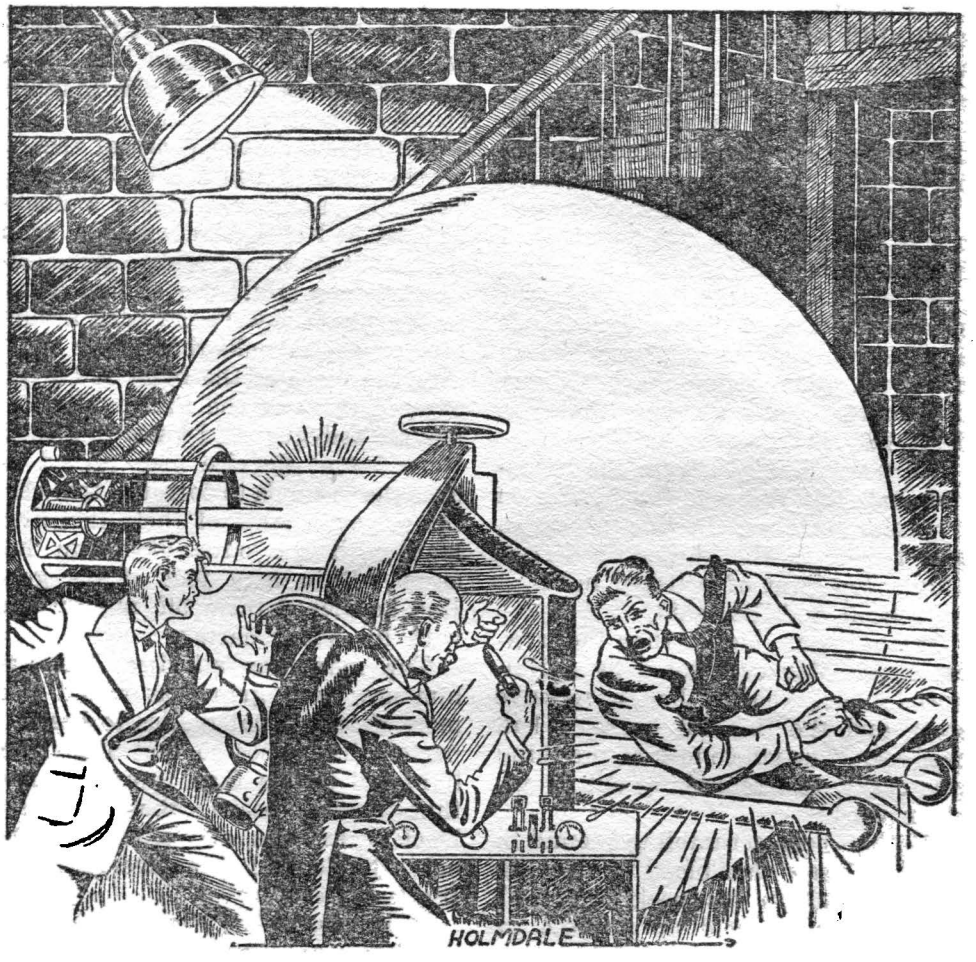
But the thing that plagues the experts, that frets the archeologists, that has caused Rocks Malone to tear his hair, is the fact that the weapon was designed to be used by a creature who had six fingers. Not five fingers. Six. And the archeologists are having drizzling fits trying to decide whether there was once a race of six-fingered creatures here on earth, a race that reached tremendous scientific heights, and vanished.

Or was earth once visited by creatures out of space, who left a weapon behind them?

Nobody knows. Possibly nobody will ever know.

But Rocks Malone is preparing to leave for Asia Minor, to dig in the ruins of lost and gone civilizations, searching for another clue to the identity of the lost race.

Penny is going with him.



Sparks crashed in a crescendo as he threw his body across the giant power cables, in a human short-circuit!

THE ULTIMATE IMAGE

The Magnificent Defense Unit of Dampier.

by P. SCHUYLER MILLER

"MIKE!"

It was Bill Porter's voice. I put one hand on the balustrade and vaulted into the garden. From behind a mass of shrubbery came sounds of a struggle, and Bill's voice rose again.

"Mike, you ape! Step on it!"

I plowed through where someone had gone before. Bill, his shirtfront awry, his coat-tails torn and muddy, was grappling with a snarling, kicking little man about half his size. As I burst out of the shrubbery, Bill kicked his legs from under him and they went down in the newly spaded

earth, Bill on top. Bill Porter weighs a good two hundred pounds. The struggle ended then and there.

Bill sat up, one fist clenched in the little man's shirt front. He glared at me out of a rapidly closing eye.

"Where in blue blazes have you been?" he demanded. "D'jou think I *like* wrestling with wildcats?"

I looked him over. "Didn't make out so well, did you? Lucky he wasn't any bigger, or I *would* have had to help you. Why pick on a little guy like that? What's he done that you don't like?"

He pointed. Light from the reception hall fell through the bushes in irregular patches. In one of them, half buried in the scuffed-up dirt, I caught the glint of polished metal.

"Pick it up," Bill said.

It was a gun, bigger than the largest six-shooter ever toted by a Hollywood buckaroo. It had a massive stock and the thickest barrel I had ever seen. The whole look of the thing was crazy, like something out of another world.

Bill had been scrambling around in the dirt. I saw that blood was oozing from a gash in his neck. Before I could speak he held up a piece of gleaming metal.

"Take a look at that," he said grimly. "That's what he wanted to pump into the Ambassador. Only I got it instead—in the neck. Now will you give me a hand with this he-cat before he comes to and starts trying to skin me alive?"

I took the thing. It was a steel bolt or arrow of the kind once used in cross-bows, sharpened to a needle point with six razor-edged vanes running back to the hilt. I slipped it into the chubby muzzle of the gun. It was a perfect fit.

"That," Bill told me, "is a solenoid-gun—one that works. You've seen a metal core pop out of an electric coil when the juice is snapped on. It's a common laboratory stunt. Well, it's grown up and had pups, and this is one of the nastiest of them. No noise at all—and does that dart travel! It would go through a man like cheese even if he's as thick as His Magnificence yonder."

Through the open doors of the reception hall I could see the broad Teutonic back of Herr Wilhelm Friedrich Nebel, Ambassador from the newly stabilized Middle-European Confederacy. Half the stuffed shirts in Washington were crowded around him, trying to make themselves heard over the blare of the band and I recognized three of the President's own private bodyguards. I knew that there were Secret Service men posted all over the grounds to forestall this very thing, yet in spite of them this little man with the outlandish gun had crept within fifty feet of his goal. Had he picked them off, one by one, with his silent darts?

The man was stirring. Bill had him now in a grip that would take more than wildcat tactics to break. I parted the bushes so that a shaft of light fell on his face. Surely I knew that forked beard, those piercing black eyes, the shock of bristling hair. Suddenly I remembered. "Bill! It's Dampier!"

Pierre Dampier, France's greatest physicist, the confrere of Einstein and Heisenberg and Poincare, who had dropped out of sight so mysteriously five years before. Dampier here, in Washington, sniping at the Middle-European Ambassador with an electric gun!

The little man was staring at me with those beady eyes. For a moment I thought he would deny it. Then his face changed. The fury, the madness went out of it and were replaced by a great weariness that made him seem years older. He slumped in Bill's grasp, then stiffened proudly.

"Yes, gentlemen," he admitted. "Pierre Dampier, at your service."

This was no ordinary assassination. Big as the news was, Dampier made it bigger. And news was what Bill and I were here for.

"Bill," I said, "this is our story.

No one else even suspects it. Are you going to turn him over to the police or do we get the whole yarn, ourselves, first?"

He nodded. "You're right," he agreed. "We'll never get it if we let him go now. Washington has a way of hushing those things up." He turned to the little Frenchman. "Monsieur Dampier we are newspaper men, we too. There's a reason for what you tried to do tonight, a good reason, or you wouldn't have attempted it. Will you tell us that reason, and let us explain to the world why the great Pierre Dampier has chosen to play the role of a common murderer?"

Dampier stiffened. The forked beard was thrust stiffly forward and the thin shoulders squared in spite of Bill's numbing grip. "I am no murderer!" he hissed. "Wilhelm Nebel is the enemy of my country and of yours—of the world! I stood in his way, and I was crushed. I rose again, and he has found me and tried to grind me under his accursed heel! He will kill me, if I do not kill him first. I implore you, Monsieur, let me go! Let me finish what I have begun. The world will be better for it, and"—a whimsical smile twisted his thin lips—"it will be a greater *coup* for you, will it not?"

Bill was studying him. "We can't do that," he replied, "even if we wanted to. Herr Nebel is our country's guest. But this I will do. Give me your word that you will make no further attempt on Herr Nebel's life for twenty-four hours, tell us why you have done this thing, and I'll let you go. I'll give you one hour's start, and then I'll tell the police the whole story. Is it a bargain?"

Dampier bowed his head. "You have my word, Monsieur. I will tell you everything. But when you have heard what I will say, perhaps you will not wish to call your police. Shall we go to my laboratory? We can talk more freely there."

Bill's grip tightened. "Wait! This garden was guarded. Have you killed those men? Because if you have all bets are off!

The little Frenchman smiled. "But no, Monsieur. I have no quarrel with your countrymen. There are other missiles for this little toy of mine—hollow needles filled with a certain rare drug like the 'mercy bullets' of your American sportsmen. They will sleep soundly for some hours yet, and have what you call the big hangover when they awaken but that is all. Shall we go now? It is late, and I have much to tell you."

The whole idea looked screwy to me. Even now I'm not sure that it wasn't. But when Bill Porter makes up his mind, it would take Gabriel's trumpet to change it. He was quite capable of plumping one of Dampier's little needles into me and going off with the Frenchman alone.

"I'll get the car," I said. "Let's get out of here before someone stumbles over a corpse and yells for the cops."

We were somewhere in the middle of Maryland before Bill let me slow down. He must have had a talk with Dampier while I was getting the car, for the little Frenchman never peeped until we swung into a narrow dirt road somewhere north of Frederick. He called the next turn, and the next, until I began to suspect that he was running us around in circles. At last we pulled up before a deserted farmhouse, set back from the road behind a dilapidated picket fence. Bill nudged me. Silhouetted against the stars were the towers of a high-tension line. Dampier was either stealing or buying power in a big way.

Now a French gentleman's word is supposed to be about as good as Finland's credit, but we were taking no chances. I remembered that wicked little dart with its razor-edged barbs, and I felt pretty sure that Bill hadn't forgotten it either. We lined up, one on each side of him, and marched across the weed-grown lawn to the rickety side porch. There was a Yale lock on the door, and as Dampier

swung it open I saw that it was backed with steel armor-plate. Outside the house might look like the poorer section of Bilded Road, but inside it was built like a fortress. Six-inch concrete walls, steel doors, indirect lighting and ventilation—it looked as though Monsieur Pierre Dampier had been expecting to stand a pretty heavy siege.

A winding stair went down through the floor into a basement room that ran under the entire house. Dampier led the way, Bill followed, and I came last. Probably our science editor could have made something of what Dampier had in that buried room. I couldn't. I wouldn't even have known where to begin photographing it, if the Leica hadn't been back on the terrace at the Embassy where I'd dropped it to vault over the rail into Bill's little shambles, and the Graflex somewhere in the back of the car.

To begin with, he was drawing more current than any ten men I'd ever seen, and I've covered some of the atom-busting at M. I. T. and the lightning shop at Pittsfield. It all went into two huge buss-bars, that ran across to a kind of cage of interlacing copper loops, standing in the center of the room. They were hung from jointed supports that rose above an insulated block or platform of bakelite, with most of the bulkier apparatus inside out of sight, but I had a hunch that whatever was going to happen would take place in, at, and around those spidery coils.

One corner of the room was a kind of office with a desk and books, and a couple of ancient chairs. Dampier waved Bill and me into them and began to pace up and down in front of us like an expectant father. The wild glint had come back into his eyes, but I've seen enough of scientists to know that that isn't necessarily fatal. Most scientists are half nuts anyway. Bill and I never agreed on that point.

You see, before Bill became a demon reporter, he was the white hope of American science. That's how I met him, trying to cover something I couldn't understand and didn't much want to. He fixed my story up for me, and chiseled in on the season's juciest murder scandal in return. I came down with a bad case of busted cranium, as a result of following his hunches a little too far, and he wrote my scoop for me. After that it stuck. I claimed then they should have made him science editor, but old Medford is our owner's nephew or something, and besides he's pretty good. Anyway, Bill wouldn't take a desk job. It seems he'd always wanted to feel the pulse of Life—

Dampier's English was good. He'd been educated in England and the United States. But when he got excited he fairly surpassed himself and became heart-breakingly colloquial. Where most foreigners would have broken down into their mother-tongue, he relapsed into gutter slang or worse. I've left that out. It doesn't read as well as it sounds, and besides, nice old ladies like to read these magazines. If only they knew the truth—the real inside truth about some of the yarns that have been told in these pages! I've seen the originals —things that a newspaper wouldn't print for fear of being laughed out of a year's circulation—and with proofs! They happen, believe me. Only I'd never been in one before.

Dampier began with true professional dignity. "Gentlemen," he said, "you have treated me honorably. I shall do the same to you. I shall tell you all! When I am finished, judge then if I have done right to assassinate this monster of the devil!

Monsieur Crandall recognized in me that Pierre Dampier who vanished from the world of science five years ago. It was Welhelm Nebel who made me to flee like the wild goose. Nebel—the chief of munitions, the millionaire, the so great diplomat, whose hands reach out to every country, regardless of boundaries or the hatred of races. Even in France I was not safe! The finger of Nebel was in

the pie of our government. He twisted it—poof! Spies of the police investigate me. They ask questions. They give me the degrees. But I tell them nothing. They can find nothing. It is all here—here in the grey material!" He tapped his bristling skull. "And when they have gone, I take my books, my papers, what money I can get, and take it on the lam to these United States!"

He stopped for breath and glared at us triumphantly. "I scram," he repeated. "I vanish from the sight of men. Here I am Leon the retired hair-dresser, the man with the big radio. Pierre Dampier is forgotten. But not by the accursed Nebel!

"Here in America is a free country where only the dogs, the automobiles, the husbands must have licenses. There are no foolish papers to carry about, no questions to answer to the police. I can hide like a rate in the mousecheese, and be safe. But not from this son-of-an-unpardonableness Nebel! His men are everywhere. He sees everything. Only here I can protect myself. Here I can kill before I am killed!

"But I see in your eye that I am beating about the gas-works, Monsieur. What is it that the old man Dampier has wrested from Nature, that is of so great value to the famous Nebel? What is the secret for which he has lammed himself here to hide like a flea in the chemise of your charming Maryland? Why is he willing to sail down the great river, to fry on the heated seat, so long as Nebel shall die? I will tell you, gentlemen!"

He drew himself up to every inch of his five feet two. He thrust out a pipe-stem arm and pointed an accusing finger at the mechanism that squatted in the middle of the floor.

"There, gentlemen, is the weapon that will make France supreme! The instrument of defense that makes offense impossible! The weapon that will end war!"

We looked at him, and at it, and at each other. It didn't look like the sort of thing you'd lug out on a battlefield to chase the enemy away. It had even less resemblance to the kind of fortress that I'd heard France was building along the Middle-European border. I began to wonder if, after all, that glint in Dampier's eyes was the holy light of pure science.

"What is it?" Bill asked.

The little Frenchman's chest pushed out until his vest-buttons creaked. Then he zipped forward, his rat's eyes darting from side to side, and hissed in our ears:

"It is, total reflection!"

That left me cold, but it didn't Bill. I could see that he had a glimmering of an understanding of what went on, but he was puzzled as to the why, what and how. "How d'you mean?" he asked. "We have total internal reflection in prisms. That's no weapon —or defense either, unless you're figuring on Nebel's crowd developing a death-ray or something like that for the next war."

Dampier chuckled. It was about as self-satisfied a chuckle as I've heard. "Death-rays—maybe. I do not care. Bullets, shells, bombs, I tell you nothing, *nothing* can break through the barrier of total reflection! And it is a weapon as well, to turn the enemy's own strength against him."

Bill was sitting up straight in his chair. "Tell me about it," he said softly.

Dampier wriggled and seemed to settle down like a statue on his two spread legs. Only from the waist up was he alive, talking volubly with both hands and that wagging beard.

"It is simple," he explained. "From the beginning of time, what has been the first defense of mankind? It is the wall, the barrier which the enemy cannot climb, cannot break, cannot penetrate with their weapons. A wall of thorns against the beasts of the darkness. A boulder rolled in the mouth of a cave. Walls of sharpened stakes, of earth and stone, of human flesh and blood! Walls of fire laid

down by giant guns. Walls of poisonous vapors through which no living thing can pass. Always a wall, stronger and stronger, but never perfect. I, Pierre Dampier, have made the perfect wall!

"Look, Monsieur—you have spoken of the reflecting prism. All light that falls on it at the proper angle is diverted, turned back. Walls of steel and concrete, such as I have here about me, will repel the bullets of powerful rifles, the shells of small guns, like the little balls of ping-pong. All these things will protect me from the weapons of my enemies—but they are not perfect. They are not total reflection!

"Look you, again. Always there is some ray that will be of the improper angle, the too great or too small wavelength. Always there is some shell that will batter its way through my walls and kill me. But if I can find a mirror that will turn back all rays, a wall from which all projectiles will rebound, a shield against all the many forces of Nature and of man—then, Monsieur, I have the perfect defense and the perfect weapon!

"See this little mirror in my hand. I flash in your eyes a beam of light—so. You are blinded, no? And if this is not light, but a ray of death that you have hurled against my mirror, it kills *you*—is it not so? If it is a bullet that you shoot at me, it recoils and strikes you down. If it is a bomb, it is thrown back into your trenches, to kill your men. If it is a great force of pressure or attraction, it is diverted, reversed, and it strikes at you while I am safe behind my perfect wall."

Bill was on his feet with that mulish look he has when he's sure he's right. "It's impossible!" he snapped. "No metal can reflect all wavelengths. No substance can resist a force greater than those which created it and hold it together. As for magnetism, gravitation, t h e y ' r e space-warp forces. *Things* can't stop them. Sorry we're not in the market for Sunday features today, and I rather doubt that Herr Nebel is. You've got brains—I'll grant you that. You have some energy source in the handle of that little gun of yours that would turn industry up on its tail overnight. I haven't the slightest doubt in the world that you may have blasted the atom wide open and made it sit up and beg. But there's no substance, known or unknown, that will do what you claim, and there never will be. If you have no objections, Monsieur, we will be on our way, and in exactly one hour I will call the police. Au revoir, Monsieur."

Dampier was hopping from one foot to the other like a hen on ice. "No, no, no, Monsieur!" he cried. "You have not heard all! You must lend another ear! There is no substance that will reflect all things; that is true. Only a fool would believe it. But what of a wall that has no substance—that has no existence in what we call reality but that is as fixed and unshakable as the roots of the universe—a wall, a discontinuity *of Space itself?*"

Bill stopped halfway up the stairs. "Say that again," he demanded.

The little Frenchman's hands went winging out in hopeless resignation. "There are no words! One does not explain the theories of Dirac and Schroedinger in words. There are symbols—the logic of symbols—that can be translated at last into reality that men can see, but there are no words for the things that are born and live only here, in the head, in the think-box. It is here, in these symbols, on these sheets of paper. It is there, in that apparatus which you see. But it is not in words."

Bill wasn't being stopped now. He lives words. "You mean," he said, "that you've hit on a condition of Space—maybe a discontinuity of some kind—that has the property of absolute total reflection? It will reflect all radiations one hundred per cent. Any material body will bounce off without making the slightest im-

pression. Every force exerted on it is turned back on itself—even space-forces like gravitation and magnetism. And you can create that condition at will. Is that what you mean?"

Dampier's black eyes fairly spit sparks. "That is it, Monsieur," he cried. "You have said it with a full mouth! My wall, my zone as I have called it, will reflect completely all things, although it is itself a no-thing, without existence in our universe. It lives in the symbols of mathematics, and I have just this day completed the apparatus which will give these symbols reality—which will create the zone as I desire it, in any shape or size. I will show you, and you will believe. And then we shall see about Herr Wilhelm Nebel and his makers of wars!"

Bill frowned. "Dampier, give me those equations. I've got to puzzle this thing out for myself, follow your argument through on paper. Is there any place where I can be quiet?"

"But of course, Monsieur. There, in the room for thermal work, everything will be perfectly quiet. Here are the papers, and while you read, I shall show Monsieur Crandall the working of the works."

But Bill didn't hear that last. The heavy door of the constant temperature room had closed behind him and insulated him from the world.

I couldn't do much but stand and watch Dampier as he bustled about, tuning up his crazy-looking machine. He talked a blue streak as he worked, but most of it went right over my head. I'm no Bill Porter. I did begin to see why Nebel, if he was behind the world's armaments racket as Dampier claimed, might be pretty anxious to get hold of such a thing before the little Frenchman began peddling it to his best customers. In the right hands it might make war very unfashionable.

Imagine an invaded nation squatting down behind a perfectly reflecting wall. They can't see out, but nothing can get in. Enemy shells bounce off into the enemy lines. Death rays flash back into the faces of those who sent them. Radio is garbled by all kinds of curious echoes and reflections, making communication impossible. Electrical and magnetic apparatus would be subject to strange disturbances. And gravitation—how would it affect that? Would every outside object be attracted to the mirror, or would it be repelled by a kind of negative gravity, lifting it into space, to the moon, the planets, to the very stars? I wish now that I'd known at least a fraction of what Bill did, and had been able to read what he read in these few sheets of neatly written paper. I can only guess, from what Dampier said and from what I saw. What his zone really was—what it could do—I do not know.

I tried to pay attention to what he was doing. The real vitals of his apparatus were in the big insulated block. The thousands of amperes he was drawing from the high tension lines were merely the kicker that kept the real engine turning. Atomic energy, Bill had guessed. Probably he was right.

The loops and coils above the platform determined the shape that the zone would take. According to how they were set, Dampier explained, he could get any geometrically continuous form—a disc, a paraboloid, anything that geometry can describe. What he was going to make was a sphere.

I'm not at all sure that I'm getting the order of things right. I gathered that the zone must be built up and strengthened little by little; first impermeable to the simplest forms of energy, like light and heat, and then to the more and more complex ones, until at some critical point the whole thing became absolute. The machine that created it had to be outside, otherwise the zone itself would keep any power from getting through. On the other hand, it might be powered by one of those super-batteries that Dampier had in the grip of his sole-

noid-gun. With a set-up like that, you could dig a hole and pull it in after you, so to speak. What I wondered was how you get out?

I asked Dampier that one. "There would be no way," he told me. "Once the zone is complete, it is unchangeable—absolute. You would be inside, to us here, but I think that to yourself it would seem that it is we who are inside—that you are in a world all of your own, with its own laws, its own science. They can be worked out, these laws. They are in the equations that Monsieur Porter is reading; but they are very strange and complex. In war, a closed zone would be used only as a trap for the enemy."

"Wait a minute," I objected. "You mean to say that once you've made this thing you can't unmake it?"

"That is right," he nodded. "Once the zone is complete it is a bubble—a nothingness—entirely apart from our Space and Time. The forces build up very rapidly, exponentially, but until the very instant of completion, even if it is one little billionth of a second before that moment, the zone will collapse if the power which builds it is shut off. Never in practice would one go so far. Long before it is complete, such a zone will repel all things that can be directed against it, while the balance of power still remains in the hands of him who has created it. To make it—that is nothing. To destroy it is impossible. But to hold it so in the delicate balance between destruction and completion; that is the triumph of Pierre Dampier! I have calculated it all from the equations. See—here at these red lines each needle must stop. If they go beyond—zut! In the space of a thinking the zone is complete! Beyond control!"

He straightened up, his wirey mop of hair bobbing at my shoulder. "Now, please, if you will watch and remember. The loops are set, so, for the sphere—little, like the apple of the eye. Now I press the first switch, and the second and then the others, three, and four, and five. Now I turn the dials, so, a little at a time. A minute now, while the zone builds, and then you will call Monsieur Porter and show him that this is not all sunshine and honeysuckers that he reads."

The big machine began to hum a deep-throated drone that deepened and strengthened until I could feel it shaking the floor under my feet with each colossal pulse of energy. I wondered about the sympathetic vibrations you read about in the Sunday supplements. Might it not shake the walls down around our ears? But Dampier didn't seem worried. And then I forgot it, for a shadow was beginning to form in the space between the coils.

That's all it was at first—a shadow, the size of a big red polished apple. I could hardly be sure it was there, but there was something queer about the way light acted that showed me where it was. Things behind it disappeared, smothered out by something that wasn't really darkness; and then suddenly it began to shine.

You've seen bubbles of air under water, shining like quicksilver. Well, it was like that. It was flawless, without texture, intangible and shimmering. It was not the thing itself we saw, but the things reflected in it—a little, twisted, shining world swimming in the heart of that ball of distorted space. Peering closer, I saw that the coils which shaped it were glowing with an eerie, frosty white light. I stared, fascinated, and by what? By a half-invisible bubble, like an indoor baseball, conjured up by some legerdemain to make fools of us! It was nonsense! I jerked my eyes away—and saw them.

Three men with guns stood on the little stair, watching us. They were gentlemen, polished, clever gentlemen adroit at the art of death. Their guns were of the kind which Middle-Europe gives to its officers, and their faces were Middle-European faces. They were in formal dress, and one

of them held his gloves in his left hand.

Dampier had seen them before I, reflected in the shining sphere. He turned, his back against the control-panel, his white teeth gnawing like a rat's at his black beard. The madness was back in his glittering eyes; madness of a trapped beast.

"So!" he whispered. "Now we shall meet."

They came down the stairs, one after the other. How they had cut their way into that Gibraltar of a house I will never know. They may have been working for days and weeks to break through Dampier's defenses. But they were there.

Resistance was futile. Even Dampier realized that. The three guns urged us back against the wall. Deft fingers searched us but found nothing. The three men stepped back to the foot of the little stair, their guns raised, like a firing squad waiting for the signal. And then, above them, I saw the smiling face of Wilhelm Friedrich Nebel, Ambassador from Middle-Europe.

I hadn't believed Dampier's story until then. It was fantastic, this spy business, with a man like Nebel in the villain's role. Things like that don't happen any more. Yet Wilhelm Nebel stood there with a smile on his heavy lips and no smile at all in his pale little eyes. He came down the stairs, treading silently like a cat. He was like a cat in his black and white evening attire, white-bossomed and sleek. He had in his slender fingers a thick golden chain, with a heavy seal of gold made from an ancient coin. A crimson ribbon stretched across his breast like a line of blood.

Satan at the sacrifice! And then the illusion broke.

Those devil fingers went into the pocket of his vest, brought out thick, steel-rimmed spectacles, perched them precariously on the thin-bridged nose. The massive shoulders slouched over, trousers drew tight across his heavy buttocks as he bent and stared into the shining globe. I had never thought of Nebel as fat or gross, in spite of his size, but that single act showed him to me as a Teuton peddler, stooping to finger the weave of some shoddy cloth, to decide how high a price would be safe and how low a one profitable. Satan from his throne! He stood erect again, but his massive face was red with the effort.

Me he ignored. I was nobody. He bowed to Dampier and again I heard the cloth of his breeches creak.

"We meet again, Monsieur."

Dampier answered nothing. He too had his fine tradition of insolence. Nebel's slim hand flicked toward the machine. "This, I presume, is the great weapon that is to be the salvation of *la belle France*. This shining ball that floats in the empty air. Will you show us what it can do?"

The Frenchman's eyes never left Nebel's suave face as he went to the machine. His fingers darted here and there among the dials, tugging and twisting. Above his head the coils stirred in their massive bearings, and within their compass the silver sphere swelled like an inflating balloon, to the size of a man's head—of a basketball—larger and larger while its shimmering surface took on a steely hardness. We seemed to be staring into unfathomable depths, out of which tiny distorted replicas of ourselves peered curiously. I had a feeling that I was two men, one here in this buried room and the other there in that twisted other room, staring inscrutably into my own eyes.

"Stop!" Nebel's voice rapped in my ears. The sphere was huge—ten feet and more in diameter. "It is large enough," he said. "What else will it do?"

I saw Dampier's eyes then. I knew that this time there would be no stopping him. Step by step I withdrew toward the wall. One of the guards saw me and turned his pistol to cover me, but made no other sign.

Dampier answered. "Many things,

Monsieur. If you will watch—?" He pulled up his coat-sleeve, baring his scrawny arm, and clambering up on the platform pushed his hand and arm into the shining sphere. I saw the sweat come out on his forehead with the effort. Already the zone was strong. He withdrew his hand and touched the dials of the control-board. Nebel's eyes were watching every move, his hand in the pocket of his coat. Dampier stepped back. "If the gentlemen will shoot? But I warn you—be wary of the ricochet."

Nebel's finger jerked up. "Rudolf!" The youngest of the three men stepped forward and emptied his gun at the shining globe. The first bullet passed through and spanged against the farther wall; the rest glanced whining from its surface and bit ugly scars from the concrete wall beyond. Dampier's eyebrows raised ever so little.

"You have improved the quality of your guns," he commanded. "They are more powerful than I had thought."

"Is that all?"

"Is it not enough? What weapon have your thieving swine stolen that will penetrate what you have seen?"

"Is that all?" Nebel's face was purple with rage. They hated each other bitterly, these two, and Dampier had given him not the slightest satisfaction as yet.

The Frenchman shrugged. "It is not complete. Nothing can pass the completed zone, though it is good enough now for anything your blundering fools have invented or will invent. However—"

He turned to the dials. Then suddenly he wheeled. His thin lips were drawn back in a snarl of fury, his eyes were sunken pools of black hate. With a scream he leapt at Nebel's throat.

The first slug caught him in mid-air. The shock dropped him in a crooked heap. Five more bullets smacked into him as he lay there, then Nebel's polished shoe went out and turned him over on his back. He lay there, a bloody froth on his contorted lips, sneering up at the man who had killed him.

For the first time Nebel turned to me. "It was in self defense. You will remember that, Mr. Crandall, if I decide to let you live." He went to the machine, as Dampier had done, and tapped the dials lightly with his long white flowers.

"These red marks—they are, I suppose, the settings with which Monsieur Dampier was working. He would not go beyond, for me. And yet, they are less than halfway to the limit of the dials. What will happen, if I turn them so—a hair beyond?"

His fingers twisted once, twice, and behind us Bill Porter's voice cried out. "Stop, you fool! Stop!"

He stood in the door of the temperature room, the sheaf of Dampier's notes in his hand. Nebel's thin eyebrows went up. "Mr. Porter! I had forgotten you. And why am I a fool?" His fingers spun another of the dials.

"You murdering Teuton fool!" Bill's tone was venomous. "What do you know about science? Your agents bring you this and that. You pay them or kill them, as may be convenient, but what do you know or care about what they have given you, so long as it can be sold at a profit: Mike, come here."

No one moved to stop me. Bill held out the papers, his thumbs marking a certain line. I saw that the margins were filled with his spidery writing.

"Take that top sheet. Now, look at those readings. Has he reached them yet?"

The figures looked familiar. Of course they were the settings at which Dampier had drawn his little red lines.

"He's past them," I cried. "On all but two."

"On all, my friend." Nebel turned again to the dials. "Bluffing does not work in a game for men."

As he moved Bill sprang. Not at

Nebel—not at the machine—but at the two great copper bars that came in through the wall. His lean body fell like a stretched spear across them. There was a burst of flame, the stench of burning flesh, but my eyes had left him. For as he leaped Nebel turned the dials.

A roar of subterranean thunders shook the room. Vast energies poured into the shining zone. It changed. It was a great mirror of utter blackness, its shimmering silver sheen gone leaving a shell of strange transparency out of which creatures of another world leered crookedly at us. And it began to grow!

Momentum carried it. I know that now. The looped coils were swept aside. The apparatus beneath it buckled and split. Beyond it, Nebel's highborn gunmen gaped aghast. They vanished behind its sleek circumference, but Wilhelm Nebel was not of their stupid breed. With a roar he flung his huge body high across the swelling arc of the sphere's circumference. A moment he slithered on its top, sprawled like a toad, his great face crimson—then it crashed him against the ceiling like a toad under a giant's heel. Fragments of concrete began to fall.

I was up the stair, the remaining sheet of Dampier's equations in my hand. I was at the outer door as the walls buckled and fell in ruin. I was running across the littered lawn, staring over my shoulder at the giant silver globe that towered a hundred feet above me. Then it burst!

The force of the explosion hurled me a hundred yards across the fields. I lay gasping in the wet grass, staring glassy-eyed at the column of violet flame that plumed into the sky. I got shakily to my feet and stared into the smoking pit where Dampier's fortress had been. At last I remembered the scrap of crumpled paper in my hand.

The margins of Dampier's paper were full of Bill's penciled notes. At the end he had added five neat equations, and below them the remaining space was filled with his closely written lines.

"These added equations prove Dampier's analysis to be incomplete," he had written. "Such a totally reflecting zone has every characteristic of the closed, intangible boundary of the Einsteinian universe. It may be considered the boundary of such a universe in miniature, containing every force and body of the greater outside universe which it reflects. Neither is more real, in the physical sense, than the other. There is no way of disproving that we may not in turn be the images of some greater universe than ours, outside of the Einsteinian boundaries of our Space and Time.

"Jeans, and others, have postulated that the size of such a closed universe must depend upon the number of physical particles included in it, and that it will expand, *as our universe is expanding*, until that size is reached. Dampier's closed zone, containing the same number of image-particles as our own outside universe, must expand *to the same size*, and at a vastly greater rate.

"It may be that the cosmic atom, postulated by Abbe Lemaitre, from which our universe was born, was the creation of some Dampier of a super-universe, who failed to check its growth, and that its swelling bubble is crushing the mighty cosmos of which it is the ultimate image, as Dampier's completed zone would crush our own."

Bill Porter's scribbled notes stop there. In the split millionth of a second before the twist of Nebel's fingers could throw the balanced sphere over the boundary to completion, his body shorted the power that fed the great machine. It was in time! Momentum of growth, gained in that instant of which Dampier had told me, swept Nebel and his gunmen to their death, and as the zone collapsed the incalculable energies trapped in it

burst forth in a holocaust of atomic flame. A millionth of a second—less perhaps—but in it chance, and whatever power it is that rules chance, had checked the thing whose illimitable growth would have swept our universe before it in an avalanche of destruction.

If, as Bill Porter thought, our universe is just such a swelling bubble in the vaster world which it mirrors, I wonder whether in that world there is not another Dampier, another Nebel, another Bill Porter going to his death. I wonder if Time itself is not reflected in some contorted scale in such a cosmic bubble, and the entire history of a universe reproduced in the instant before it bursts.

I wonder, too, if one day our bubble-universe will not burst as Dampier's did, robbing us in that future instant of all reality—the snuffed out images in an almost perfect mirror. For as our Dampier did, so did the greater Dampier whose image he was. As he failed so did that other Dampier fail. Perhaps, in his turn, he but mirrored greater things beyond. Where then—in what inconceivable realm beyond Space and Time—is the reality of which we are the ultimate image?

The SPACEAN

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FLASH ★ ★ ★

Space ship P.Q.-7 dented by shower of magnetic meteorites, enroute from Mars to Venus with cargo of Vesonite, and 87 passengers. Speed reduced for two days. No leaks found. Full speed resumed today.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

Privateer "Spar," cruising Jupiter's third moon in search of the mineral "birytum," reported down for repairs and short of rations. Space Patrol Cutter L.V. 19 enroute with food and spare parts.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

Earth-Saturn exploration party of the "Year 2000" expedition, which left Earth secretly to evade Space pirates, has been located on Saturn Satellite 4.

Party including 32 men, 7 women has built houses and cultivated native fruits and vegetables. Climate mild. Valuable meteorological tables reported tabulated.

3 deaths 11 births reported during period of isolation. Lack of fibrous material on satellite made clothing impossible to improvise. Valuable deposits of *Actual* discovered, though samples must be verified.

Families on Earth and Mars who considered missing expedition lost, are said to face complications. Universe amnesty will probably be granted all parties due to situation.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

Mutiny at Lunar station 5. Report 300 Venusian plantmen laborers revolted; killed 7 Mercurian engineers before being subdued by glow-ray guns.

Plantmen will be tried before Captain Elkins of Space Patrol Cutter M-V-8 next month.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

War threatens between Binary Stars of 31st Magnitude area. Space Patrol squadron threatened to blast one city from Easo Twin, only to be faced by 200 Rocket Ships built in violation of Space Navy law.

Squadron retired without casualties to await Earth-Mars Disintegrator fleet, now only 84 million miles away.

Hostilities on Binaries have begun.

FLASH ★ ★ ★

M. C. Thomas, earth author, circling earth in one-man space crate, is reported off course but being overhauled by Space Patrol Cutter M V 173, Lunar 3 Station.

ORDERS

Commodore G. O. Bates from Lunar Station 3, to Midway Port, Venus.

Captain Bart Smith, from Mars 2, to Mercury 1.

Lieutenant M. M. Swift, from Cutter M.V.3 to Lunar Station 4.

Colonel Abbe, Capt. Gray, Capt. Clark, Capt. Jones, Lt. Everette, Lt. Spence; previous orders rescinded. Stand ready for new orders.

Lt. Chester, Lt. Moine, from Space Cutters M V 89 and M V 30 to Space Liner X Q 19.

Space Liner X Q 4 from Venus, with 11 passengers and forty tons of Milken; at Bostport, Earth.

—

DEPARTURES

Space Liner X Q 10 for Saturn, with 189 tons of Cypress Timber, will make Lunar stop.

Space Patrol Cutter M V 17 for three year tour from Mars Base. Captain Ian McDougal and crew of 31.

—

SPACE LANE GOSSIP!

Eleanor H, ass't. Telly Op, Space Liner X Q 19, and Lt. O, of Patrol Cutter Service, have pfft!

Minnie Howes, of the Boston Howes boarded fast freighter for six months Martian trip. Why?

Captain George Dixon hints broadly that Johanes Goebbels better remember blast clearance when ships pass, or a meeting in person will result*/[%$&—

Since personal attendant of twenty cows, enroute from Earth to Venus, (Space Liner L V 87) was laid low by Space Sickness, Ensign Elmer Jones, who had to pinch-hit, no longer drinks milk.

Park Rhodis, Argentine Polo star, and Zilthia Gates accidentally (?) both booked passage to Mercury aboard L V 48!

Inside dope on conference in mid-passage (cost Liners full day's time) is that Plutarch of Mars Federation sealed trade agreements with Saturn Envoys and transferred to save three months travel.

Billy Carnation boarded Saturn Liner (M Q 3) with ballet, (No member of chorus is over sixteen years of age, as trip requires two years) to fill five year engagement at Elbo Lub, the Monte Carlo of the giant planet.

TWENTY YEARS AGO IN THE SPACEWAYS

The first "Q" type of ship was tested at the international field, by a crew of crack spacemen, drawn by lot from the entire interplanetary personnel.

Over fifty thousand people had gathered to watch the ship "which was powered by an impossible means," and even the greatest skeptics had to admit its superiority.

The beautiful gray bird rose without effort. Seeing the blast of the giant tubes was awesome with the new silencers in perfect operation. The crowd which brought its ear protectors and padded shoes, despite the announcement that they would not be required, appeared rather foolish amongst the hardier individuals who came, as the authorities had requested, without protection.

"As the sleek gray hull disappeared in the distance, and the vibration died slowly from the earth's surface, I realized for the first time that the rocket tubes had *caused* vibration. After watching other ships take off for many years, the change was so absolute that it left the eerie feeling of a ghost ship," said the reporter.

FORTY YEARS AGO IN THE SPACEWAYS

"The new Martian terminal is being dedicated as I write this item. The earth has gone forth to conquer the universe. The Martians are on their knees to welcome the earthmen, who have brought them new life. Their officials are gathered, as the first ship on scheduled service nears port, to greet the earthmen with every honor it is possible to bestow.

"It seems providential that men from earth should hold the secret of life or death to them; that after struggling for centuries to absorb moisture from the ether of outer space, earth men should discover the secret in a

world where it is of little use. For years the Martians considered all earthmen as gods; but were forced to change their opinion with the arrival of large numbers of men who proved beyond doubt that they were not.

"Moisture machines are set up and operating in many parts of the planet, and already the ground is beginning to swell with new life. Crops are growing, and the Martians look forward to a period of such prosperity as they have not enjoyed since their very ancient history. Men from earth have brought them many evils from this modern planet, but the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

"The people of earth should also be thankful, that they have been able to bring happiness and prosperity to a planet which was dying for lack of one element. That it should be done through the channels of trade, rather than as an act of charity, is a good sign. The earth will benefit as greatly as Mars through the exchange of goods and we should not consider that all favors are on our side."

FIFTY YEARS AGO

"THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL ROCKET FLIGHT HAS JUST BEEN COMPLETED!

"The ship returned to port this morning, and made a landing with only slight damage. The crew knows what is necessary to make it a complete success, so that a landing may be made on any surface without danger to either crew or ship. Three men were slightly injured in the bump, but they are happy at the success of the great undertaking.

"The Space Society has voted to give each member of the crew a substantial bonus and, although the amount has not been made public as yet, we know that it will be a small fortune.

"These men have opened up new trade lanes, new horizons of conquest, when the world seemed stagnated. Even though the trip was only as far as the moon and return, it means that the new era has begun. Already they are planning another trip, when a landing will be made, and the surface of our satellite explored in space suits.

"Even now plans are being drawn up to build a ship which can travel to Mars, and within the next two years that trip will be an accomplished fact. To all of you skeptics who read this article I say without qualification that I *know* space travel will be a success. I saw the return of the ship—and having seen must believe!"

NEW PROJECTS

Nov. 2,008:—The new monorail line on Jupiter, between Elbo Lub and Mut Sero, *(stretching for eighteen thousand miles)* has been completed. It will start service within a few days, the greatest engineering feat ever attempted by a human race. Twenty-seven hundred Earth engineers have worked on the project, with uncounted thousands of Jupiterians for labor. The seemingly impossible task has been completed in *less than two years*, as the most modern and fastest means of surface travel that has ever been known.

The time required for transit from one city to the other will only be thirty-six hours, with the average speed of the cars at better than *five hundred miles per hour*, and a top speed of almost *nine hundred!*

Someday I hope to be able to ride in one of the modern coaches, even though it requires so long to get there from earth. We take off our hats to such a progressive planet.

Mining operations have begun on Jupiter's Zero mountains. The insurmountable task has finally been attempted by a group of earth men, who are risking their lives and fortunes. The ruling board of Jupiter will not

allow them to employ any help until they prove that it is possible to maintain life under the stringent conditions.

All the universe wishes them luck, and know that if it is possible to conquer the wealth that lies hidden beneath the lofty peaks they deserve every honor as well as the lucrative return.

HONOR ROLL

This month we must sadly mention the names of many brave men. The more who go forth to conquer an unsympathetic universe the more names must be added here.

John Bostonian, who lost his life in attempting to rescue the party lost in the great Venusian crater. He succeeded in making a landing within the crater rim, but the vibration caused such an eruption as has not been known since its discovery. It is believed that the five members of the lost party had succeeded in reaching the ship and that all perished at the same time.

Martin Crosby, must be considered lost. His ship has not been heard from for three years, and the supplies could not have been stretched this far under any circumstances. We all know that he was on a secret assignment, and take off our hats to a man who attempted to accomplish a feat too dangerous to allow risking more than one life at a time. It is rumored that his buddy, Jimmy Yates, will follow the trail.

Tom Brinkley, who shot it out with twenty green men on Venus. He gave his life protecting the retreat of the remainder of the party, when the workers obtained some *"Jucit"* and ran amok. It is a sad tale, but he rose far above the average human and died with a smile on his lips. Their last sight of him was a farewell wave of the hand.

SCHEDULES

The Mars-Venus take-off has been changed 23 hours, Stellar time, due to a slight variation in calculations. The storm period, which has been touched several times by the ships on this run, will be avoided until information as to its cause is accurate enough to eliminate such danger. Port transfer time will be increased 45 Stellar hours, until further notice.

Another Q ship has been added to the Earth—Mars run. It is of the latest type, and lessens running time considerably. Good luck to the new crew. "Keep your blasts clean."

Jupiter—Saturn run has become a standard schedule, and time tables are already in print. Eighteen ships are due to cover this route, and should make service excellent.

NEW INVENTIONS

The "space—robot" is almost completed. Early tests have already been made, and give sign of it being the greatest advance in many years. The name of *Nelson* behind the development is all that space men need, but proof is there also. This little device will chart the position and course of every space ship within twenty million miles, and carry the positions accurately at all times. For the first time in the development of space travel a captain can feel safe. Nothing can approach without his knowledge, and even the smallest rock formation will be located and charted. Even in this age, it is the coming marvel of universe mechanics.

The new magnetic space boots, which will cling with unbelievable power to the metal hull of a ship, are a great step ahead. Emergency repairs will become almost as simple as those in port. The boots only weigh three pounds, and can be worn whether inside or outside of the ship without the slightest discomfort.

THE OVERSIGHT

Roman soldiers, armor glistening in the sun! Chariots! Galleys!

JOHN C. HASTINGS, senior medical student in the Nebraska State University Medical School at Omaha, looked out of the window of the Packard sedan he was driving down the road along the top of the bluff, and out in the middle of the Missouri River he saw a Roman galley, sweeping down midstream with three tiers of huge oars.

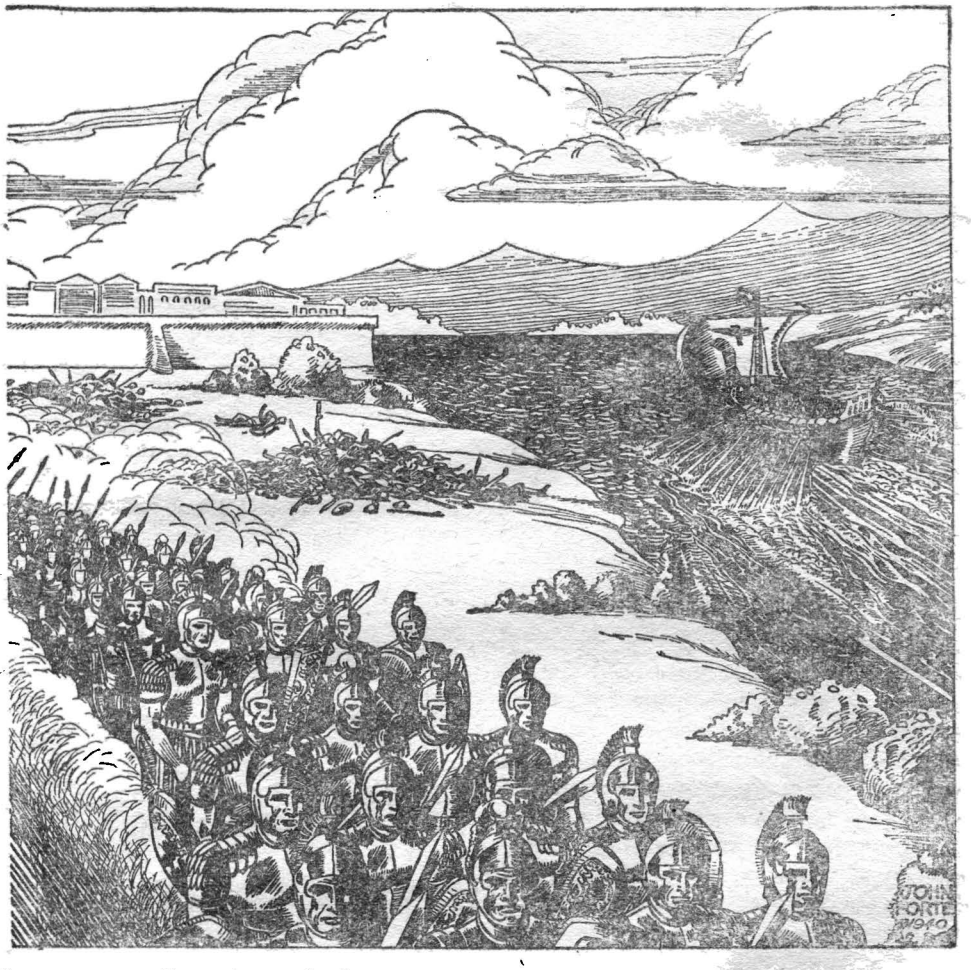
A pang of alarm shot through him. The study of medicine is a terrible grind; he had been working hard. In a recent psychiatry class they had touched upon hysterical delusions and illusions. Was his mind slipping? Or was this some sort of optical delusion? He had stolen away from Omaha with Celestine Newbury to enjoy the green and open freshness of the country like a couple of stifled city folks. Perhaps the nearest he had come to foolishness had been when the stars had looked like her eyes and he had pointed out Mars and talked of flying with her to visit that mysterious red planet.

"Do you see it too?" he gasped at Celestine.

She saw it, too, and heard the

Time Accomplishes Progress On Earth.

by MILES J. BREUER



They came in endless columns, fearless . . . .

creak of oars and the thumping of a drum; there floated up to them a hoarse chant, rhythmic but not musical, broken into by rough voices that might have been cursing.

It was a clumsy vessel, built of heavy timbers, with a high-beaked prow. There was a short mast and a red-and-yellow sail that bulged in the breeze. The long oars looked tremendously heavy and unwieldy, and swung in long, slow strokes, swirling up the muddy water and throwing up a yellow bow-wave. The decks were crowded with men, from whom came the gleam of metal shields, swords, and helmets.

"Some advertising scheme I suppose," muttered John cynically.

"Or some traveling show, trying to be original," Celestine suggested.

But the thing looked too grim and clumsy for either of these things. There was a total lack of modern touch about it. Nor was there a word or sign of advertising anywhere on it. They stopped the car and watched. As it slowly drew nearer they could see that the men were coarse, rowdy, specimens; and that the straining of

human muscles at the oars was too real to be any kind of play.

Then there were shots below them. Someone at the foot of the bluff was blazing away steadily at the galley. On board the latter, a commotion arose. Men fell. Then voices out on the road in front of them became more pressing than either of these things.

"A young fellow and a girl," someone said; "big, fast car. Omaha license number. They'll do."

"Hey!" a voice hailed them.

In front, on the road, were a dozen men. Some were farmers, some were Indians. One or two might have been bank clerks or insurance salesmen. All were heavily armed, with shotguns, rifles, and pistols. They looked haggard and sullen.

"Take us to Rosalie, and then beat it for Omaha and tell them what you saw," one of the men ordered gruffly. "The newspapers and the commander at Fort Crook."

This was strange on a peaceful country road, but John could see no other course than to comply with their request. He turned the car back to Rosalie, the Indian Reservation town, and the men were crowded within it and hung all over the outside. Even the powerful Packard found it a heavy burden. In the direction of Rosalie, the strangest sight of all awaited them.

Before they saw the town, they found a huge wall stretching across the road. Beyond it rose blunt shapes, the tops of vast low buildings. What a tremendous amount of building! the thought struck John at once. For, they had driven this way just three days before, and there had been no sign of it; only the wide green fields and the slumbering little village.

The armed men became excited and furious when they saw the wall. They broke out into exclamations which were half imprecations and half explanatory.

"They put these things down on our land. Ruined our farms. God knows what's become of the town. Squeezed us out. Must be a good many dead. We have telephoned Lincoln and Washington, but they are slow. They can't wake up. Maybe they don't believe us." There were curses.

John could see great numbers of armed men gathering from all directions. There was no order or discipline about them, except the one uniting cause of their fury against this huge thing that had so suddenly arisen. Far in the distance, countless little groups were emerging from behind trees and around bends in the road or driving up in cars; and nearby there were hundreds more arriving with every conceivable firearm. The last man in the countryside must have been aroused.

The men climbed out of John's car and repeated their order that he drive to Omaha and tell what he saw.

A ragged skirmish line was closing in rapidly toward the big gray wall, that stretched for a mile from north to south. Along the top of it, after the manner of sentries, paced little dark figures. John and Celestine were amazed to see that they, too, were Roman soldiers. The sunlight glinted from their armor; the plumes on their helmets stood out against the sky; their shield and short swords were picturesque, but, against the rifles below, out of place.

There came a shot, and another from the approaching attackers, and a figure on top of the wall toppled and fell sprawling to its foot and lay still on the ground. Hoarse shouts arose. A dense knot of Roman soldiers gathered on top of the wall. A fusillade of shots broke out from below, men running frantically to get within close range. The group on the wall melted away, many crashing down on the outside, and a heap remaining on top. The wall was completely deserted. The wind wafted a sulphurous odor to the nostrils of the two young people in the Packard.

Then followed a horrible spectacle. John, hardened to gruesome sights in the course of his medical work, came

away from it trembling, wondering how Celestine would react.

A huge gate swung wide in the wall, and a massed army of Roman soldiers marched out. Bare thighs and bronze greaves, and strips of armor over their shoulders, plumed helmets, small, heavy shields; one company with short swords, the next with long spears; one solid company after another poured out of the gates and marched forth against their attackers.

The Farmers and Indians and other dispossessed citizens opened fire on the massed troops with deadly effect. Soldiers fell by the hundreds; huge gaps appeared in the ranks; whole companies were wiped out. But, with precise and steady discipline, others marched in their places. Blood soaked the ground and smeared the trees and shrubbery. Piles of dead were heaped up in long windrows, with twitching and crawling places in them. New ranks climbed over them and marched into the blaze of lead, only to fall and be replaced by others. The peaceful Nebraska prairie was strewn with thousands of armed corpses.

Terror gripped the hearts of the couple in the Packard. The firing began to halt. It became scattered here and there as ammunition became scarce. As the troops poured out in unlimited numbers, men in overalls, sweaters, and collars and shirt sleeves began to retreat. The grim ranks closed upon the nearest ones. Swords rose and fell, spears thrust, clubbed rifles were borne down. There was more blood, and the bodies of American citizens littered the ground that they themselves had owned and tried to defend.

John and Celestine, paralyzed by the spectacle, came to with a jerk.

"It's time to move," John said.

He swung the car around just as, with a rattle and a roar, a score of chariots dashed out of the great gates and the horses came galloping down the road. The ranks of the infantry opened to permit pursuit of the retreating skirmishers. The clumsy vehicles rattled and bumped behind flying hoofs at a rapid clip, the men in them hanging on to the reins and keeping their footing by a miracle. Gay cloaks streamed backward in the wind, and gold gleamed on the horses' harness.

John bore down on the accelerator pedal, and the car leaped ahead with a roar, a scattered string of chariots swinging in behind it. He headed down the road and, once the Packard got a proper start, it left its pursuers ridiculously behind. Celestine shrieked and pointed ahead.

"Look!"

A group of Roman soldiers with drawn swords were formed on the road ahead, and more were swarming out of the shrubbery.

An officer waved a sword and shouted a sharp word.

"Stop, nothing!" John said through gritted teeth, remembering bloody overalls and sprawling limbs gripping battered rifles.

He put his full weight on the accelerator pedal and the huge machine throbbed and rumbled into life, a gleaming, roaring gray streak.

"Duck down below the windshield, dear," he said to Celestine. Never before had he used that word, though he had often felt like it.

The Roman soldiers quailed as they saw the big car hurtling toward them, but they had no time to retreat. The bumper struck the mass of men with a thud and a crash of metal. Dark spatters appeared on the windshield and things crunched sickeningly. The car swerved and swung, dizzily, and John's forehead bumped against the glass ahead of him, but his hands hung to the wheel. The fenders crumpled and the wheels bumped over soft things. Just as he thought the car would overturn, he found himself flying smoothly down a clear road; in his windshield mirror a squirming mass on the road was becoming rapidly too small to see.

He laughed a hard laugh.

"They didn't know enough to jab a sword into a tire," he said grimly.

And, there to their left, was the tiresome galley, sliding down the river. The countryside was green and peaceful; in a moment even the galley was out of sight. Except for the crumpled fenders and the leaking radiator it seemed that they had just awakened from an unpleasant dream and found that it had not been true.

They talked little on the way to Omaha; but they could not help talking some. Who were these men? Where did they come from? What did it mean, the piles of dead, the sickening river of blood?

They must hurry with the news, so that help would be sent to the stricken area.

The hum of the motor became a song that ate up miles. John worried about tires. A blowout before he reached the army post at Fort Crook might cost many lives. There was no time to waste.

Just as the roof-covered hills of Omaha appeared in the distance, two motorcycles dashed forward to meet the car and signalled a stop. The khaki clad police riders eyed the bloody radiator and nodded their heads together.

"You've been there?" they asked. John nodded.

"You've been there?" he queried in return.

"The telephone and telegraph wires are hot."

"They need help——," John began.

"Are you good for a trip back there in a plane, to guide an observer?" the officer asked. "We'll see the lady home."

So John found himself dashing to the landing field on a motorcycle, and then in an Army plane, a telephone on his ears connected with the lieutenant in front of him. It was all a mad, dizzy, confused dream. He had never been up in a plane before, and the novelty and anxiety of it fought with his tense observation of the sliding landscape below. But there was the galley on the river, and three more following it in the distance. There was an army marching along the top of the bluffs down the river, a countless string of densely packed companies with horsemen and chariots swarming around. There were the huge flat buildings in the walled enclosure where Rosalie had stood. Out of the buildings and out of the enclosures, marched more and more massed troops, all heading toward Omaha.

Then they were back in the City Hall, he and the lieutenant, and facing them were the chief of police and an Army colonel. There was talk of the Governor and General Paul of the State Militia due to arrive from Lincoln any moment in an airplane; and the National Guard mobilizing all over the state, and trucks and caissons and field guns already en route from Ashland with skeletonized personnel. Secretaries dashed out with scribbled messages and in with yellow telegrams. A terrific war was brewing, and what was it all about?

The lieutenant stepped up to the colonel and saluted.

"If you please, sir, the galleys on the river—"

"Yes?" asked the worried colonel.

"They've got to be sunk."

"We have no bombs," the colonel answered. "We're just a toy army here, in the middle of the continent."

"No bombs!" The lieutenant was nonplussed for a moment, and hung his head in study. "Will you leave it to me, sir? Somehow—"

"Good fellow. Thank you," said the colonel, very much relieved. "Your orders are, then, to sink the galleys."

"Come!" The lieutenant said to John.

"Me?" gasped John.

"Don't you want to?" the lieutenant asked. "Men are scarce. I need help. You're the closest. And you've got a level head."

"Just give me a chance," John said eagerly.

The lieutenant spent fifteen minutes in a telephone booth. Then they

dashed in a motorcycle to the city landing field where the plane lay. They made the short hop to the Army flying field. This all took time; but when they taxied towards the Army hangars, there stood men ready to load things into the plane. A stack of kegs labeled "Dynamite" and white lengths of fuse did not look very military, and their source was indicated by the departing delivery truck of a hardware firm. The men knocked the stoppers out of the kegs and wadded the fuses into the bungholes with paper.

"Bombs!" The lieutenant spread his hands in a proud gesture. "The Q.M.G. in Washington ought to see this. Maybe he'd trust us with real ones some day."

He turned to John.

"We'll use a cigarette-lighter down in the cockpit, and heave them over the side."

Out over the city they flew, and up the river. The trireme was steadily approaching, and the lieutenant flew his plane a hundred feet above the ship. They could see gaping mouths and goggling whites of eyes turned up at them. The decks were a mass of coarse looking faces.

"Hate to do it," remarked the lieutenant, looking down on the decks packed with living men. "But, Lord, it seems to be the game, so light up!" he ordered sharply.

As John applied the cigarette-lighter and the fuse began to fizzle, the lieutenant circled about and again flew over the creeping galley.

"Now!" He shouted, and John rolled the keg over the side. It turned over and over endwise as it fell, and left a sputtering trail of smoke in the air.

It fell on the deck and knocked over several men. The lieutenant was putting height and distance between themselves and the galley as rapidly as possible, and rightly. In another moment there was a burst of flame and black smoke. Blotches of things flew out sidewards from it, and a dull roar came up to them. For a few minutes a mangled mass of wreckage continued the galley's course down the river. Then it slowed and drifted sidewise, and flames licked over it. Struggling figures stirred the water momentarily and sank. Not a swimmer was left; bronze armor does not float on muddy Missouri River water.

Above the second galley they were met by a flight of arrows, and the lieutenant hurriedly performed some dizzy gyrations with the plane to get out of bowshot, but not before several barbed shafts struck through the wings and thumped against the bottom. So they lit their fuse and passed low over the galley at full speed. There was less regret and more thrill as they rolled the keg with its sputtering tail over the side; the humming arrows made the game less one-sided. The high speed of the plane spoiled the aim, and the keg of dynamite plumped harmlessly into the water just ahead of the galley. The second time they figured a little more closely, and before very long, all four of the galleys were a mass of scattered, blackened wreckage.

John leaned back in the seat.

"Terrible way to squander human beings," he said.

The lieutenant's teeth were set.

"You haven't seen anything yet," he said to John." "We've got two more kegs of dynamite and no orders to the contrary. Let's go back to the front lines."

"Front lines!" exclaimed John.

The lieutenant smiled.

"You've studied medicine; I've studied war. It is two and a half hours since we left the meeting. The Roman—or whatever the blank they are—infantry has made ten miles south and west. Our troops from the Fort have easily made thirty or forty in their trucks, and started digging trenches and emplacing guns. That would mean that there must be fighting north and west of here. Isn't that so?"

"I hadn't thought of it," John admitted.

"Also by this time there must be two or three regiments of State militia on trucks and bound in this direction; and the artillery and machine-guns from Ashland ought to be ready any minute. We've got two more kegs. Are you game?"

As if in answer, a dull boom sounded from the northwest, followed by another; and in five minutes the banging was almost continuous.

John nodded his head. The lieutenant swung the plane around, and it was less than ten minutes before they saw the trenches of the Fort Crook troops spread below them; and from far into the north there poured column upon column of densely formed Roman troops, with the gleam of the afternoon sun upon the metal of their armor and swords. On the eastern end of the line the Roman infantry had reached the trenches and a sickening carnage was taking place. As they advanced steadily toward the trenches, the Roman troops were mowed down by the machine-guns of the Federal soldiers and the Omaha police, in swaths like meadow-grass laid flat by the blade of the scythe. During the period of a few minutes as they looked down they saw thousands of men fall; great heaps of twitching and bloody dead in armor and plumes were piled before the thin line of khaki.

"They don't need us much, but here goes!"

Far back over the enemy's lines, where the troops were massed the densest, they sailed, and dropped their black and smoking blasts and scattered several companies of bewildered soldiers. But others took their places and pressed steadily on.

"If we only had a few fighting planes and some ammunition for them—wouldn't we clean up the place!" gloated the lieutenant. "But there isn't a plane with a machine-gun on it in this division, and not an aerial bomb except some dummies for practice. The War Department isn't ever so very fast, and this certainly came suddenly. However, I'm sure that they must be getting busy sending things over by now. Let's look westward."

The line was flung a dozen miles west of the Missouri River, and gradually was crawling still further west. The artillery from Ashland had stopped ten miles southwest of the place where fighting first began, and by now had set up their pieces and gotten the range with the aid of a commandeered, tri-motored, passenger plane; they were banging shells at the rate of one every three seconds into the thickest of the troops. Even at the height of three thousand feet, the sight was horrible; there were red areas against the green of the landscape, and red areas on the piled up heaps that twitched and gleamed with spots of metal; the heaps piled up and grew into hills, between the gaping holes that the shells dug into the wheatfields.

"Ha! Look!"

The lieutenant pointed near the line at the middle.

"An artillery captain is looking for prisoners."

The barrage of one of the batteries was laying flat a wide area, but preserving a little circle intact in the middle of it. On this island, among a sea of smoky holes, stood a huddled group of Roman soldiers. One by one they fell, for flying fragments of high-explosive shell traveled far, and they did not know enough to fall flat on their faces. Then the barrage stopped and a platoon of men in khaki with rifles crept toward them.

The lieutenant looked like a man on the side-lines of a football game. He flew his plane low and gazed breathlessly at the combat below. For it was an exciting one.

The khaki-clad soldiers wanted prisoners alive. But the Roman soldiers understood nothing of the threat of the gun. Rifles and pistols were leveled, but served in no wise to stop them from making a fierce attack on the Americans with swords

and spears. To save their own lives, the latter had to stop and shoot the Romans down.

All but a half a dozen armored men now lay flat on the ground. These gathered together for a moment's council, adjusted their shields, and balanced their swords and spears. They were preparing a charge.

The lieutenant on the ground obviously had orders to get live prisoners. He also knew his battle psychology well.

He formed his men in line; bayonets flashed out of scabbards and in a moment a serried line of them bristled forward on the ends of the rifles. The khaki-clad line started first. The men on the flanks ran as fast as they could go and dodged through shell-holes. The Romans started slowly toward the thin looking center of the American line.

The aviation lieutenant rose in his seat and dropped the stick of the plane for a moment in his excitement. The plane veered and the fight below was lost to view for a moment. By the time he had swung the plane back, the circle of khaki had almost closed around the Romans. The latter stood back to back, spears straight out in front of them. It must have taken nerve to face that circle of advancing bayonets, outnumbering them six to one. They held, stolid as a rock wall, and John was almost beginning to think that they would fight to the death and kill a few American soldiers. But, just as the ring of bayonets was within a foot of the ends of their spears, they suddenly dropped their weapons on the ground, and held their hands in the age-old gesture, straight above their heads.

The men in khaki pushed them apart with their bayonets, and two to a prisoner, marched them back to the line; others stopping to pick up weapons. For the first time John noted that these men were all giants; even from the altered perspective of the aeroplane it was clear that they were six and a half to seven feet tall, and burly.

"We'll go back and report, then get a rest," the aviation lieutenant said, heading the plane toward the Army field. There he shook hands with John, and arranged to meet in the morning for further work.

After a telephone conversation with Celestine, and a meal, John settled down in his room and turned on the radio. Program material had been crowded off all stations by the news of the war.

"The front lines are now fully equipped with portable searchlights and flares. But the Roman soldiers have quit coming. Apparently there will be no fighting during the night."

There followed a resume of happenings with which John was already familiar, and he shut the instrument off. Just as he was beginning to doze, his telephone rang. It was the pathologist at the Medical School.

"Hello, Hastings," he said. "You have been in on this from the start, and I thought you would be interested in our prisoners."

John hurried over to the hospital, where in one of the wards there was a squad of soldiers with fixed bayonets, and two of the giants on the beds. One had a shoulder wound and one a thigh wound from high-explosive fragments. Both wounds were very slight.

"Mr. Hastings," said the pathologist, presenting him to a man bending over one of the prisoners, "Professor Haven is from Creighton University, and is the head of the Latin Department. He is trying to talk these men."

Professor Haven shook his head.

"These men speak Latin but I don't," he sighed. "I've studied it a lifetime, but I can't *speak* it. And they speak a very impure, corrupted Latin. But, I'm making out, somehow."

He spoke slowly, in ponderous syllables to the prisoner. The man grumbled surlily. In the meantime, the pathologist called John away.

"One of the prisoners died," he said, "and we are doing a post-mortem. Just a slight flesh-wound; no reason under the sun why it shouldn't heal easily. He seemed to have no vitality, no staying power."

The post-mortem failed to make clear what had been the cause of death; the slight bullet wound in the shoulder could not have caused it. No other abnormality was found. They went back to the ward, and found another of the prisoners dead.

"Strange," the pathologist muttered. "They can't resist anything. And there is some odd quality about their tissues, both anatomical and physiological, that I can't put my finger on. But they're different."

"They're certainly stupid," the Latin professor said. "I have succeeded in making myself understood to this man. I asked him, who are they, what they wanted, why they were fighting us, where they come from. He does not know. *'Non scio, non scio, non scio!'* That's all I got out of either one of them, except that they are hungry and would prefer to lie on the floor rather than on the bed. They give me the impression of being feeble-minded."

"Good fighting machines," John remarked.

When he got back to his room, the radio was urging everybody to go to sleep and rest. There were guards detailed for necessary night work, and there was no danger. Freshness and strength would be needed tomorrow. But John was too excited following his strenuous day, and knew that sleep would be impossible. He kept on listening to the news from the radio, which was trying to solve the mystery of these Roman hordes.

"Who are they?" the announcer asked rhetorically. "Where are they from? What do they want?" His questions were asked but not answered. He reported that during the afternoon the entire world had been searched by cable and radio, and nowhere was there any trace of the departure of such vast numbers of men. Italy and Russia were especially suspected; but it was out of the question that such hundreds of thousands could have been transported without leaving some evidence. How had they reached the middle of the North American continent? No railroad knew anything about them; there had been no unusual number of airships observed in any direction. One was tempted to think that they came out of the ground. Someone proposed the idea, based on the popularity of Einstein's recent conceptions, that these men had somehow crossed the time dimension from Julius Caesar's time; a fold in the continuum might readily bring the period of the Roman Senate in contact with the period of radio and automobiles.

A few minutes later the announcer stated that he had received a dozen contemptuous and scornful messages about the idea from scientists and historians. If these troops had come from Caesar's time, their sudden disappearance would certainly have caused enough sensation to be recorded; and no such record existed. If they came from such a period, they must have disappeared from the sight of the people who lived then; otherwise one must assume that they went on existing in their own time as well as the present day. The idea was rent to bits. The announcer went on with rhetorical questions:

How many more men were there? What would happen tomorrow? At least there were comforting reports that in the morning the sky would be crowded with planes bearing tons of high-explosive bombs. It could not last long.

Suddenly John slapped his thigh. He went to the telephone and called up the aviation lieutenant.

"Hello!" he said. "Did I get you out of bed? Well, it looks as though neither one of us is so bright about war."

"Now what?" the lieutenant asked.

"Those last two kegs of dynamite

that you dropped on Caesar's army—"

"Yes?" the lieutenant asked.

"They ought to have been dumped on the buildings on the Indian Reservation, what?"

A faint oath came over the phone.

"Say, Hastings, I feel like resigning my commission and getting a job selling bananas. But, what do you say to correcting the oversight? At once?"

"I'm there. But wait. I'm getting positively brilliant tonight. Why not get the Latin prof to go with us and see what we can find out?"

"If I could slap you on the back by phone, I'd do it. I'm waiting for you with the ship. Hurry."

Professor Haven was delighted at the opportunity; the wizened little fellow seemed oblivious to the dangers of the undertaking. They put rifles in the plane, and two forty-fives apiece in their belts.

The walled enclosure was visible to the plane from a distance, because of a strange reddish glow that came up from it. The glow enabled the lieutenant to note that a long, flat-roofed building offered a far better opportunity for a landing than did the ground, which was systematically spaced with guards: He shut off his motor several miles away, and managed his landing with marvelous skill and silence. Only the landing-wheels, bumping over the rough places on the roof, made any sound. They waited for thirty minutes in silence, and as no further sounds came from the camp, they crept out of the cockpit and stole along the roof.

The guards pacing about below seemed not to have noticed their landing. Ahead of them was a large, square affair like a chimney, with a red glow coming out of it. But, it was not a chimney, for no heat came from it. It might have been a ventilator; in fact as they approached they found that a strong current of air drew *downward* into it. They could lean over the edge and see a large, bright room immediately below them.

It was certainly no crude Roman room. It was a scientific laboratory, crowded with strange and delicate apparatus. Most of it was quite unfamiliar to John in use or nature, despite the fact that he was well posted on modern scientific matters, and could make intelligent guesses about scientific things or equipment even out of his own line. He could make nothing out of the things he saw below.

Just beneath them stood a huge Roman officer; the numerous gold insignia on his chest indicated high rank. He stood in front of a glass jar about four feet high, from which numerous cords led to a table full of intricate apparatus. Inside the jar there was something that looked like a piece of seaweed. It was hard, tough, leathery. In the bright light, it might have been a sort of a branching cactus. But it moved about within its jar. It gestured with one of its branches. It pointed at the Roman soldier, and nodded a large, head-like portion. A rapid rattle of words in a foreign tongue came up to them, and Haven, the Latin professor, craned his neck. John recognized a Latin word here and there, but could make out no meaning. Haven later translated what he had heard. The first words he distinguished were those of the big Roman general.

"We need fifty more legions of men by morning," he said apologetically.

"Why not?" a metallic voice replied. It continued monotonously, with scant intonation. "I'll start them at once and have them ready by daylight." There was a quick gesture of the leathery thing in the jar. Little groups of long, red thorns scattered over it.

The general went on.

"These people are good fighters. They may conquer us. We haven't a thousand soldiers left."

The metallic voice that replied conveyed no emotion, but the gesture of the cactus-like thing in the jar was eloquent of deprecation.

"To our science they are but a puff of wind," the droning voice said. "I

can destroy them all by pressing a button. Do you think I have studied the earth and its beast-like men for ages in vain? But, I want sport. I've been bored for too many centuries. So, to entertain me you shall have your five hundred companies of soldiers tomorrow morning. Now go. I must be alone."

The general saluted with an arm straight forward and upward, turned about, and walked out of the field of view, muttering something dubiously under his breath. For a long time, all was silent. Then the metallic voice spoke:

"Earth men, I perceive you up on the roof about the ventilator." The leathery thing in the jar stirred and the machinery on the table clicked.

The group on the roof started in alarm, but the wizened little Haven regained his composure first.

"Who and what are you?" he exclaimed.

"You ask as though you had a right to demand," the metallic voice droned. "But it pleases me to inform you, earth-men, that I am a being of the planet Mars. Tired of the monotony of life in our dull world, I decided to emigrate. I came peacefully."

"Peacefully!" exclaimed the lieutenant, but the metallic voice went on as though he had not spoken:

"I harmed no one until your people attacked my walled enclosure and destroyed my defenders. They have suffered. I am sorry. Let me alone, and I shall not molest you. I wish you no harm."

"But!" exclaimed Haven, "you cannot take possession of a hundred acres of land that belongs to other people, and lay waste to thousands more. That is their land. They will fight for it. How can they let you alone?"

"It is better for you not to bother me. The science of Mars is still millions of years ahead of yours—"

There arose a shouting and a clatter among the guards below. Their suspicions had been aroused by sounds on the roof. A trampling of feet toward the building increased in volume. The trio hurried to their plane, swung it about by the tail, and jumping in, took off with a roar, leaving a band of gaping legionnaires below. John eventually found himself in his bed at about three o'clock in the morning, and even then too exhausted to sleep. Questions kept running through his mind.

The creature's claim that it was a Martian, made things more mysterious instead of less so. It was not possible to transport these hundreds of thousands of men from Mars. And the buildings and chariots and horses. It would have taken an enormous tonnage of vessels, whose arrival certainly would have been noticed. And to think that Mars was inhabited by Roman soldiers was a most preposterous and childish notion. And if the Martians were as far advanced in science as they claimed, why did they use the military methods of ancient Rome? Certainly there was still plenty about this that had not been explained.

John slept late and awoke exhausted by his previous day's unwonted stress. But the thundering of guns would let him sleep no longer. The radio told him that fighting was going on up around Sioux City and westward toward Fremont and Norfolk. Always the reports carried the same statements of the incredible slaughter of innumerable Roman soldiers by the modern engines of war against which their swords and shields meant nothing. It was an unbelievable nightmare, creepy, horrible destruction of life and a soaking of the earth with blood, and piling up of mounds of dead bodies scores of feet high on the green and peaceful prairies. The reports ended up with an optimistic note that aeroplanes with high-explosive bombs were due to arrive from the East at any moment.

Then his telephone rang. It was his dean calling him to a conference with the Commanding Officer of the area. The smiling aviation lieutenant was also present. They were discuss-

ing the advisability of destroying the Martian in his building, and thus stamping out the rest of the trouble.

"It might not necessarily stop all trouble, you know," the medical dean said; "those curious men are still loose in large numbers. I think that the creature, instead of being destroyed, ought to be captured and studied."

The dean's view finally prevailed, and it was decided to avoid destroying the spot on which the Martian stood. The adjutant was already busy directing. Army and Navy planes were now arriving in swarms from East and West. Arrangements were made to bomb all around the Martian's retreat, and then raid it with a small party when everything was clear.

Grimly, methodically, the Army and Navy fliers went about their tasks. They systematically covered the entire contested territory with high-explosive bombs. In three hours, a Nebraska county was a field plowed by a giant, in which persisted one little island, the long house in the walled enclosure, with its red-glowing chimney. Airplanes landed a platoon of the National Guard on the river, and these marched to the surviving building and searched it thoroughly. With them was John and his friend the aviation lieutenant; and also the dean and the Latin professor. They found nothing anywhere, except in the room below the ventilator, where the Martian was still sealed in his glass jar.

"Earth men!" the metallic voice said suddenly, and the leathery body jerked in surprise. *"Homines terrae!"*

Professor Haven spoke in Latin. He was imbued with the educated person's ideal of courtesy in the victor.

"We regret to inform you that we have destroyed all of your men—"

"I have been watching you," the metallic voice said. Its tones conveyed no feeling, but the attitude of the branched body was weary. "I am surprised I must have missed something."

"Eh? What's that?"

"I must have missed something in my observations. After all, your fighting machines are very simple. I could have destroyed them in a breath, only, I did not know you had such things. I cannot understand why I did not find them before."

The men stood in silence, looking at the dry, hard looking thing, not knowing what to say. Finally the metallic speaking began again. John noted that the voice came from a metal diaphragm among the apparatus on the table, to which the cords led from the creature in the jar.

"I cannot understand it. When I planned to migrate to the Earth, I came here and remained many years, studying many men, their bodies, their language, their methods of fighting —fighting was something new to me, and I enjoyed it; we do not have fighting on Mars. I took all necessary observations so that I might prepare to live among them.

"Then I went back home and spent sufficient time in research to make everything perfect. Of course it took a long time. I devised a suit in which I could stand in your atmospheric pressure, heat, and moisture; methods of transporting the nuclei of my apparatus to the Earth and growing them into proper bulk when I arrived, so that I might carry only very little with me. I was especially interested in devising methods of growing human beings on suitable culture media. I developed men who were just a little larger and a little stronger than yours; yet not too much so, because I wanted to see good sport, though remaining sure of winning you over in the end—"

"Cultured these men!" Professor Haven exclaimed. He lagged a little in using his Latin words. "You mean you grow them like we grow bacteria in test-tubes?" He got his meaning across by many words and much effort.

"I grew these soldiers on culture media," the metallic voice answered,

and a shriveled arm gestured in a circle. "With a forced supply of air for carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen, and water for hydrogen, I can grow a man in a few hours; or as many men at once as I have culture medium and containers for. They grow by simultaneous fission of all somatic cells."

"So they are not really human?" Haven seemed much relieved at the idea that the destruction might not have been that of human life.

"That depends on what you mean by human," the dried-up Martian said, by means of his machine. "To me, it means nothing."

"That accounts for the queer differences our pathologist found," the dean observed when the fact had been translated to him that these hordes of men were cultured in a laboratory.

"Now that you have me in your power," the Martian continued, "please explain to me how you kept all your destructive engines hidden when I was here on my preparatory observation trip."

The dean of the Medical School touched Haven on the shoulder.

"Ask him how long ago he was here."

"It took me," the machine said, "just about a thousand years (our year is twice as long as yours) to work out my methods of transportation, maintenance, and culture, and to make a voice instrument with which to talk to these culture-soldiers."

The dean turned toward the Commanding Officer.

"Two thousand years ago," he said. "The Romans were just about at the height of their military glory. Explain that to him, and how the world and its people have changed since."

The queer, seaweed-like creature nodded in comprehension and settled itself down in its jar in resignation.

"That is the point I overlooked. For millions of years, the Martians, at the zenith of scientific knowledge, have remained stable. The idea of human change, of progress in civilization, had slipped my mind. Our race has forgotten it. Your race progressed, and left me behind."

A little discussion arose among them. All agreed that it would be most interesting and valuable to preserve the Martian carefully in some museum. A great deal of useful information could be obtained from him. Many benefits would accrue to humanity from his knowledge.

"Only," reminded the Commanding Officer, "how much power does he still have left for doing harm?"

The dean was interested, and bent close to the jar to have a better look. He put his hand on the glass.

There was a quick rush and a crash of furniture. The big Roman general leaped up from beneath a couch, where he had been concealed. With sword upraised he dashed at the dean.

"Look out!" shouted John.

The Roman general gave a hoarse cry. Fortunately it took a goodly number of seconds for him to cross the room. The Commanding Officer was tugging at his pistol holder. His automatic came out fairly quickly and banged twice. The Roman came rushing on almost to within a foot of the muzzle.

Then his sword dropped with a clatter on the floor, his helment rolling several feet away. The case tipped. It toppled. It looked almost as though it would go over.

Then it settled back; but a crackling sound came from it. A crack appeared in the glass, and wound spirally around it. There was a sizzle of air going into the jar. Machinery clicked and sparks crackled.

The creature inside jerked convulsively, and then was still. In a few minutes it began to bloat, and a red mold spread rapidly over it.

"Eyoaoc Eiioie!" cried Rog Tanlu, "He's come through. He has followed me!"

TICKETS TO PARADISE

The ice stone was a time warp, a pathway through 500,000 years!

by D. L. JAMES

IT all started at Bandar Shahpur. You see, I'm a railroad construction man. Our job was finished, and the whole outfit was waiting at Bandar Shahpur, which is on the inlet Khor Musa of the Persian Gulf, for a boat to take us back to America.

And there, out of nowhere, this Dr. Champ Chadwick showed up. He seemed to be starving for a little good old U. S. A. palaver, and I guess that's why we struck up an acquaintance.

"I've been doing a little digging over in Iraq," he said offhand. "But

things quieted down there. So now I'm bound for the desert and mountains to the north of here. This railroad has opened things up. It's difficult to get an expedition financed, you know, and transportation is sometimes the chief item."

I began to catch on that he was one of those guys who dig up ruins and things, and read a country's whole past from what they find. Then he went on to tell that he'd been sent out by a university in Pennsylvania, but that this present trip was just a sudden idea of his own.

And as he talked I began to like Dr. Chadwick. He was a serious-faced, rawboned little guy—not half my size—with steady eyes, a firm chin, and black hair plastered down slick on his head. By and by he got around to mention that he was looking for a strong-backed man to take along with him.

"I intend to strike out from Qum, the holy city," he said. "I'll try to get hold of a motor-truck there—and one of these desert men to drive it. They're rotten drivers though," he added, "and next to a dead loss on a trip like this." Then he sighed. "But I'm getting used to 'em."

"What do you expect to find up there?" I asked.

"The usual thing," he answered, as if that ought to explain everything. "This country is full of ruins. It's so old, in fact, that sometimes I think that everything that can happen has already happened here, at one time or another. Take Qum, for instance. A few years back there were twenty thousand ruined and deserted buildings still standing. These walled towns are like coral islands, surrounded and upheld by the dust and decay of their own past. But I'm looking for something farther back—much farther back."

He paused, then suddenly his eyes brightened. "There's one thing, though. I may have a try at finding the Ice Stone."

"The Ice Stone?" I echoed. "And what's that?"

"Perhaps just a legend. It isn't likely you would ever have heard of it. It's supposed to be a black stone, a huge, square block, set in the side of a mountain. If a man touches it, his hand sinks in, and he can get loose only by amputating. The queer part is, there seems to be some basis for the legend. All down through Iran's history there are disconnected references. The thing keeps cropping up. Vague reports from wandering tribes, with one or more cripples, minus an arm or leg, to verify the yarn. So, I may take a shot at locating the Ice Stone."

Queer stories like that are quite common in Iran. Ordinarily I'd have laughed and forgotten it. But as I say, I'd taken a sort of liking to this serious-faced little Dr. Champ Chadwick. And when you like a man you're bound to think twice before discrediting what he believes in.

"So you'll be taking a ride over this crazy railroad," I remarked thoughtfully, somewhat later.

He nodded. "What makes you call it crazy?"

Well, I told him. Of course he already knew quite a lot about Iran's new railroad—the many-million dollar toy of the "Brother of the Moon and Stars," as the fancy-tongued Iranians like to call their shah. This road writhes and twists and climbs through eight hundred miles of queer, mountainous country—a country of mud and rocks and salt-swamps—and carefully avoids all the important towns. You see, the "King of Kings" —another pet name for Shah Pahlavi —is afraid some of his neighbors might get control of the road and use it against him. These same neighbors sneeringly refer to it as the road that leads from "nowhere to nowhere."

Perhaps they aren't far wrong. But this road was the reason for my meeting up with Dr. Champ Chadwick.

The last spike, a gold one, had just been hammered into its tie by the

"Most Lofty of Living Men" himself. That put our outfit out of a job temporarily. You see, I'd been working for McKardin-Malroy, an American contracting company, to whom the Shah had let out part of the constructional works on his railroad.

So, in the end, I of course took the job this Chadwick had sort of dangled under my nose. The pay wasn't anything worth mentioning; but, as I found out later, he himself was supplying the cash for this trip out of his own pocket. He didn't have much, and so expenses had to be cut to the limit.

Things moved fast after that. I'd always had an idea that such trips were planned carefully, months in advance, detail by detail. But this Doc Champ, as I got to calling him, didn't seem to plan anything——he just acted.

The next day Doc and I rode back over that crazy railroad I'd helped build——a road that winds through a maze of tunnels, one a grotesque spiral affair, over high bridges and gorge viaducts. We passed through Dizful, famed city of rats; Sultanabad, city of rugs; and on to the holy city of Qum.

Two days later, with Doc's whole scant outfit stored in the truck he'd managed to purchase, we were grinding out through squalid towns of ancient, one-story huts toward the salt swamp of Kavir and the lonely stretch of mountains to the north.

"Notice the way the dew lies there on the grass?" he said to me one morning, just as the sun was rising and we were breaking camp. "We slept right over the foundation walls of what was once part of an ancient city."

I squinted at where he was pointing, and, sure enough, I could see the grass was all marked out in big squares—showing up only in the way the dew sparkled, or didn't sparkle, in the slanting sunlight.

"Difference in heat and moisture conductivity," explained Doc. "Those walls are probably only a little way beneath the surface."

"You want to dig here?" I asked him.

He shook his head. Since that time when he told me about the Ice Stone, he'd never mentioned it again. But I had noticed him squinting at all the mountains we passed, and sometimes I'd see a queer expression on his face, like a man who catches himself doing something that hasn't got good sense back of it.

In fact, by the end of the week, I had about decided that he didn't have any better idea as to why we'd come out here than I did.

I think it was on the seventh day that we came upon a queer-looking country—isolated masses of rock, like big blocks, sticking up out of the ground. Beyond these was a range of low mountains, or big hills, whichever way you look at it.

"We'll camp here for a day," said Doc. "How's the water?"

"About gone," I told him.

"Good," he nodded. "We'll run the truck up to the foot of those big hills and find some."

I headed that old bus for a sort of fold in the hills ahead, and when the ground began to get pretty rough we stopped and went on afoot, each carrying a couple of empty water buckets. It wasn't long before we found a shallow stream.

"There may be a spring farther up," said Doc.

He started splashing along the creek bed, for it was bordered by dense thickets of "jangal"—birch and box—through which you could scarcely squeeze.

I followed him. Pretty soon I smelled smoke.

"Hey, Doc!" I called, "something's burning."

He stopped and turned around. There was a queer look in his eyes, almost like he wasn't all there—dopey.

"Yes," he said, not seeming surprised at all. Then he pointed ahead.

"Smoke—I saw it some time back."

He started on again. The whole thing wasn't natural. For almost a week we had seen no living human being. And now, smoke—a wood fire, as I could tell by the scent—seemed to mean that we were getting near where someone lived. And yet, Doc hadn't thought it worth mentioning!

Well, I followed him on for a hundred yards. Then we turned a bend in the creek. The jangal opened up, and there, under the spread of a huge plane-tree, was the fire.

It was a small fire. Over it, roasting to a turn, were three dangling fowls; and near by stood a strange human figure—a man.

He beckoned to us. And as we approached he stood with folded arms, facing us.

"I am Rog Tanlu," he said in stiff but absolutely correct English. "I called you, and you came."

Doc Champ, ahead of me, straightened with a start. It was almost as though he had just realized the queerness of all this.

"Good Lord!" I heard him gasp softly.

Then we both stood there, staring at that chap who called himself Rog Tanlu. He was dressed in a glove-fitting garment that appeared to be made of fawn-colored silk—which was odd enough. But the man himself looked still stranger. He was no Iranian—no Kurd, Kashgais nor Bakhtiaris. I could have sworn to that.

He was very light skinned—lighter than any Persian—with a kind of pallor, although not an unhealthy look, as though he'd spent all his life indoors.

"Do not be alarmed," he said, smiling at us, and with a friendly look in his light blue eyes. "I can well understand your surprise at finding me here. But I shall explain everything. Meanwhile, I have prepared food, thinking you might be hungry. Will you join me?"

He started dishing out those broiled fowls—black partridges, or "durraj," I judged them to be—with the air of a man enjoying his first outdoor picnic and getting a big kick out of it.

"Here, Dr. Chadwick," he said, handing Doc one of those birds on a big leaf for a dish. "And here's one for you, Mr. Lavin."

Well, I took that broiled fowl and looked for a place to sit down. You see my name is Lavin, Curt Lavin, but how he'd found it out was a puzzler. I looked at Doc Champ. He was starring at this Rog Tanlu as if seeing a ghost, or a man from Mars.

That kind of knocked me out. I put a lot of dependence on Doc's knowledge of human tribes and such. But evidently he couldn't tag on our host any more than I could.

I started to sit down on a flat rock near the fire. And then I saw something standing on that rock—a thing like a tubular flashlight, eight inches tall, with a globe of silvered glass at the upper end.

"You are wondering at the way I speak your language," I heard this Rog Tanlu saying to Doc Champ. "I have been learning it during the last few days, but as yet am very lacking in fluency."

"You—you've been learning English?" Doc Champ kind of gulped.

Rog Tanlu waved the bird-leg he was nibbling on.

"With the audio-visiscope," he explained.

He reached over and did something to that flashlight thing on the rock near me. Right away it started talking—like a radio. But I knew it wasn't a radio. The speaker was someone cussing the King of Kings' order forbidding veils for Iranian women. And then I saw that what I had thought was a reflection in that silvered globe was moving. It wasn't a reflection; it was a robed, turbaned mullah, and he went on telling someone how unjust it was for a mullah to have to carry a license.

"Television," I heard Doc Champ mutter.

I'll say it was, with a bang! And yet, not just that either. For you may depend on it that no station was sending out such stuff.

Rog Tanlu shut the thing off, and the silver of that globe became dead black. I started eating. There was nothing but coarse salt to go along with the bird—the kind you can scrape off rocks near those mud-salt swamps—but the meat tasted okay. The others sat down and we finished the three birds in no time.

"How'd you bag 'em?" I asked Rog Tanlu, for I hadn't seen anything of a gun, and black pheasants aren't easy to knock over with a stone.

Rog Tanlu smiled and wiped his hands on that knit-silk outfit he was wearing. All the time during that meal he'd been smiling, squinting up at the sky and breathing deep—for all the world as though he'd never been on an outdoor party before.

"With this," he said, in answer to my question, picking up something from the rock near where he was sitting—something that looked like a black fountain-pen—for there didn't seem to be any pockets in his clothing. Again he squinted up at the sky.

Just then a buzzard came flying along slowlike, pretty high over our heads. Rog Tanlu pointed that pen affair up at the bird. A thin little ray of light flashed up—another and another. They wavered around for a second, getting centered. And suddenly that buzzard started tumbling out of the sky and crashed into the bushes near us.

Doc Champ and I looked dumbly at each other. And then we stared at Rog Tanlu. Grinning like a magician who has just pulled a fancy trick, he held that ray-gun out for us to look at.

"What did you mean when you said you had called us?" asked Doc Champ, in that quiet way of his.

"I had to get in communication with someone in this Age—someone who could understand," said Rog Tanlu. "I chose you" (he was, of course, speaking to Doc champ) "because of your training and comprehension of the Past. So I called you with the psycho-coil on the audio-visiscope, by which means mental suggestions may be conveyed."

Doc Champ swallowed hard. "What country are you from?"

"Iralnard," said Rog Tanlu. "A nation which does not exist on earth today, but which was contemporary with the beginning of the last Ice Age. At that time my people occupied this very land. I am, as you might say, a refugee from the Ice Age—the first to come through. But I believe that others will follow. A number of my people. This possible migration cannot help but result in discord with the present holders of the land, unless some friendly agreement can be established. So I called you."

By this time I was up to my ears. I grabbed Doc Champ's arm.

"Doc," I groaned, "are we awake? Is this guy joking? Or what's the answer?"

Doc pushed me away.

"I shall make everything clear," said Rog Tanlu.

"Let's get this straight," insisted Doc Champ. "You say you are a refugee from the Ice Age? But that was some five hundred thousand years ago. And you are in possession of at least two instruments of advanced science. It doesn't match up."

"It is quite necessary that you believe me." Rog Tanlu wasn't smiling now, but was speaking very seriously. "Perhaps you realize that it is a trait of the human mind to look upon the Past as uncultured. Such an attitude is greatly in error."

"You traveled here through Time?" asked Doc.

"Not exactly," said Rog Tanlu. "Time, as you know, is merely the illusion experienced by creatures endowed with memory living in a universe of random energy distribution. Time is movement, the rearrangement of matter—dependent upon the degree of entropy. I found it impos-

sible to travel in Time. That's why I constructed the Ice Stone."

"The Ice Stone!" There was a kind of awe in Doc's voice. "*You* built the Ice Stone?"

Rog Tanlu nodded. "Of course I didn't call it that. But I happened to overhear a conversation between you two, with the audio-visiscope, some days ago, and thereby learned the name you have for it. A very appropriate name! I also learned that neither of you had ever seen it. So now, if you will accompany me, I will take you to my laboratory—or rather to what still remains of my laboratory—and show you the Ice Stone. That' should simplify things, and may help us to solve the problem of this impending migration—a problem which was forced on me due to certain interference, as I will later explain."

He picked up that flashlight thing and started off up the creek bank.

Doc Champ shot a glance at me as he wiped beads of perspiration from his face with his old felt hat. The shiny black locks plastered down on his head glinted as he stepped into the sunshine.

"Come along," he said to me. "We'll see this through."

We followed Rog Tanlu. Presently he turned off the bank of the creek, and the path he chose got rocky and wild as hell. I began to understand why it was that so few people had ever run across the Ice Stone by accident.

"Doc," I whispered, "what do you make of this guy? Did you ever hear such a crazy yarn?"

"You forget," muttered Doc, "that we saw some things, too."

I knew what he meant. You couldn't get around that buzzard tumbling out of the sky, nor the mullah's image and voice in that silver globe.

Rog Tanlu was walking a few yards ahead of us. Suddenly I saw a queer-looking object hanging in one of those scraggly trees that were having a hard time trying to grow there among the rocks. It looked like a heavy blanket or garment, the same fawn-color as Rog Tanlu's outfit.

He stopped just opposite the tree where the thing was hanging from a low branch.

"After emerging from the Ice Stone," he explained, "I had to discard my outer clothing. The sudden climatic change was almost shocking." Then he pointed upward and to the left along a broad ledge that seemed to zigzag down the rough face of a cliff, a hundred yards away.

I guess Doc Champ had already caught sight of the Ice Stone. But I hadn't; and now with my first glimpse of it, the thing did look exactly like ice. It was like a huge, square block, set flush with the face of the cliff, and with that ledge forming a pathway up to it.

"Queer," I heard Doc Champ muttering. "All the legends pertaining to the Ice Stone mention its black appearance. That stone doesn't look black—it looks transparent."

"Its color has recently changed," explained Rog Tanlu. "It isn't a stone, or any material substance. It is a peculiar kind of space—space with the third dimension, thickness in this instance, so twisted and curved as to allow the fourth dimension to emerge from nothingness into a certain hypostatic realness. Light has needed a long time to penetrate through it, and for that reason the cube has only recently assumed an apparent transparency. Now, if you will follow me, I will lead you to my laboratory."

He continued on around a shoulder of the cliff, so that we lost sight of the Ice Stone. Gigantic boulders all but blocked the way. However, our strange guide seemed to know where he was going and how to get there.

"All these rocks didn't used to be here," he said musingly. "They are evidently glacier débris carried down since—well, since my time. Ah! Here we are."

He wormed his way through a narrow crevice. Doc and I followed. We

soon entered what at one time in the past must have been the wide mouth of an underground cavern.

For a moment we stood there, breathing the cold, moist air and staring into the darkness.

Suddenly a light flashed. I saw that Rog Tanlu was using that fountain-pen thing like a flashlight, but now it was sending out a blue-white radiance instead of those thin, death-dealing flashes.

"This was my laboratory," he said, holding the light at arm's length above his head. "There were big sliding doors that closed the place up tight and kept out the ice and the cold. I had some rather unique scientific apparatus here, but now it's all mouldering dust."

His voice sounded flat, there with the weight of rocks around us, and sad somehow.

The floor of the cavern slanted stiffly upward. As we advanced, the air around us kept getting colder and colder. It was like a gale from the poles blowing in our faces.

"We'll soon be directly behind the Ice Stone," said Rog Tanlu.

A light began to appear ahead. I could see more of that cavern—even the rock-ribbed ceiling high overhead. I can't express just what I was thinking at that moment, but I saw Doc Champ kick at a mound of something underfoot. The mound crumbled; Doc stooped and picked up a round object, like a disk of rusted metal, and looked at it with a kind of stark wonder. Then he threw it away and we followed Rog Tanlu.

The light grew brighter, became a huge square of blustery, blue-white chaos. We were standing as if just within the maws of a Gargantuan doorway—an open doorway through which we could look out over a scene of inexpressible dreariness.

You've seen pictures of the Antarctic? Titanic masses and pinnacles of ice, frozen white barrens, a land without feeling or soul? It was like that.

"We are looking through the Ice Stone." Rog Tanlu's voice was all but snatched away by that glacial blast swishing in our faces. "I set it up like a door—a door leading from my laboratory to the outside. The light you see, and the wind, has taken half a million years to get through."

Doc Champ was tugging at the collar of his coat, and my own teeth were chattering. Rog Tanlu motioned us to one side, out of that freezing blast.

"You see what we were up against?" he smiled. "Our space explorations had killed the hope that some other planet in the system might offer a suitable refuge where humans could live under anything like natural conditions.

"Moreover, there were social troubles. Politicians, philosophers and sociologists all combined to control science. A scientist had to get a special permit before he could conduct any new line of inquiry.

"So I built this laboratory—ten miles from the vitro-domed city of Iralnard—partly to escape governmental interference and partly to keep from being spied upon by Darlu Marc, another experimentalist and personal enemy of mine. I worked here alone, except for one laboratory assistant—Eyoaoc Eiioiei, as I called him. And here we created the Ice Stone.

"As I have already explained, it is no material thing—merely a cube of specialized s p a c e, foreshortened, warped and curved to attain a specific result. Its action is very simple. It slows up a beam of light exactly as does a lens, but to an incomparably greater degree. And being composed of nothing tangible, it acts on any moving thing—particle, atom or electron—exactly as it does on light photons.

"Thus a man can walk through the Ice Stone without sensing any change. Yet every function of his being is retarded, including mental processes. And when he emerges from the other side, approximately half a million

years have elapsed. But once having touched it, say with his hand, he must not try to withdraw, for his hand will then be within a separate and distinct macrocosm, uninfluenced by anything outside, and he must follow on through.

"My intentions were, of course, to provide an avenue of escape from the Ice Age we were entering, for I knew it wouldn't last indefinitely. But I needed some sort of proof as to what conditions would be like in half a million years before I could offer the Ice Stone as a possible refuge. With Eyoaoc Eiioiei's help I managed to obtain several chemically depicted approximations of the nearby landscape as it would bet likely to appear after the Ice Age.

"These were very beautiful—or thus they seem to me—for you must remember that in my time no one had ever seen trees or grass or flowers growing naturally in the open.

"We had just completed all this when, as we were working one day here in the laboratory, my assistant sensed a snooper-ray on us. I myself am not sensitive to an audio-visiscope emanation—sometimes called the 'snooper-ray'—but Eyoaoc Eiioiei sensed it, and he warned me.

"However, the warning came too late. Darlu Marc, my enemy, was the spy. Within a few hours I was thrown in prison. Eyoaoc Eiioiei escaped. He was almost immune to the outside cold.

"Darlu Marc had inveigled himself in with certain politicians and, as a reward for reporting my misconduct, he received charge of my laboratory. But I knew that the Ice Stone was safe, being practically indestructible.

"Shortly thereafter, word came to me in prison that a company had been formed under Marc—a company that was selling tickets to the poorer class of Iralnard City, entitling the holder to emigrate through the Ice Stone. Their slogan was 'Tickets to Paradise.'

"Naturally, this injustice made me desperate. I swore that I'd be the first to pass through. In the meantime Eyoaoc Eiiciei had managed to enter Iralnard City, disguised. He was very attached to me. He helped me escape, helped me reach the laboratory. However, at the last moment, we became separated. To avoid recapture I was forced to pass through the Ice Stone alone.

"Now, my friends, you know why I am here."

Doc was beating his arms to keep from freezing.

"If I understand you," he puffed, "that thing"—pointing toward the Ice Stone—"affords a short-cut into the future, by a kind of suspended animation. And once there, you can't go back."

"Quite correct." Rog Tanlu seemed pleased. "If I were to pass through it again, in either direction, I would not return to the Ice Age but would take another jump into the future."

It sounded simple, as he told it, even to me, and Doc nodded.

"What seems queer," he observed, "is about this cold and wind. I understand it's blowing from the outside cliff into the Ice Stone—from way back in the Ice Age—and is only now emerging here. In that case the cube must have swallowed a tremendous amount of air—and energy!"

"You grasp the idea," said Rog Tanlu, with quiet satisfaction. "But you must not judge the capacity of the Ice Stone by its external dimensions. They are quite deceptive. I assure you that its ramifications in the fourth dimension would enable it to absorb a total of all telluric energies, and still have room to spare. . . . Come, my friends, I had not realized that you were suffering from the cold! Let us return to the balmy open. I find your climate—inexpressible!"

Well, I wasn't sorry to hear this proposal. And judging by the way Doc Champ was frostily puffing and rubbing his ears, I guess he wasn't, either.

We soon got down to where the

wind didn't hit so strong, and Doc started asking questions.

When would the refugees start coming? Would Darlu Marc—Rog Tanlu's enemy—be among the first?

"He may never come," said Rog Tanlu bitterly. "His purpose is to bleed the people, sell them passage to this paradise. That would enable him to live in comparative security and comfort back in Iralnard City for the remainder of his lifetime."

I could see by the way he spoke that those half-million years separating him from this guy Marc were pretty galling on Rog Tanlu.

We were moving slowly down toward that all-but-closed entrance, and now and then he would flash his light to show the way.

"Here's a strange thought," said Doc Champ suddenly, as he stumbled along at my elbow. "Why can't we go up on that ledge and look through the Ice Stone from that direction? We ought to be able to see right into your laboratory, as it was a short time after you left, and find out what's going on."

Rog Tanlu chuckled. "Of course," he agreed eagerly. "That's right where we're bound now. I've been hanging around there for nine days—watching. But so far——"

A funny sound cut in on him—a sound coming from somewhere ahead. It was like a voice—a metallic voice—thin and clear.

"*Rog Tanlu . . . Rog Tanlu . . . Rog Tan-lu . . .*"

Then I saw something move, there in the shadows, and goose-pimples sprang out on me. For as the light glinted on that thing, I saw it wasn't human.

"Eyoaoc Eiioiei!" cried Rog Tanlu. "He's come through—he has followed me!"

Did you ever see a dog frisk around someone he likes, someone he's been separated from for a long time? Then picture the dog as no dog at all, but a madhouse thing prancing on two jointed-metal legs, as thick as stovepipes, its eyes glinting ruby-red when they catch the light——

But the part that made cold shivers run up my back was the thing's head—a round globe from which those ruby eyes sparkled. That head wasn't attached in any visible manner to its short, squat body, but seemed to float, six inches above its shoulders, as if poised there by some magnetic force.

All the while the thing was capering around Rog Tanlu, it was jabbering at him in some outlandish tongue, and he was jabbering back at it.

Doc Champ and I stood there staring.

But by and by I heard Doc's voice.

"A robot," he said, speaking softly and in kind of an awed tone. "So his laboratory assistant is a robot."

"No wonder it was immune to the cold," I gulped, swallowing hard.

Presently Rog Tanlu swung around toward us and commenced to talk so we could understand.

"Serious news," he bit out. "Darlu Marc has delayed the emigration. But he is sending a party of his vassals to wipe me out. He thinks I possess means to destroy the Ice Stone—thinks I'd do it out of sheer spite. He's wrong of course, in both instances. But the idea is hindering the sale of tickets. Eyoaoc Eiioiei learned of Marc's intentions. He managed at last to reach the Ice Stone, and bring me warning. He emerged on the cliff side while we were in here. But an armed band of Marc's vassals are right on his heels!"

I couldn't tear my gaze from that thing he called Eyoaoc Eiioiei. It had stopped frisking around him and was now blinking its ruby-red eyes at Doc Champ and me; and, I swear, I believe that damned thing was just as amazed and curious as I was.

"Do you mean," asked Doc, "that these killers are outside now?"

"I do not know," answered Rog Tanlu. "If so, they will soon find the entrance to my laboratory, since they are familiar with the terrain."

"Then we better sneak out of here,"

I suggested, not liking the idea of being bottled up, there in that hole.

"My friends," said Rog Tanlu, "I regret having drawn you into this. Leave now; you may be able to escape undetected. But I shall await them here, in this cavern which is very familiar to me."

Doc Champ shook his head. I knew he wouldn't fall in with that plan.

"We're both armed," he told Rog Tanlu, slapping the automatic that sagged in his pocket. "We'll hang around awhile."

I guess I like this quality in Doc. Maybe it was partly the reason why I took to him.

Well, I backed up the little guy . . . but I thought he was wrong. That fight—if there was going to be a fight—wasn't ours. And I couldn't just see men with pistols getting very far against those fountain-pen affairs, like Rog Tanlu had. And then, there was that Eyoaoc Eiioiei. . . . The whole thing was a little beyond my depths. I thought Doc was wrong to mix up in something we didn't know a cussed thing about—and I still think so!

Rog Tanlu had switched off his light. We stood there in the dark listening. But we didn't hear a sound.

I groped around and touched Doc's arm.

"Doc," I whispered, "let's slip down to the entrance and find out what's going on."

Although my words shouldn't have carried six feet, that robot thing must have heard me—and, stranger still, must have understood.

For immediately I heard a subdued, metallic jabbering, then Rog Tanlu's voice speaking urgently to Doc and me.

"That would be very unwise. Eyoaoc Eiioiei suggests that it would be better for us three to withdraw farther from the entrance. He will remain here and act as guard. Moreover, I can easily learn, with the audio-visiscope, what is taking place outside—just as soon as I have a moment of leisure. Come, my friends.

Well, we faced around and started back. And I could hear that nightmare thing he called Eyoaoc Eiioiei moving on down toward the rock-choked entrance—its steps surprisingly soundless, considering its clumsy appearance.

However, the entire arrangement didn't seem right to me, especially letting that thing plan our line of action as if it was one of us and, well, alive.

But that robot-thing could certainly think, and fight, as I was shortly to learn!

Doc Champ and I groped along after Rog Tanlu. He seemed to know right where he was going, and after a hundred feet or so he stopped.

It was not quite dark here—just enough light for us to see, in a vague sort of fashion, that he was bending over a low, flat block of stone, a stone suggesting that it had once served as the foundation for some huge machine. I realized that he was setting up that flashlight contraption with the black bulb at one end.

And suddenly that bulb began to glow softly.

"Now," said Rog Tanlu, "we'll see what's going on."

The three of us bent over the thing. What looked like reflections in it were shifting around and around, and abruptly the steep face of a cliff swung into view. We could see the Ice Stone as it appeared from the outside, and the ledge running up to it.

We saw no one near the Ice Stone. But suddenly, under Rog Tanlu's swift adjustment, the image shifted and enlarged—like a movie close-up—magnifying a certain portion of that ledge.

And there, in a heap like cast-off cocoons, were some half-dozen of those heavy, fawn-colored garments, identical with the one we had seen hanging in the tree.

"So-o-o," Rog Tanlu breathed

tensely, "Eyoaoc Eiioiei was right! They *have* come! They must be—"

A startled shout cut off his words. It was followed by a blinding flash of light. Then hell suddenly broke loose down below us . . .

In that cavern-darkness the blast of light was, in itself, almost stunning; and following it were other blasts of equal intensity. Vision was a torturing thing. It was like those brief but vivid glimpses presented by lightning during a summer storm at night.

But with hurting eyes I managed to discern a group of figures jamming the entrance-way to the cavern, with Eyoaoc Eiioiei's weird shape looming betweeen us and them.

"Down!" shouted Rog Tanlu to Doc and me. "Down, behind the rock!"

In a dim, bewildered way I realized that those flashes of light were from weapons in the hands of invaders—weapons trained on Eyoaoc Eiioiei. But we, also, were directly in line.

Doc Champ didn't seem to hear Rog Tanlu's order. He was staring down at that weird sight—staring at Eyoaoc Eiioiei. And for a moment I, too, ignored the warning. For that grotesque thing was fighting—fighting in a way that was an astonishing sight to witness.

Thin, dazzling, rapierlike beams were flashing up at him and past him. But Eyoaoc Eiioiei was avoiding those hissing shafts with a skill not human—a dancing, cavorting nightmare thing, silhouetted against and enmeshed by those lethal streaks of fire; and I saw that now and then from his metal hand flashed a return blast of radiance. He was standing between his master and his master's assassins, and such wild courage and savagery brought into my throat a choked feeling of admiration.

A hissing white shaft flashed within a foot of my head, bringing me to my senses. I made a grab at Doc Champ, intending to drag him down to safety. Then I realized that he was already lying flat behind that ancient block of rock.

Rog Tanlu was on his knees. He had jerked that fountain-pen affair into action. Again and again I saw its belching bar of whiteness blast down toward the entrance. This man from the Past, despite his thin, pale face and affable manner, was also a fighter!

And strangely, watching him and that wildly cavorting shadow that was Eyoaoc Eiioiei, I forgot all about the automatic in my pocket. For somehow this fantastic meeting of forces seemed remotely withdrawn from the affairs of Doc Champ and myself—although heaven knows we were mixed up in it at that moment close enough!

I do not know for how long that flaming barrage lasted—perhaps only a moment or so, although it seemed longer. But suddenly it was over. Darkness and silence blotted down on us there in the cavern.

"Doc!" I gasped.

He didn't answer. But I heard someone moaning softly.

I groped around in the darkness. Then my hand touched him. He didn't move, and somehow it needed only that touch to tell me the truth.

"Rog Tanlu," I called hoarsely. "Rog Tanlu——!"

"Here," came a voice, followed by a moan.

The temporary blindness caused by those recent blasts of light was leaving my eyes. I began to see dimly.

I crawled over to where Rog Tanlu was lying.

"They accomplished their purpose," he muttered. "I—I'm—"

"Where you hurt?" I asked, my hands running over his shoulder and arm. That glove-fitting silk garment over his right arm and part of his chest felt strangely altered, brittle, charred.

"The healing ray," he muttered. "The orlex ray—only that could help me . . . . and I know that you do not have it."

A sound, the clump of heavy metal feet, caused me suddenly to jerk erect. My eyes tried to pierce the darkness.

A grotesque form was emerging from the gloom—Eyoaoc Eiioiei.

I drew back as that metal thing bent over Rog Tanlu.

There followed a moment of excited voice-sounds, and once or twice Rog Tanlu answered, faintly, words I could not understand.

Suddenly, reaching down, the thing picked him up in its jointed metal arms and started to carry him on up the passageway.

For a moment I stood there, saddened and appalled by this grim turn of fate. Then I began running up the slope after them. But so swiftly did that metal thing stride on before me that the blast of glacial air from the Ice Stone was hissing in my ears before I overtook them.

"Rog Tanlu!" I cried. "Where—?"

"The healing ray," his voice came back to me. "You do not have it . . . my good friend. . . . But somewhere . . . in the Future . . . it will be rediscovered. Eyoaoc Eiioiei will take me . . . on into the Future . . . through the Ice Stone . . . again and again if necessary . . . until we find it—"

His voice ceased. For Eyoaoc Eiioiei had not paused, but had continued on straight into that frigid blast.

I caught a last vague glimpse of that nightmare shape disappearing into the Ice Stone.

THERE is but little more to tell. Those assassins from the Past were all dead, as I discovered when I left the cavern—Rog Tanlu's laboratory.

I buried what was left of little rawboned Doctor Champ in the sand at the foot of that cliff below the Ice Stone.

Then I headed back in the truck for Qum, the Holy City. Three days later the fuel ran out. I do not know what plans Doc had made for replenishing it, but whatever they were he hadn't put me wise. So I left the truck there at the edge of a mud-salt swamp and went on afoot.

Two weeks later, more dead than alive, I arrived at Qum and tried to give warning.

It may seem queer, but until that moment I had not worried over the chance of my word being doubted. Moreover, the one substantiating exhibit I had thought to bring along—that fawn-colored silk garment of Rog Tanlu's—I had been forced to abandon along with the truck.

I soon realized that if I persisted in trying to tell the truth, one of two things would happen: I would either be locked up as a nut, or, if I managed to convince certain Iranian officials, then the "Most Lofty of Living Men" —the Shah—might possibly send a few airplanes out there to bomb the Ice Stone "out of existence," as they lightly and humorously suggested.

I doubt that this could be done. If the Ice Stone were dislodged from its setting, there in the mountain-cliff where it was installed by its maker—Rog Tanlu—who knows what world-catastrophe might not result?

So at last I gave up.

At Bandar Shahpur I caught a boat for home.

But I am now dickering with a certain Pennsylvania university. They are interested in the disappearance of Dr. Champ Chadwick, and I've offered to act as guide if they will send a party of scientists out to investigate the Ice Stone. Perhaps something may come of it—before it is too late.

But then I get to thinking of how Eyoaoc Eiioiei is carrying his wounded master on and on into the Future in search of a "healing ray!"

EQUATION for TIME

by R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

THERE is no one today who has seen a living horse. The creature became extinct a couple of centuries ago, about the year 2,800. Man, who betrayed the horse into what he became, hardly regretted the passing.

However, and I speak with all sincerity, there will be men of the future who will see a horse. Perhaps men of the future may ride horseback like knights and cowboys of the Middle Ages.

The secret of time travel has been discovered. No one has traveled through time as yet, although man has explored the universe for more than twenty light years from the sun. But the day of time travel is not far distant. It had simple beginnings. All great things began in simple ways. Newton and the apple were the begin-

nings of modern understanding of the laws of the physical world; Watts and the teakettle were the origins of industry and the machine age. A very beautiful young woman and an unscrupulous man were responsible for time travel.

I met the man early in the morning of July 2, 3002. I remember the date because on the day before I had visited in Alexandria, Egypt, and I had eaten dinner in Shanghai, China. It was nearly midnight when I reached the rocket port in Chicago and a jam in the pneumatics delayed my arrival home until nearly one o'clock in the morning.

Blake, fully dressed, met me at the door. There was a worried look in his eyes.

"There is a gentleman to see you, sir," Blake said. "I explained that you would not return until quite late and I tried to get him to leave, but he said it was urgent that he see you the minute you returned." Blake glanced over his shoulder toward the library and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I was a little frightened of him, sir. He doesn't seem quite—ah—quite right, sir, if you know what I mean. Shall I call the police?"

"No, Blake." I felt confident of licking my weight in madmen and I entered the library.

A tall, distinguished, dark haired gentleman rose to greet me.

"Ah! Dr. Huckins! I was afraid you would not get here in time!"

As he spoke I noticed a peculiar light in his eyes. It seemed to be a reflection from the fluorescent lamps of the library, but it showed a little too much of the whites of his eyes and I thought of what Blake had said about the man not being "quite right."

I did not feel that I owed him an apology for keeping him waiting, since I usually received visitors by appointment.

"I am Gustav Keeshwar!" he introduced himself. He seemed to expect some reaction, but unfortunately the name meant nothing to me, although if I had paid more attention to the newspapers I would have known who he was at once.

"I am the president of the Stellar Transport Company," he announced.

As he spoke he glanced secretively about the room, as though he feared an eavesdropper. Then he picked up a brief case which was lying on the table. With no explanation he opened it and pulled out package after package of thousand dollar bills.

"You may count it if you wish," Keeshwar said. "There are 1,000 bills, each of one thousand dollar denomination. One million dollars in cold cash."

There are any number of bank presidents who have never seen a million dollars in one pile. Spread out before me, I could scarcely grasp the amount of wealth it represented. As I recall now, my clearest mental reaction was a curiosity about how he managed to tuck it away so neatly in a brief case. Then I wondered if it was real money. A closer glance at the bills convinced me that it was.

Suddenly I came to my senses. I closed the library door and locked it. I glanced nervously at the shades to make sure all were pulled down.

"Great Scott, man, you shouldn't carry all that money around with you in a brief case!" As I said it, I spoke with the realization that the man was mad.

"I brought the money to you," Keeshwar said. "It is yours if you will do one thing for me."

"I must ask you to leave and to take your money with you," I said, realizing that I was turning down the ransom of a king. "No honest task ever called for a million dollars compensation—"

"But you have not asked me what I wish you to do!" Keeshwar exploded. "Look! Do you see how much money a million dollars is?"

I do not wish to pose as a man overstocked with principles. A million dollars is more money than I ever hope

to see again at one time. But I had a good income, a nice little fortune tucked away in worth while investments. I had a good name and my position in the world was better than average. I did not trust this man. I had a feeling that the million dollars he offered would not be worth the price.

"I am a surgeon," I said. "If you wish my professional services, I will charge you a reasonable fee."

"I want your services," Keeshwar said. "I want them for one day."

"You may have them. I will send you a bill after I complete the task."

"I want your services tomorrow," said Keeshwar, persistently.

I shook my head. "I have a delicate operation scheduled tomorrow. It is an operation I cannot postpone."

"It is an operation on Trella Mayo?"

I started. "How did you know that?"

"It is this operation that I wish you to perform for me," Keeshwar said. "Would it not be simple to let your knife slip, or to allow something to happen to her—for one million dollars!"

I do not remember clearly what happened next. I think I knocked the man down. I do remember stuffing his million dollars into his brief case and throwing it after him out of the door.

When I closed the door I was excited and unnerved. I found some sedative tablets and swallowed one. Then I sat down to think. Trella Mayo, beautiful, young and intelligent, a woman in a billion! Someone wanted to kill her.

She was only twenty-eight, yet her discoveries in physics had astounded the world. She might have taken first place in any beauty contest, yet she preferred working in a laboratory with men too old to notice her charms.

Her operation was not serious, except that it involved delicate skill. I resolved that nothing must happen during that operation the following day.

Two weeks later I visited Trella, now convalescing from her operation.

"I've wanted to talk to you, Fred," she said after I had taken her temperature, felt her pulse and gone through the usual ritual.

"I must warn you that I'll send you a bill for any medical advice I give you," I replied, laughing.

She smiled only a little and then puckered her brow seriously.

"I wanted to ask you about that operation. Wasn't it performed under unusual circumstances?"

I was taken by surprise and I am afraid that the truth forced its indications through my professional manner. "Why do you ask?"

"I noticed Blake standing near the door. There seemed to be a bulge in his pocket. It couldn't have been a gun, could it? And you kept watching, as if you were afraid a tribe of Indians would drop in for a massacre. I wonder if there couldn't have been a tall, dark gentleman mixed up in these unusual precautions?"

I did not reply.

"And I've noticed during my convalescence that the internes that continually hover around my door have a look as if—well, shall I say that they look more like policemen than internes?"

I laughed nervously. "I think you are a mental case, Miss Mayo," I said. "I shall have to call in a specialist."

"You do not need to deny it, Fred," she said. "Why do you suppose I insisted that you perform the operation? Why didn't I let you call in someone else? It was because you are the only man in the world that I trust, Fred. How much did Gustav Keeshwar offer you to do me in?"

Before I could stop myself I opened my mouth and blurted the truth.

"One million dollars!"

"Whew!" Trella whistled softly. "I'm worth a lot to you! I must be getting close if Keeshwar will pay a million to see me out of the way."

"Trella," I pleaded. "What is it all about? What's behind this mystery?"

"If you turned down a million dollars for my sake, I think I can trust you," she said. "Supposing I was about to invent a new method of locomotion? Can you see where Keeshwar might find me obnoxious?"

"A new kind of space ship?"

Trella shook her head. "A new kind of locomotion. Animals either swim or walk. Man also uses wheels."

"He also can fly. So can birds."

"Flying is simply swimming through the air and crawling, as a worm or snake, is gliding, like swimming. Space ships swim, too, after a fashion. Boats swim through the sea and sleds swim on ice. Therefore we have only three kinds of locomotion: Legs, wheels and sleds. Another might revolutionize everything."

"But there couldn't be any other way to travel. Even the planets 'sled' through ether."

"There is another way. It will open exploration to the furthest limits of the galaxy."

"I can see why Keeshwar was so interested."

"As soon as I'm out of bed, I want you to call on me at my laboratory, Fred. I'll show you something that will make your eyes pop out of your head."

I turned to leave, when something on the window pane caught my eye. It was a small, cherry-red spot, about the size of a twenty-five cent piece.

The minute I saw it, I knew what it was. I shouted to the interne—really a detective—outside the door, and lifted Trella into my arms. I must admit that I handled her a little roughly and she groaned as I hurried her out of the room. But what I did was necessary.

As I left the room, the glass of the pane melted and a beam flashed across the room, striking the bed where Trella had been an instant before. That beam was an Oronic Ray, 5,000 degrees hot, of the type used in welding the rockets of space ships.

It was evident that Gustav Keeshwar intended to finish Trella Mayo whether I would help him or not.

A FEW weeks later I visited Trella in her laboratory.

"I'm anxious to see this incomprehensible conveyance," I explained.

"At least, I'm glad you are taking an interest in something besides my safety and my operation scar," she replied.

She led me through a corridor toward a heavy steel door, which she unlocked.

"You are the first person besides myself to go into this room in the past five years," Trella added.

I scarcely know what I had expected to see. What would anyone expect to see, if he was told he was going to be shown a machine that neither walked, glided nor rolled? Such a contraption is beyond human experience.

It was a long, hollow tube, large enough to hold a human body. It was made of quartz and on each side was a cylindrical, low power atomic energy machine.

"This," Trella said, "is the translator."

"The what?"

"I call it my space-time translator, which someday will make the rocket as obsolete for space travel as the horse for surface travel. It will take an object from one point in space-time to another instantly."

"Instantly?"

"There is a small lapse of time," Trella confessed. "You see the machine has two motors, one for starting the operation and the other for completing it. It takes about one second's time to switch the motive power from one motor to the other.

The machine, except for the motors, was made entirely of quartz and silver. On the right side of the machine was a long strip of silver running the full length of the tube. It was about three inches wide and it was connected with a knife-like blade of silver on the left side of the tube by a strand of silver wire. Silver was

used, of course, because it was the best known conductor of electricity and other forms of energy.

"It would be wonderful if it worked," I said.

"It does work," Trella said. "We sent two guinea pigs to the Sirius system yesterday morning. We got them back in an hour with a copy of yesterday's issue of *The Sirian Daily Universe*. Here's the paper."

She held out a copy of the beautifully printed daily magazine. On the cover was the date, August V2,504 (3002).

It was customary for terrestrials to use terrestrial dates wherever their outposts were located in the stellar system. But instead of using the terrestrial year—as shown in parenthesis on *The Sirian Daily Universe*—the year always was reckoned from the date when the planet was first visited by an expedition from the solar system. Although days were not always the same, twenty-four hour periods could be reckoned quite easily so that on some planets a single day might have more than one terrestrial date, and on others a single day would be a fraction of a legal day. The number of actual days usually was indicated by a Roman numeral preceding the Arabic figure. Thus August V2 indicated that Sirius had risen and set five times while the sun had done so twice during th month of August.

"Unbelievable!" I said. "How does it work."

"It operates through time," Trella explained. "It takes a short cut between two parallel instants."

She took a guinea pig from a cage in the laboratory. She put the wriggling animal inside the quartz tube and strapped it firmly in the center.

"Watch," she said.

She turned a switch on one of the boxes. A low hum arose from the atomic motor. Trella watched a dial located in the top of the quartz tube until an arrow pointed to a gold star. Then she pressed a button in the motor on the right side of the machine.

I noticed that the translator had controls that could be operated from inside the tube as well as from the outside.

There were two distinct gasps of the motor. Half of the guinea pig disappeared with the first gasp and the remaining half disappeared with the second.

Where the tube had been a second before, there was nothing now.

"He's on Proxima Centaur now," Trella said. "I managed to equip a laboratory there about two years ago. It was through that laboratory that Keeshwar learned of my experiments in translation. My men on Proxima will send back the guinea pig in a few minutes."

We sat down and waited. Trella explained the machine, although at the time the explanation was a little over my head. The actual translation was accomplished by the pushing of one motor and the pulling of another across an extra-dimensional space. Half of the object to be translated was hurled across space by the pushing of the first motor. The second motor, which operated automatically, began pulling the other half, including the first motor, after it as soon as it materialized at the end of the journey.

By means of radio signals the exact location of every explored planet had been determined. It was therefore only a matter of mathematical calculation to find the target. There was some risk, of course, if a mathematical error were made in computing the range but considering the risks involved in ordinary methods of interstellar flight everything was in favor of the translator.

"The whole secret of the invention lies in locating the proper *Now* in space-time," Trella explained.

"The proper *Now?*" I asked.

"Of course," she said, "the *Now* we experience on earth is not the same

Now that exists simultaneously on Rihlon, the second planet of Proxima Centaur. We are dealing with space-time, Fred. Time is a dimension, it stretches like a line through space. If we connect the *Now* of the present with the *Now* of ten minutes ago, we have a straight line, just as we would have a straight line if we connected any two points in the universe. The *Now* of the present and the *Now* ten minutes ago on Rihlon also would be a straight line, but it would not be the same straight line."

"But it would be parallel!" I exclaimed, beginning to see her point.

"Oh, so you *do* know something about mathematics?"

"Of course! If you connect the *Nows* of the present on both the earth and Rihlon, you have a straight line, perpendicular to the parallel time lines of both the earth and Rihlon. Why couldn't your invention be used for time travel? Couldn't you connect the present—*Now* of Rihlon with any *Now* in the time line of the earth—any *Now* of the past or future?"

"The idea occurred to me, but it won't work," Trella replied. "There's a serious obstacle we can't overcome. In going backward or forward in time we do not travel in lines perpendicular to the parallel time lines of the earth and Rihlon—or for any other planet for that matter. But we travel like this—" Trella drew a figure on a piece of paper.

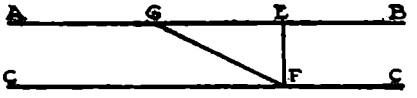


Figure 1

"The line AB represents the time line of the earth and the line CD represents the time line of any other planet X. The two lines are parallel. E represents the earth—*Now*, and F the *Now* on planet X. A line connecting the two is perpendicular to both AB and CD. Supposing we should travel from F to a point G, a *Now* in the earth's past. If we connect F and G we would have a right triangle GEF. The hypothenuse GF would be the square root of GE squared plus EF squared."

"There is nothing mathematically implausible in that," I said.

"There is nothing implausible, yet to determine the exact distance from G to F is in most cases impossible. Unless the distances involved are of the proper ratio, say, 4 and 5, the line GF becomes an irrational number, of which it is impossible to find the exact value. Supposing the distance from E to F was one light-year and the distance from G to E, one year. Then GF would be the square root of one squared plus one squared, or the square root of two. Because we are dealing with such immense distances and because even the smallest decimal point of error might lead to disastrous results, we cannot attempt time travel unless we know the exact value of the square root of two, or any other irrational number."

As Trella finished speaking there was a coughing hum and the translator appeared in the room, containing the unharmed guinea pig and a copy of the *Rihlon Gazette* for Aug. 3rd, which was this day.

"Do you believe me?" she cried gleefully, waving the paper over her head.

It was quite convincing, I admitted.

"Now I am going to make a trip in the translator!"

"You!"

It was the beginning of a long argument. There was danger in the trip, I told her, and Trella had come to mean a great deal to me. She scoffed at my fears and told me that if I didn't care to witness the first translation of man to another planet in another star system she would do it when I wasn't there.

Of course, no man can win an argument with a woman.

Trella climbed into the translator.

I closed the opening. Her hand rose to the switch that operated the mech-

anism from inside the tube. She smiled and her lips moved in a cheerful good-by. Then she touched the switch.

The indicator on the dial crept upward toward the gold star.

Suddenly the unexpected occurred.

The door of the laboratory opened. Trella had forgotten to lock the door when we entered the room.

As I heard the noise, I turned and saw Gustav Keeshwar leveling a gun toward the helpless young woman in the glass tube.

I sprang toward him just as the gun went off.

Apparently he had not expected to find me in the room, for as I lunged he uttered a cry and threw the gun at my face. Then he turned and ran.

I managed to duck in time to receive only a glancing blow on the head. I started to pursue, when my eyes fell on the translator.

Something terrible was wrong.

Half of the tube had disappeared and, with it, half of Trella's body. The other half, containing half of the most beautiful woman on the earth, remained in the laboratory.

My spring toward Keeshwar had spoiled his aim enough to keep the bullet from striking Trella, but the bullet had struck the small silver wire that ran from the atomic motor on one side to the atomic motor on the other. The translation had been only half completed.

Half of Trella's body was on the earth, while the other was on Rihlon, four light years away!

Her single eye was open and her half-face was frozen in an expression of terror. She did not move and she was not breathing. There was no blood. It was a complete suspension of animation.

Suddenly I realized that I was losing precious seconds. Unless something was done, Trella would die.

I picked up the bit of wire that had been broken off by Keeshwar's bullet. I lifted it toward the end dangling from the motor.

Then Trella moved! It was not suspended animation, but something else —something new!

Her eye swung toward me. Her half-head visibly shook. Her half-lips moved but no sound of her voice reached me. But I understood. She was telling me not to replace the wire.

She lifted her hand and drew a right angled triangle on the side of the tube.

I understood. Trella was alive and she would continue to live, but it would be impossible to restore her component halves merely by mending the broken wire.

Trella was linked in time. She was still whole, but half of her body was visible in one *Now* and the other half in a *Now* on Proxima Centaur, four light years away.

To join the halves of her body, would mean joining the two *Nows* and to do that would form a triangle, at least one side of which would be an irrational number. Unless the riddle of time travel were solved, it would be impossible to make Trella whole.

I walked around the half-tube. Her appearance was not what I expected to see. It was not a case of sawing a woman in half. The cross section of her body appeared only as an opaque blankness. When I touched her side I felt something cold and hard. It was as if I had touched eternity.

The laboratory officials were called in for consultation. It was decided that the matter should be hushed, at least until we knew what should be done. There was too much to do now to be bothered with police and reporters. We would not have a warrant issued for Keeshwar. There would be time to deal with him later.

We discovered that Trella could eat and she seemed to be in perfect health. But I knew that she was doomed unless we could restore the parts of her body. Her muscles would atrophy. Inaction is more deadly to the human

machine than millions of disease germs.

If it would be possible to locate some day in the future when the wires might be pieced together and the linking of Trella's two halves might be accomplished without rationalizing irrational numbers, our problem would be solved. But the nearest date in the future when this could be done was three years ahead.*

But in three years Trella would be dead. We could not wait for the coordinates to adjust themselves. We had to make the coordinates adjustable to our purposes.

A small chronometer located in the atomic energy machine on the quartz tube gave us the exact time the silver wire had been broken.

Even Blake, my servant, offered a suggestion:

"If you could take the earth half of Miss Trella's body to Rihlon, or bring the Rihlon half to earth and bring the two *Nows* together, would that form a rational triangle?"

I took paper and pencil and tried to figure it out.

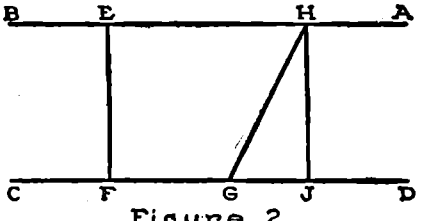


Figure 2

The line BA represented the time line of Rihlon. The line CD was the time line of the earth. The points E and F were the *Nows* on Rihlon and earth, respectively, at which the accident occurred. The point G represented the *Now* at which a space ship would leave the earth for Rihlon carrying Trella's half body. The point H represented the *Now* of arrival on Rihlon and the point J the parallel point on earth. We still had a right-angled triangle and we still had to deal with irrational numbers. But hold on—

I gazed at my drawing. Before my eyes was the answer! The whole thing was clearly and completely solved. The secret of time travel was solved. Trella was saved. The invention of the translator had been perfected so that all danger of becoming lost in time was removed!**

"Blake," I said to the servant, "bring me my automatic pistol."

"Wh-what?" Blake stuttered.

"I said bring me my automatic pistol. I'm going to save Trella, or murder somebody."

"Perhaps I should call your lawyer."

I threw a book at him and he left hurriedly, to return in a few minutes with my pistol and holster. I strapped the weapon about my waist and slammed my straw hat on my head. In a few minutes I stepped from a taxi in front of the Galaxy building, in which the officers of the Stellar Transport Company are located.

A clerk with thick glasses interviewed me.

"I want to charter a ship for a trip to Proxima Centaur," I explained. "I want one of your late model cruisers which can go about ten times the speed of light. I want to get there quickly."

The clerk nodded. I have often wondered about the composure of clerks who never seem to be astonished at anything. "We have a ship available that could get you there in three months, that's sixteen times the speed of light. But to charter it would cost one million dollars."

He never batted an eye when he

* Three years from the time this accident occurred would make the sides of the triangle between the past event, the present, and the present on Rihlon (four light years away) equal to the units 3, 4 and 5. Three squared, plus four squared equals five squared.

** As a mental exercise, I would suggest that the reader look at Figure 2 for a minute or two and figure out the answer. The answer is there and high school mathematics should enable a person to discover how to extract the irrational number.—Dr. Fred Huckins.

named the price. I doubt if the clerk was receiving more than forty a week.

"I should like to transact the deal directly with Mr. Keeshwar," I said.

"He will be pleased, I'm sure," the clerk replied. "What is your name?"

"Andrew J. Colt," I said, for lack of more originality.

The clerk disappeared into the sanctum. He returned presently with:

"Mr. Keeshwar will see you, Mr. Colt."

I had counted on Keeshwar being —or pretending to be very busy as I entered. I expected him to pay no attention to my entry, and not even to glance in my direction, as if a million dollars were a trifling matter, until we were alone.

I judged Keeshwar right. When at last he glanced at me he was unnerved by the presence of an automatic pistol which was pointed directly at his head.

"I must warn you not to touch any of those buttons on your desk," I said. "It would give me a great deal of pleasure to drill you and I won't go out of my way for an opportunity."

"Wh-what d-d-do you w-w-ant?" he asked, turning pale.

"One day you offered me a million dollars to take Miss Mayo's life," I said. "Now I'm asking you to contribute an equal amount to save it. However, I'm willing to take it out in trade. I want you to pilot one of your ships for me to Rihlon."

"Impossible!" Keeshwar said, regaining some of his composure. "I couldn't leave my business for a period long enough to make the trip."

"If you don't leave your business to make the trip right now you won't exist any more," I warned casually. I reached into my pocket and brought out a silencer, which I fitted to the end of the pistol barrel. I unfastened the safety and aimed deliberately.

THE space ship containing the terrestrial half of Trella Mayo, in company with myself, Blake, two other scientists and Gustav Keeshwar, arrived on Rihlon three months later. Keeshwar, who had had a pistol trained on him almost every instant since I had called at his office, was released and permitted to return to earth. He did not know that I had left the instructions on earth for his arrest for felonious assault the minute he landed.

We located Trella's Rihlon laboratory. It was the matter of a few minutes to make the connection of the broken wire and to finish the translation of her two halves.

Trella stepped out of her quartz prison, swayed unsteadily for a second on her feet, and then collapsed.

"How on earth did you do it?" she asked. "How did you reconcile the irrational number?"

I sketched the figure roughly (Figure 2). "The distance from F to G and the distance from E to H does not enter into the equation," I said. "The only thing we are interested in is the distances GJ, JH and GH."

"And GH is an irrational number," Trella said.

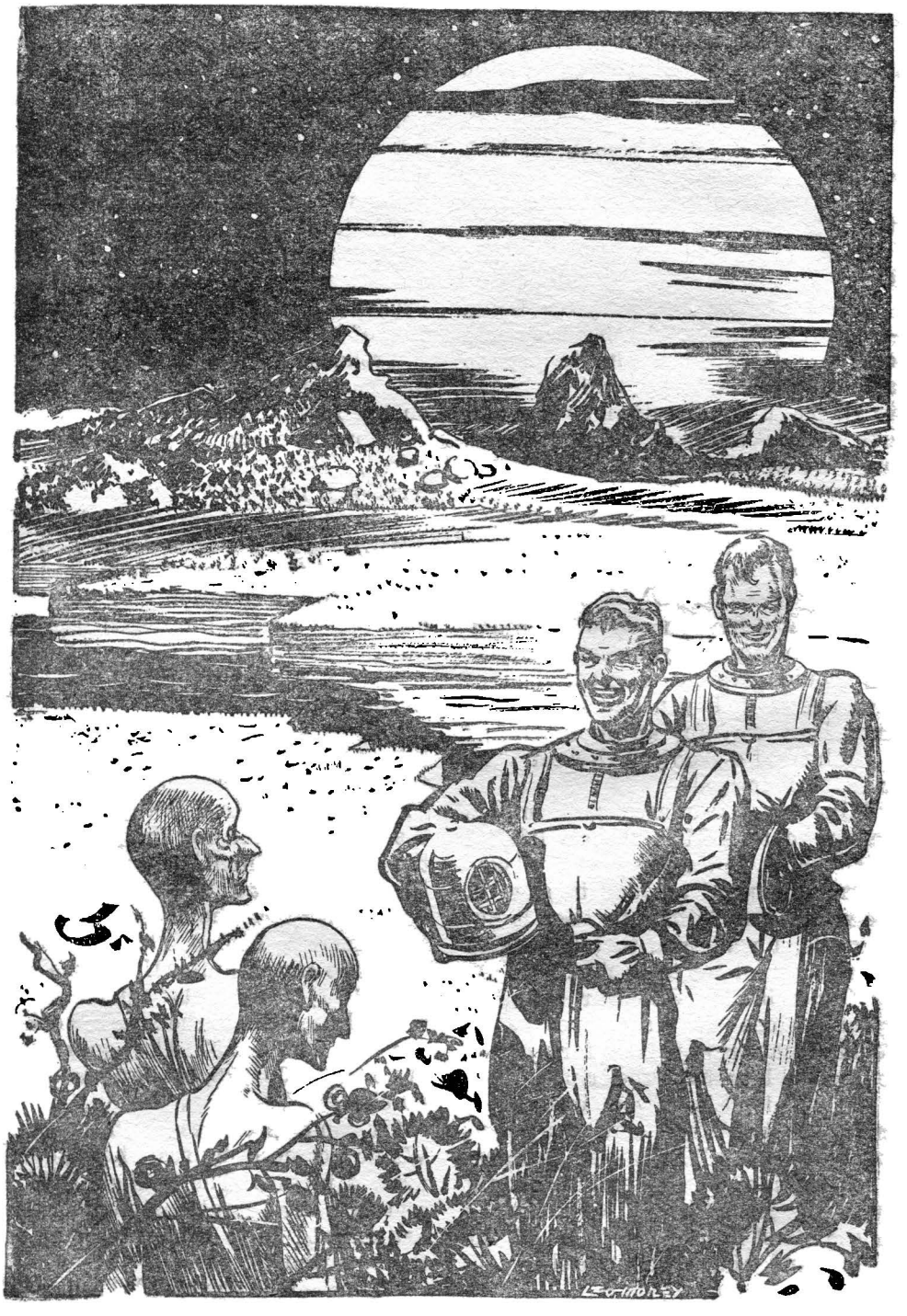
"Quite right, although like most things that appear absurd on the surface, it is not as irrational as it seems. The distance G to J is three months, the time required for the flight from the earth to Rihlon. We will represent this by the unit 1. The distance JH is four light years, the distance in space from earth to Rihlon. This, therefore, would be sixten units. Using the formula $(GJ)^2$ plus $(JH)^2$ equals $(GH)^2$ we find that GH is the square root of one plus 256, or 257. The square root of 257 is 16.031228, etc., an irrational number."

"It can't be expressed in figures!" We do not need figures when we can draw a picture. The triangle GHJ is a picture of an irrational number. We had only to go to Rihlon to complete the equation."

"Time can be traveled," Trella said.

"Where would you like to go on our honeymoon?" I asked.

"To the Garden of Eden," she said.



Manlike, yet different! Was their shrill laughter like a cackle? Or was it the cleverest defence mechanism of all time?

MOMUS' MOON

An incident of the skylanes where two men, freed for a moment from the harsh confinement of space travel, forgot caution.

by EANDO BINDER

"WHATEVER annihilated the two previous expeditions to Neptune's moon was an agency of blind nature," maintained Wade Winton. He prepared for deceleration. "There can be no downright intelligent life out this far—"

"What about me?" grinned Archie Boswell.

"—with the possible exception of myself," continued Winton inexorably. "Intelligence diminishes as the square of the distance from the sun. Look at the Venerians, so damnably clever that they would have started interplanetary travel ages ago if metals didn't rust on the spot in their highly active atmosphere. They had no metal age, but passed directly into the plastic age, for that reason. The Mercurians would be still brighter, of course—except that they don't exist.

"Now, going to Earth, we have mankind—brainy, yes, but too dumb to know it. Conquers space but can't keep the murder rate on earth below 2000 an hour. Mars? The famous, or infamous canals are like the Egyptial pyramids—built by neurotic tin-god dynasties at the end of a lash. Your various Jovion-system races would just about pass muster alongside a dull-witted Neanderthaler. The Saturnians are still trying to figure out how much is two plus two.

"As the Crile-Brady theory of life states, the further you are from the sun, the less electrons motivate your cell-radiogens, and the less electro-psychic—"

"Precisely, precisely," yawned Boswell sagely, clipping off the lecture before it went beyond his depth.

He eyed the deceleration needle climbing close to its starting mark on the chronometer, and began carefully strapping himself into his seat.

"Still," Boswell said, "it remains that two preceding expeditions visited the lone moon of Neptune, never returning. *Something* did them in. It's the Moon of Doubt so far. And as MacKinzie said—cheerful cuss that he is—'be prepared, boys, for any menace, particularly that of intelligence'. I'll look for that first, Wade."

Winton tripped a lever which brought the hissing of fuel jets and spark distributors to life. "Archie, did you ever hear the story of the fellow walking on the moon who was so intent on the mountains ahead that he fell into a crater."

"No, what is it?"

"Besides," Winton pursued, "there probably isn't *any* life on Neptune's moon at all. Photometric tests from earth give a surface temperature of fifty degrees in its tropics, if any."

"Fifty? I've been known to survive 49 and 51—"

"This is Absolute, my feather-brained friend," Winton growled. "*Minus* 225 degrees Centigrade. Thus its atmosphere must be largely hydrogen, helium and methane. On the ground would lie nitrogen-ice and liquid-oxygen. Picture forms of life in *that* balmy climate!"

Boswell shivered. "We can expect an icy reception and the cold shoulder from the girls. Well, anyway, I'm slightly sick, to put it strongly, of the sight of space. Even when I close my

eyes I see it—or the lack of it. Any extra terra-firma, even at 25 *below* zero Absolute, would look good. Wade, my boy, apply deceleration. The needle says so."

WINTON jammed over the proper lever. The nose rockets burst forth volcanically and continued, imposing their smooth retardation to the space ship's stupendous velocity. The two men felt themselves pressing forward against their straps.

Hour after hour, slowly, the rockets cut down the velocity that had been built up, hour by hour, at the start. Ahead, the star that was Neptune, inconspicuous in the hosts of heaven, began to assume a more regal aspect. It climbed the scale of magnitude, reached brilliance, and finally became a small moon.

THE third expedition to Neptune, it had taken them two long months since leaving Mars to make the giant hop over the dangerous asteroid belt and plunge into the trackless immensity beyond. Neptune—thirty Astronomical Units from the sun. In miles, close to the meaningless number of three billion. Sixty times as wide as the gap between earth and Mars. It was something like a miracle to arrive.

The giant planet, sixty earths in volume, loomed in eerie grandeur, and swept to one side as Winton arrowed for its Mercury-sized moon. Back of them the sun had shrunk to star-like proportions, with no more disc than Venus shows to Earth.

Able to look directly at the sun without being blinded, Boswell seemed to be searching for something. "That must be earth there—that greenish star. Good old earth!"

Winton laughed sarcastically.

"That green star is more light-years away than you are old. Archie, you can't see earth from here at all! Stop to realize how far out we are, and how narrow those puny orbits of the inner planets have become. They are so close to the sun that its glare hides them. The Neptunians, if any, could only know there are four inner planets if they had A-1 photos taken while the sun was eclipsed by their satellite. If you aren't properly amazed at that, here's more. Neptune's orbit is so tremendous that since its discovery in 1846, it hasn't yet made one revolution around the sun. It hasn't completed one of its 'years' yet. Yet every second since 1846 it has moved three and one-third miles!"

"That's the record for getting nowhere fast," Boswell grunted. "It is a little removed from the haunts of earth at that." He squinted at the huge planet. "Looks like an anemic tomato. Plenty of atmosphere around it but the Lord knows of what." He shifted his gaze to the satellite, now rapidly nearing. "An atmosphere there too, judging by the fuzzy profile."

"Don't construct any high hopes, Archie. It's probably thinner than the veneer of civilization, and mostly hydrogen. And cold enough to freeze an electric furnace at full blast. And you won't find the biological disease of life on its pristine purity of rock. *Br-r-r!* Turn up the heater a bit. I'm freezing just to think of it."

BUT Winton proved wrong on every count.

He landed the ship with his usual skill, on Neptune's moon, turned off the powerful engine, then sat stunned, staring out of the ports. Boswell bustled around the cabin. He made readings of the instruments hung outside the hull.

"Air-pressure of 298 millimeters!" he announced excitedly. He had set up his portable Fraunhofer Analyzer. "Temperature fifty degrees—but Fahrenheit, my lad! Humidity 50%, like an air-conditioned room in earth's swankiest hotel."

His voice trailed away as he watched ghostly lines sharpen in the analyzer. "Looks like breathable air

too, Wade! Has less nitrogen and more rare-gases than earth's air, but that makes no difference. Oxygen percentage high, about 30%, and that neatly offsets the low pressure. No harmful ingredients that I can discover. Isn't it unbelievable?"

"That too!" Winton p o i n t e d through the high nose-port. Across the dark heavens they saw a small, glowing shape swiftly streak toward the horizon. The shadow of its oncoming quarter-phase visibly broadened over its face.

"Another moon of Neptune!" Boswell gurgled.

"Look at that changing phase for another minute," suggested Winton cryptically. "See—it's changing in reference to this moon's motion, not its own."

"I'm a little deaf," B o s w e l l vouched.

"Sap! That's a moon, all right. But not of Neptune."

Boswell stared. "Wait—don't tell me. On second thought, tell me."

"It's this moon's moon! Too small to be seen from earth in even the largest telescopes."

"Seventy little blue devils," Boswell said. "A moon of a moon! And maybe that little moon has another, and that another, and so ad infinitum."

"The landscape outside," Winton said abruptly, "is pretty weird."

"Weird?" grunted Boswell, rummaging in the food stores. "Why, it's so much like earth's, you'd think we were back there."

Winton nodded. "That's the weird part of it. The whole blessed set-up isn't natural. It just isn't right for a body so far removed from earthly regions to practically duplicate its conditions. Next we'll be seeing a deer come out of that forest as nice as you please and—"

Winton choked, eyes popping. "There it is!" he wailed. "It isn't quite a deer, smaller and daintier, but still a hooved animal. Do you see it? Tell me I'm sane, Archie, please!"

"I see it. You're as sane as I am, Wade."

"I'm still in doubt!"

"Soup's on!" Boswell, unconcerned with the phenomenon, passed out a large cup of gelatinous porridge. "It may all be unnatural, but my appetite isn't."

After they had eaten, they felt sleepy, as two normal, healthy human beings should feel, whether on Neptune's satellite or earth. Winton set the outer alarm system that would operate if anything touched the hull, and they retired to their bunks with gusty yawns. Their inner minds, when their eyes closed, pictured the hollow immensity of star-spattered space as the picture had been before them for two long months.

THREE days passed, as measured on earth.

When they awoke the third morning it was still light, as it would be forever on this face of the satellite turned eternally toward its primary. But a new sharpness had come into the light with the rising of the blazing sun-star, still equal to more than 500 full-moons on earth. Sunlight on this little world would last for seventy hours. Then there would be "night" for seventy hours. But day or night, the magnificent striated bulk of Neptune hung in the sky, shedding a ruddy silver glow of reflected sunlight.

"On this globe is a menace that destroyed two other expeditions," Winton mused soberly. "No use to look for them. The last one was three years ago. They're dead, and *something* did it—but what on this pleasant world?"

"Well, if the menace shows up in any form short of fourth-dimensional soup," Boswell promised grimly, "we'll give it a rousing welcome."

They were equipped as thoroughly as every other interplanetary expedition, but as an added feature had a turret nest from which could be

sprayed lethal death in three forms—poison gas, shock-beams, and bullets. No conceivable enemy could storm this stronghold.

But there seemed no answer to the challenge. They had landed in a clearing of what seemed an ordinary forest. A few eyes gleamed from the trees, but no formidable creatures appared in the three earth-days they had rested from their space journey. That was as far as caution held them.

It was the morning they had elected to sally forth from the ship for the first time. Both were achingly impatient to tread on this amazing second earth. Boswell whistled and drew an answering note from Pete, their canary. He took the cage down and put it in the air-lock.

"Sorry, old fellow," he muttered, "but it has to be done."

Closing the inner seal, he pulled the lever that opened the outer plate. Fifteen minutes later he reversed the process and whistled to the frightened but unharmed bird. It was a sure test for alien atmospheres, as as well as the mine depths of earth.

The next process was to adjust their lungs to the outside pressure. Boswell gradually valved air out of their cabin through a pipe that pierced the hull. Their respiration rate automatically increased as the pressure lowered. A period of dizziness came and went. Finally the barometers, inner and outer, were equalized.

They donned light garments and strapped belts around their middles each with a knife, gas-mask, and pistol with fifty rounds of ammunition. They stepped out in a gravity that allowed them to leap twenty feet up without effort. Boswell immediately tried it a dozen times, yelling in pure exuberance after the close confinement of the ship.

"Whoopee! I'm going to like this place."

"Stop it, you infernal chump! A fine representative you are of earthly manhood, jumping around like a rubber ball." Winton was doing it himself a moment later. "Just to test the gravity," he alibied.

A few minutes later, sucking in huge lung-fulls of the fresh air and liking its tang, they strode forward in the odd wash of light from three sources. Under their feet was a smooth carpet of clipped grasses, almost park-like in appearance. Winton stooped to dig up a handful of soil, letting it run through his fingers.

"Fine-grained stuff, weathered by ages and bacteria. The top-soil of a planet indicates its surface evolution as much as the life-forms. It's good dirt."

"But not pay-dirt." Boswell had planted his portable mass-atom analyzer on the ground and was reading its cryptic message. "The usual iron, calcium, aluminum, silicates, carbon—but no radium! Inside the ship, for three days, my electroscope discharged like seven hells. There *has* to be radium in this soil, yet there isn't. Is MacKinzie, in behalf of Solar Metals Incorporation, going to be sore! His private theory, or hunch, is that Neptune and Pluto both should have lots of radium, since earth has more than Venus, Mars has more than earth, Jupiter has more than Mars, and so on. Greedy old optimist! Reckon he expected us to come back with a ton of pure metal."

He frowned. "But still, I don't understand—"

"Wouldn't a large deposit at a distance work your electroscope?" Winton suggested thoughtfully.

"Ye-es, except that I put a lead shield around it, which localizes the ionizing gamma-rays as coming from below, or above. Since above is ridiculous it must have come from the ground." He waved his arm helplessly. "But Wade, the ground is almost virginically pure of radium contamination. Something's crazy, and it may be me—soon."

"Or me." Winton thumped his head with his knuckles. "I wish we hadn't come here, for our peace of mind.

Archie, there's only *one* possible way to explain this tremendously abnormal surface temperature. The sun is out of the question. Neptune is cold; radiates nothing but reflected light. Radio-activity—that's the only answer. And you say—"

"—there isn't any radium!"

They grinned at one another humorlessly, more puzzled than they cared to admit. Winton dragged Boswell on to make tests of underlying soil at spot after spot.

"No use," summarized the latter mournfully. "The radio-active deposits that we know must be here aren't here, Wade."

"How sensitive is your pop-gun there, Archie?"

Boswell rolled his eyes eloquently. "It will detect the 0.4341 Angstrom radium-line straight down through anything but solid lead for two miles. It will spot a millionth of a milligram ——equal to a mole on a filterable virus' left cheek—at a distance of five hundred feet. That's sensitivity, my boy! If a wind blew over a pinhead of radium, and then blew the other way, it would still burn out my detector. Do I make myself disgustingly clear?"

Winton moved on, shaking his head as though to clear it.

"Why should we stir our cranial matter over it? Let the official men of science, when they get here some day, lose sleep. And now don't get rattled, Archie, over what just walked out of the woods. Sure, I know it's a man. So what?"

Winton was trembling all over like a leaf.

They had gone a half mile from their ship, in search of the radium phantom, and were close now to the edge of a forest. The trees looked disturbingly earthlike. It would have surprised them less to see bizarre freaks with roots in the air and leaves that smoked. One does not expect, or even like, an utterly alien world to flaunt a copy of earth's typical environment. It is not comprehensible.

Worse, to see a native creature built in the image of man was a blow to their neural systems. For man it was, in every detail, except that its face was half-human and half something indefinable. It moved slowly along, head up, plucking ripe fruits from the laden trees.

"See?" gasped Boswell. "I told you I saw some manlike beings in the field-glasses from the ship, yesterday. You told me to stop being a ninny." He jerked his gun out suddenly. "It—or he—looks half-way intelligent. Those other two expeditions; nothing like being on the alert."

Winton sneered.

"Intelligent—bah! It's purely an animal in freak human guise. Trick of evolution here. No adornments, no clothing, stark naked. Doesn't even comb its hair. And it doesn't recognize us as fellow creatures, though it sees us."

"But look at those eyes!" They had warily approached the creature, afraid of scaring it away. Instead it looked up at them with an almost disdainful expression in its quasi-human face. Boswell said again, "Just look at those eyes! Like bright jewels, glinting with intelligence. And a merry twinkle in them too."

"Bah!"

"I'll prove it." Boswell smiled at the man-being. It promptly smiled back. In fact, its lips opened wider and a whistling laugh issued. Boswell looked foolish.

"How impolite of it," Winton said dryly. "I've always managed to restrain my merriment when I looked at you, Archie. Look at the darn thing now—it's gone back to its feeding, ignoring us completely. It's just an animal, with little instinct of fear. This must be a peaceful world."

The man-creature looked up as Winton stroked its shaggy mane of hair.

"Not intelligent—peaceful world," it said calmly.

Winton jumped backward ten feet,

almost knocking Boswell over en route.

"Not intelligent, eh? But it talks," grinned Boswell, grabbing his friend's arm in time to save him a fall.

"You talk too," Winton growled. "And so does a parrot." He approached the creature again, equanimity unruffled. "Look here, buddy," he demanded, "how much do you know?"

"Much know," responded the being. Then it broke out in an infectious laugh. After a moment the two earthmen found themselves joining in. This seemed to inspire the creature more, and its peels rang out lustily. Boswell began to stagger and hold his sides, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"What are we laughing about?" demanded Winton suddenly, stopping with a choke.

"Nothing, I guess," Boswell said ruefully, also stopping.

"That *is* funny, but I won't laugh." Winton eyed the now quiet pseudoman calculatingly. "There's something phoney about you, Mack. But I don't know what it is."

"Something phoney, Mack," said the being. A grin came over its face, so vapid and guileless that the two men couldn't resist grinning back. Thereupon it burst out in a whinny-laugh that touched off the two humans as though they had been tuned sound-boxes.

It was harder to stop this time, for their risibilities had been thoroughly aroused. Winton turned away, shook himself like a dog, and clamped his teeth together. Then he took Boswell by the shoulders and shook him with determined violence till he too sobered. When they stopped, the man-being stopped.

"When this chap hits your funny-bone," Boswell gasped, "he uses a mallet."

"I don't like this," Winton snarled, glaring at the creature. "Begone, you laughing hyena."

"Like this laughing," said the man-being with perfect inflections of voice.

It reached out suddenly with one of its fruit-stained hands. Boswell's pistol glinted in the light. The creature stepped back with it, turning it over and over in apparent delight.

"Hey! Give that back!" Boswell tried to retrieve the gun, but the man-being kept out of reach. "Please! That's a dangerous toy. You might blow somebody's head off—preferably your own. Now be a nice little whatever-you-are and—"

Speaking soothingly, Boswell tried to approach again, but the pseudo-man nimbly kept out of reach. Boswell winced as the long bright barrel swung toward him and one of the being's fingers fumbled at the trig. ger.

Winton stood paralyzed. "Watch out, Archie—"

"Drat you, anyway!" Boswell leaped explosively at the man-being, but his stretching hands touched nothing as the creature agilely pranced away. Boswell stubbornly jumped again, anger in his face. With a smooth swiftness, the man-being raced away, Boswell following like a huge bounding frog.

In the light gravitation, they retreated rapidly.

"Archie, you blasted boob!" Winton roared out. "Come back here—"

But Boswell raced on. Winton hastily jerked a metal whistle out of his belt and blew on it tempestuously. The clear, shrill tone, designed to penetrate much further than the human voice, brought the flying earthman short. He came back at a lope, cursing bitterly. The pseudo-man, as though it had all been a game of tag, came trotting after him, still clutching the pistol.

"Idiot!" greeted Winton scathingly. "Might as well try to run down earth's best miler. Only way to get your gun back is wait till he's tired of it. Watch now; when his ape-like nature is satisfied, he'll drop it."

Boswell fidgeted nervously. "Or he'll drop one of us."

"One of us," said the man-being, setting off the fuse of laughter with a delirious trilling.

THE two earthmen could no more resist it than rib-tickling. Boswell's hearty guffaws and Winton's high-pitched ululation, together with the man-being's empty warbling, rang in a garbled trio over the greenery of Neptune's moon. Overhead, the giant mother planet seemed to look on mockingly—ominously.

There was a hysterical edge to their laughter before Winton could command himself. He had to kick Boswell in the shin three times before it wasn't funny to him.

"Ouch!" Boswell said weakly. "But thanks, Wade. My lungs are sore from that damnable fit. It's not funny to have to laugh when there isn't anything funny to laugh at—if you know what I mean."

"It wasn't really laughing," Winton groaned dismally. "It was merely the expulsion of air from our lungs in intermittent peristalsis of the throat. Like hiccoughs. People have been known to start like that and—" He grabbed his companion's arm. "Something tells me we'd better get while the getting's good."

"Wait. One more try at retrieving my gun."

Boswell turned to the man-being. "I hate to think of an amiable, merry soul like that carrying around a handful of sudden death. Maybe I can trade him. That usually works with children of nature."

He slipped his whistle from his belt, tooted it several times. "See, buddy?" he wheedled. "Isn't it cute? Wouldn't you rather have this shiny whistle than that nasty old gun?"

"Cute buddy," said the man-being, promptly taking the tendered object and returning the pistol. In perfect mimicry of Boswell's elaborate pantomime, it put the whistle to its lips and blew gustily.

Winton screwed up his face sourly. "Let's go. Hello! Look! Some of his friends coming. Archie, I don't like this!"

Apparently attracted by the shrill whistling, a dozen other pseudo-men emerged from the forest and came up at a run. And pseudo-women. Some of them gave their irresistible laughter as they arrived. Thereafter, one or the other was always releasing its inane chuckles. The mirthful sounds deluged the earthmen.

And laughter, even without cause, is one of the hardest things to resist.

Boswell sank bonelessly to the ground in twisted spasms of giggling. Winton tittered through clenched teeth, face purple with strain. A moment later he was in an uproarious state on the grass beside his friend. They writhed there, caught in a nervous storm more debilitating than any other human emotion.

"This is infernal—ha! ha!" shouted Winton as best he could in Boswell's ear.

"Horrible—ho! ho!" roared Boswell. "I'm weak as a—wet rag—and getting weaker. I couldn't lick—a mouse—right now."

"Got to—stop this!" chortled Winton. "But I can't—haw! haw!"

"Can't stop," said one of the creatures, reaching a hand down and plucking Winton's whistle from his belt. Taking the cue, the others crowded around and began grasping whatever they could get their hands on. The earthmen were physically unable to resist, though they feebly tried.

"Hang onto your gun—ha! ha!—if you can!" Winton had put both his hands around his pistol, hanging on for dear life. Boswell managed to do the same while he squirmed in laughter that was now painful and hysterical. The pseudo-humans took everything else—knives, gas helmets, bandoliers, bullets, and torn pieces of clothing till little but rags were left.

It had something of the air of seemingly mild, friendly beings who

had suddenly turned threatening and would punish these audacious, unwelcome two from another world.

"Can't stand much more of this!" laughed Boswell.

"It will drive us insane!" chuckled Winton.

"This must be the menace—the laughing menace—two other expeditions—gets you by surprise—" guffawed Boswell.

"A half mile to the ship. We'll never make it!" cackled Winton.

"Can't even get up!"

"Irony of it! Enough ammunition in ship to blow up half the planet. And here we are—helpless!"

They spoke only at the cost of terrific effort as constant peals of hilarious laughter racked their bodies. They were barely able to see, through tear-blurred eyes, that dozens of other pseudo-humans had come up. They milled around the two helplessly contorted earthmen, filling the air with their empty trills. Key-sounds that titillated human risibilities beyond the point of endurance.

"Must do something—" Winton gripped his reeling senses with superhuman will-power. "Archie, hit me! Hit me in the face as hard as you can."

Boswell whipped his balled fist around, but the blow landed limply. Winton only laughed the harder.

"Fight each other," commanded Winton. "Anger drive out fit."

They tried it for a while, kicking, striking, hammering at one another, raising bruises whose pain they could not feel. But the ghastly laughter that came from their lacerated throats continued unabated. They stopped their physical exertions, completely exhausted.

"Our guns!" Boswell gasped. "Last resort. Must kill them. Hate to but it's them or us."

He raised his pistol, taking aim for the nearest prancing man-being, displaying a stolen belt to a woman-being proudly.

"No." Winton knocked his arm down. "Too many. Shoot in air. Maybe the noise—"

Winton fired upward. With startling suddenness the paean of garbed laughter died out. The beings had all leaped away like wild horses. The rush of their bare feet receded.

THE two Earthmen reeled to their feet, and staggered in the direction of their ship. The creatures congregated in a group a few hundred yards away, watching.

"What a relief!" Boswell gasped. "My face muscles will never be the same. Wade, that was diabolical. Momus, the terrible God of Laughter, rules here." He hurled several choice inprecations over his shoulder. "I'd rather face dragons than those critters."

"We're not out of danger yet," Winton ground out wryly. "Look, here they come again. We'll have to conserve bullets. Half a mile to go. I'll use mine first. One each time they start their infernal whinnying."

The creatures gamboled up before they had gone a hundred yards. For a while they frisked silently around the drunkenly loping earthmen, like friendly dogs. Then suddenly one of their number gave a tentative snicker that swept the ranks like a prairie fire. The two humans trembled as though a mighty wind had buffeted them. Biting their lips till blood came, they plunged on. But within them a bubbling, gushing tidal wave of laughter flooded up inexorably.

"Damn you all seven times over!" Boswell cursed, already folding up like a straw-man as a hysterically hearty gust of laughter shook him.

Chuckling like an idiot, legs turning to rubber, Winton flung his hand up at the last possible second and fired. He struggled up from his knees, jerked Boswell's arm, and stumbled toward the ship. The beings had whisked away at the shattering report, but this time they did not run so far, nor display so much fear.

"Remember that e x p r e s s i o n,

Wade?" Boswell panted. "'They laughed him off the face of the earth?' I can appreciate that now! And can't you just picture one of these jolly fellows pulling you aside to tell you a droll story and saying, 'This'll kill you!'"

He stared wearily ahead at their gleaming ship, whose haven alone would protect them from the laughing menace. 'How did we get so thunderation far from our space buggy?"

"We were looking for radium that doesn't exist, like a couple of champion chumps," reminded Winton in dreary tones. "Like I said before, this whole set-up is screwier than a sardine nightmare. An earth-temperatured moon without radium, inhabited by laughing maniacs who speak English pronto without a lesson, and overhead a moon's moon—" He groaned dismally. "But here come our jovial hosts again!"

"Like wolves to the kill!"

They had another minute's grace before the creatures began their chorus of laughter. Then the typhoon of mirth caught them, tossing them toward the heights of insane laughter. The firing of Winton's pistol pulled them back from the brink. The beings retreated, but with less startlement, and each succeeding time the interval between firing was shortened. The creatures were fast becoming conditioned to the sharp noise.

"Chinese knew their stuff," Boswell remarked bitterly. "An old trick of theirs—torturing victims to death by tickling them into laughing fits."

"My gun's empty," Winton rasped. "Use yours the next time."

"Hundred yards to go!" gasped Boswell when his last bullet was gone.

His red-rimmed eyes hung on the looming ship with the look of a pilgrim at a saint's shrine. "We've got to make it, Wade. Think of all the sad things you can before they get back. Funerals, invalids, hospitals, shattered love. Life is a vale of tears. All things are rotten at the core. There is nothing but misery, suffering, despair. Oh, how sad, sad, sad it all is—sad, sad—" He choked. "Sad—haw! haw!—sad—ho! ho!—"

The beings were all around them again, whinnying blithely, and the two earthmen were already writhing in the paroxysms of mirthless laughter. They staggered forward desperately on legs that were turning to paper.

"Never make it!" Winton pointed his gun grimly at his friend's head. His painfully twisted face, behind its mask of pseudo-mirth, was that of a weeping man. "Saved a bullet—for you, Archie old man—no need for both of us—to die this way—"

Winton fired.

The bullet missed, aimed by a trembling hand, blurred eyes. It struck the ship whose metal sides rang out like a gigantic bell. At this new noise, stentorian in volume, the beings pranced away in confusion.

Winton and Boswell were able to reel within a hundred feet of the ship's lock. Then the creatures were back. Winton flung his gun at the ship, to make a noise. During this interval they reduced the distance by one-third. Boswell flung his finally.

But twenty feet from the lock they were caught again, writhing on the grass, as far from safety as though they were in the middle of a desert. Only a dim hope kept them from screaming insanity.

Winton tried stopping his ears with his fingers, but the fuse-sound of laughter leaked through. He tore up a tuft of grass and stuffed this into his ears savagely. Boswell followed suit. It was enough of a success to enable them to crawl forward inch by inch, foot by foot, between spasms of laughter that turned their muscles to water.

Fingers, elbows and knees scratched and bleeding, they reached the lock. Winton arose with agonizing effort on legs he knew didn't exist, to reach the combination dial for the lock.

20-83-3.

He remembered the numbers, thank God. He dialed the final figure after an age-long hell of racking laughter, then fell. Boswell rose to jerk the lever and swing the door. They crawled into the lock-chamber through effort measured only in mental horsepower.

Once in, Boswell made a feeble kick at a vapid face and tugged the door shut. He finally had to slide the handle under his arm-pit and let the weight of his body do what his nerveless hands could not.

The seal closed, shutting off the sounds from outside. The two earthmen lay quivering like jellyfish, closer to their last ounce of strength and last shred of sanity than ever before in their not-too-tranquil lives of adventure and danger.

"This," Boswell grunted weakly, "is heaven. Hell's outside. I'll never laugh again for the rest of my life."

"Nor will I," Winton agreed. "My ribs are so sore that they must be scraping raw meat at the edges. The word 'laugh' is stricken from my vocabulary. Hereafter, when someone tells me a joke that is funny, I'll show my appreciation by writing 'ha, ha' on a piece of paper."

But suddenly Winton did start laughing. However it was real laughter, without hysteria. Boswell joined him.

"We did put it over on them, at that," he gloated.

"You fool, I'm not laughing about that. I've just figured out where our radium is. About a year from now, when I get up enough energy to move, I'll show you."

AS their ship retreated from the Neptunian system, Boswell ogled the little moon of the moon they had just visited. He gave it a fond glance, for it was almost solid radium. Financially, their expedition was a thundering success.

"Everything dovetails," expostulated Winton in high good humor. "When you told me you had your electroscope shielded so that only above or below could lie the radium, I should have suspected immediately that it was the second-hand moon above! Naturally I couldn't expect your lame brain to figure it out.

"For countless ages this grandchild moon has been revolving about Neptune's moon, shedding down its flood of energy from the radium. Result—warmed and habitable moon. Propitious environment. Life, evolution. A strange kind of evolution that has produced creatures with an overdeveloped sense of humor. Those other two expeditions were *laughed to death!* The next had better be composed of deaf-mutes."

He shuddered. "Laughing—laughing—with nothing to laugh at!"

Boswell grinned crookedly. "Not in my case, Wade boy. During the time I was laughing and knew I couldn't stop, I thought of all the good jokes I'd heard, enjoying them again. Only they got kind of stale on the fifth round or so."

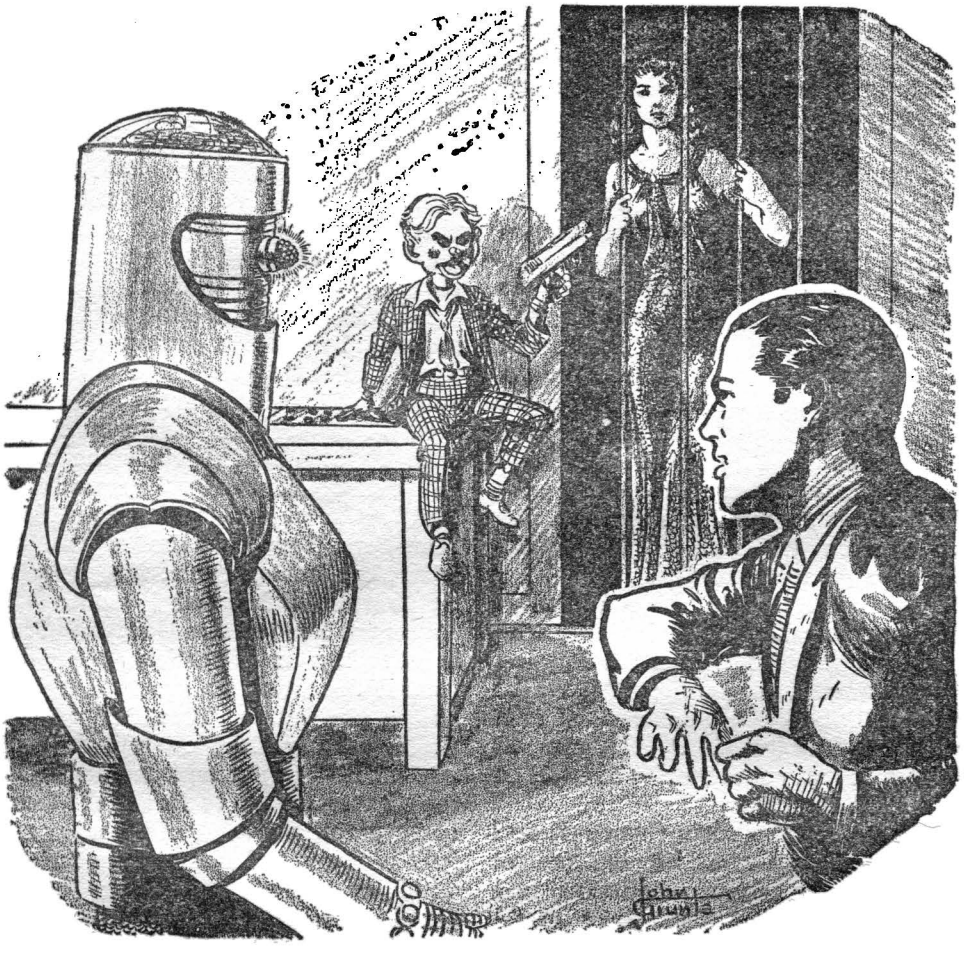
He looked at Winton in sudden triumph. "Ha, my superior friend, how do you explain those beings? The laughing mechanism is a perfect natural defense—but only of intelligent beings. You can't deny that, not to mention repeating and using English words according to meaning, which means telepathy. You were the one, Wade, who said there'd be no slightest sign of intelligence out here—"

Winton shook his head. "They aren't intelligent. They are in the class of genius."

"Well?" snorted Boswell.

"A genius is not intelligent," stated Winton calmly. "He is abnormally brilliant in one sole direction, subnormal in all else. Take his average and he's mediocre. Often, in a manner of speaking, he's insane." He eyed Boswell meaningly. "You aren't brilliant in any way, are you, Archie?"

"Oh, no, not at all!" Boswell assured him hastily.



"How about it, Gaspipe? Are you working with me? We were a good pair once."

BRATTON'S IDEA

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

OLD BRATTON, janitor at the studios of Station XCV in Hollywood, was as gaunt as Karloff, as saturnine as Rathbone, as enigmatic as Lugosi. He was unique among Californians in professing absolutely no motion picture ambitions. Once, it is true, a director had stopped him on the street and offered to test him for a featured role, but old Bratton had refused with loud indignation when he heard that the role would be that of a mad scientist. Old Bratton was touchy about mad scientists, because he was one.

For a time he had been a studio electrician, competent though touchy; but then it developed that he had lied about his age—he was really eighty years old, and he had been fooling

with electricity ever since Edison put apparatus of various sorts within the reach of everyone. Studio rules imposed pretty strict age limits on the various jobs, and so he was demoted to a janitorship.

He accepted, grumbling, because he needed money for the pursuit he had dreamed of when a boy and maintained from his youth onward. In his little two-room apartment he had gathered a great jumble of equipment —coils, transformers, cathodes, lenses, terminals—some of it bought new, some salvaged from studio junk, and a great deal curiously made and not to be duplicated elsewhere save in the eccentric mind of its maker. For old Bratton, with the aid of electricity, thought to create life.

"Electricity is life," he would murmur, quoting Dr. C. W. Roback, who had been venerable when old Bratton was young. And again: "All these idiots think that 'Frankenstein' is a romance and 'R.U.R.' a flight of fancy. But all robot stories are full of truth. I'll show them."

But he hadn't shown them yet, and he was eighty-two. His mechanical arrangements were wonderful and crammed with power. They could make dead frogs kick, dead birds flutter. They could make the metal figures he constructed, whether large or small, stir and seem about to wake. But only while the current animated them.

"The fault isn't with the machine," he would say again, speaking aloud but taking care none overheard. "It's perfect—I've seen to that. No, it's in the figures. They're too clumsy and creaky. All the parts are good, but the connections are wrong, somehow. Wish I knew anatomy better. And a dead body, even a fresh one, has begun dissolution. I must try and get—"

Haranguing himself thus one evening after the broadcast, he pushed his mop down a corridor to the open door of a little rehearsal hall, then stopped and drew into a shadowy corner, for he had almost blundered upon Ben Gascon in the act of proposing marriage.

Ben Gascon, it will be remembered, was at the time one of radio's highest paid performers, and well worthy of his hire for the fun he made. Earlier in life he had been a competent vaudeville artist. When, through no fault of his, vaudeville died, Gascon went into sound pictures and radio.

He was a ventriloquist, adroit and seasoned by years of performance, and a man of intelligence and showmanship as well. Coming to the stage from medical school, he had constructed with his own skilful hands the small figure of wood, metal, rubber and cloth that had become known to myriads as Tom-Tom. Tom-Tom the impish, the witty, the leering cynic, the gusty little clown, the ironical jokester, who sat on the knee of Ben Gascon and, by a seeming misdirection of voice, roused the world to laughter by his sneers and sallies. Tom-Tom was so droll, so dynamic, so uproariously wicked in thought and deed, that listeners were prone to forget the seemingly quiet, grave, Ben Gascon who held him and fed him solemn lines on which to explode firecracker jokes—Ben Gascon, who really did the thinking and the talking that Tom-Tom the dummy might be a headliner in the entertainment world.

Not really a new thing—the combination of comedian and stooge may or may not have begun with Aristophanes in ancient Greece—but Ben Gascon was offering both qualities in his own person, and in surpassing excellence. Press agents and commentators wrote fascinating conjectures about his dual personality. In any case, Tom-Tom was the making of him. It was frequently said that Gascon would be as lost without Tom-Tom as Tom-Tom without Gascon.

But tonight Ben Gascon and Tom-Tom were putting on a show for an audience of one.

Shannon Cole was the prima donna and co-star of the program. She was tall, almost as tall as Gascon, and her

skin was delectably creamy, and her dark hair wound into a glossy coronet of braids. Usually she seemed stately and mournful, to match the songs of love and longing she sang in a rich contralto; but now she almost groaned with laughter as she leaned above the impudent Tom-Tom, who sat on the black broadcloth knee of Ben Gascon and cocked his leering wooden face up at her. Above Gascon's tuxedo his slender, wide-lined face was a dusky red. His lips seemed tight, even while they stealthily formed words for Tom-Tom.

"Oh, Shanny," it seemed that Tom-Tom was crooning, in that ingratiating drawl that convulsed listeners from coast to coast, "don't you think that you and I might just slip away alone somewhere and—and—" The wooden head writhed around toward Gascon. "Get away, Gaspipe! Don't you see that I'm in conference with a very lovely lady? Can't you learn when you're not wanted?"

Shannon Cole leaned back in her own chair, sighing because she had not enough breath to laugh any more. "I never get enough of Tom-Tom," she vowed between gasps. "We've been broadcasting together for two years now, and he's still number one in my heart. Ben, how do you ever manage—"

"Shanny," drawled the voice that was Tom-Tom's, "this idiot Ben Gascon has something to say. He wants me to front for him—but why do I always have to do the talking while he gets the profit. Speak up, Gaspipe—who's got your tongue this time, the cat, or the cat?"

Shannon Cole looked at the ventriloquist, and suddenly stopped laughing. Her face was pale, as his had gone red. She folded her slender hands in her lap, and her eyes were all for Gascon, though it was as if Tom-Tom still spoke:

"I'll be John Alden," vowed Tom-Tom with shrill decision. "I'll talk up for this big yokel—I always do, don't I, Shanny? As Gaspipe's personal representative—engaged at enormous expense—I want to put before you a proposition. One in which I'm interested. After all, I should have a say as to who will be my—well, my stepmother—"

"It won't work!" came the sudden, savage voice of Ben Gascon.

Rising, he abruptly tossed Tom-Tom upon a divan. Shannon Cole, too, was upon her feet. "Ben!" she quavered. "Why, Ben!"

"I've done the most foolish thing a ventriloquist could do," he flung out.

"Well—if you were really serious, you didn't need to clown. You think it was fair to me?"

He shook his head. "Tom-Tom's done so much of my saucy talking for me these past years that I thought I'd use him to get out what I was afraid to tell you myself," he confessed wretchedly.

"Then you were afraid of me," Shannon accused. She, too, was finding it hard to talk. Gascon made a helpless gesture.

"Well, it didn't work," he groaned. "I'm sorry. You're right if you think I've been an idiot. Just pretend it never happened."

"Why, Ben—" she began once more, and broke off.

"We've just finished our last program for the year," said Ben Gascon. "Next year I won't be around. I think I'll stop throwing my voice for a while and live like a human being. Once I studied to be a doctor. Perhaps once more I can—"

He walked out. The rush of words seemed to have left him spiritually limp and wretched.

Shannon Cole watched him go. Then she bent above the discarded figure of little Tom-Tom, who lay on his back and goggled woodenly up at her. She put out a hand toward him, and her full raspberry-tinted lips trembled. Then she, too, left.

And old Bratton stole from his hiding, to where lay the dummy. Lifting it, he realized that here was what he wanted. Again he spoke aloud—he

never held with the belief that talking to onesself is the second or third stage of insanity:

"Clever one, that Gascon. This thing's anatomically perfect, even to the jointed fingers." Thrusting his arm through the slit in the back, he explored the hollow body and head. "Space for organs—yes, every movement and reaction provided for—and a *personality*."

He straightened up, the figure in his arms. "That's it! That's why I've failed! My figures were dead before they began, but this one has life!" He was muttering breathlessly. "It's like a worn shoe, or an inhabited house, or a favorite chair. I don't have to add the life force, I need only to stimulate what's here."

Ben Gascon, at the stage door, had telephoned for a taxi. He turned at the sound of approaching footsteps, and faced old Bratton, who carried Tom-Tom.

"Mr. Gascon—this dummy—"

"I'm through with him," said Gascon shortly.

"Then, can I have him?"

Tom-Tom seemed to stare at Gascon. Was it mockery, or pleading, in those bulging eyes?

"Take him and welcome," said Gascon, and strode out to wait for his taxi.

When old Bratton finished his cleaning that night, he carried away a bulky bundle wrapped in newspapers. He returned to his lodgings, but not to eat or sleep. First he filled the emptiness of Tom-Tom's head and body with the best items culled from his unsuccessful robots—a cunning brain-device, all intricate wiring and radiating tubes set in a mass of synthetic plasm; a complex system of wheels, switches and tubes, in the biggest hollow where a heart, lungs and stomach should be; special wires, of his own alloy, connecting to the ingenious muscles of rubberette that Ben Gascon had devised for Tom-Tom's arms, legs and fingers; a jointed spinal column of aluminum; an artificial voice-box just inside the moveable jaws; and wondrous little marble-shaped camera developments for eyes, in place of the movable mockeries in Tom-Tom's sockets.

It was almost dawn before old Bratton stitched up the slit in the back of Tom-Tom's little checked shirt, and laid the completed creation upon the bedlike slab that was midmost of his great fabric of machinery in the rear room. To Tom-Tom's wrists, ankles, and throat he clamped the leads of powerful terminals. With a gingerly care like that of a surgeon at a delicate operation, he advanced a switch so as to throw the right amount of current into play.

The whole procession of wheeled machinery whispered into motion, its voice rising to a clear hum. A spark sprang from a knob at the top, extended its blinding length to another knob and danced and struggled there like a radiant snake caught between the beaks of two eagles. Old Bratton gave the mechanism more power, faster and more complicated action. His bright eyes clung greedily to the little body lying on the slab.

"He moves, he moves," old Bratton cackled excitedly. "His wheels are going round, all right. Now, if only—"

Abruptly he shut off the current. The machinery fell dead silent.

"Sit up, Tom-Tom!" commanded old Bratton harshly.

And Tom-Tom sat up, his fingers tugging at the clamps that imprisoned him.

THE LOS ANGELES papers made little enough fuss over the death of old Bratton. True, he was murdered—they found him stabbed, lying face down across the threshold of his rear room that was jammed full of strange mechanical junk—but the murder of a janitor is not really big crime news in a city the size of Los Angeles.

The police were baffled, more so because none of them could guess what the great mass of machinery could be, if indeed it were anything. But they

forgot their concern the following week, when they had a more important murder to consider, that of one Digs Dilson.

Digs Dilson was high in the scale of local gang authority. He had long occupied a gaudy apartment in that expensive Los Angeles hotel which has prospered by catering to wealthy criminals. He was prudent enough to have a bedroom with no fire escape. He feared climbing assassins from without more than flames from within. In front of his locked room slept two bodyguards on cots, and his own bedside window was tightly wedged in such a fashion that no more than five inches of opening showed between sill and sash. The electric power-line that was clamped along the brickwork just outside could hardly have supported a greater weight than thirty or forty pounds.

Yet Digs Dilson had been killed at close range, by a stab with an ordinary kitchen knife, as he slept. The knife still remained in the wound, as if defying investigators to trace finger-prints that weren't there. And the bodyguards had not been wakened and the door had remained locked on the inside.

The blade of the knife, had anyone troubled to compare wounds, could have been demonstrated to be the exact size and shape as the one that had killed old Bratton. His landlord might have been able to testify that it came from old Bratton's little store of kitchen utensils. But nobody at police headquarters bothered to connect the murders of a friendless janitor and a grand duke of gangdom. After considerable discussion and publicity, the investigators called the case one of suicide. How else could Digs Dilson have received a knife in his body?

Hope was expressed that the Dilson mob, formerly active and successful in meddling with film extras' organizations and the sea food racket, would now dissolve. But the hope was short-lived.

A spruce lieutenant of the dead chief, a man by the name of Juney Saltz, was reputed to have taken command. He appeared briefly at the auction of old Bratton's effects, buying all the mysterious machinery at junk prices and carting it away. After that, the organization, now called the Salters, blossomed out into the grim but well-paid professions of kidnapping, alien-running and counterfeiting.

The first important kidnapping they achieved, that of a very frightened film director, gained them a ransom of ninety thousand dollars and the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The victim, once released, told of imprisonment in a dank cellar, blindfolded and shackled. Once, fleetingly, he saw a captor who looked like the rogue's gallery photographs of Juney Saltz, but that person was plainly not the one in authority. In fact, he seemed to listen with supple respect to a high but masterful voice that gave orders. And the owner of that high voice once came close to the chair where the prisoner sat bound; the point from which the voice seemed to issue was very, very close to the cellar floor, as though the speaker was no more than two feet high.

An individual short and shrill! Did a child rule that desperate band? The sages of the law were more apt to consider this a clever simulation, with the order—giver crouching low and squeaking high lest he be identified. A judicious drag-netting of several unsavory drinking places brought in one of the old Dilson crowd, who was skilfully, if roughly, induced to talk.

He admitted a part in the kidnapping and ransom collection. He described the cellar hideout as being located in a shabby suburb. He implicated several of his comrades by name, including Juney Saltz. But he shut up with a snap when his interrogators touched on the subject of the Salters' real chief. No, it wasn't Juney Saltz —Juney was only a front. No, nobody

on the police records but, he insisted pallidly, he wouldn't say any more. Let them kill him if they wanted to, he was through talking.

"I'd rather die in the chair this minute than get my turn with the boss," he vowed hysterically. "Don't tell me you'll take care of me, either. There's things can get between bars, through keyholes even, into the deepest hole you got. And you can smack me around all week before I'll pipe up with another word."

His captors shut him in an inside cell generally reserved for psychopathic cases—a solidly plated cubicle, with no window, grating, or other opening save a narrow ventilator in the ceiling that gave upon a ten-inch shaft leading to the roof. Then they gathered reenforcements and weapons and descended on the house with the cellar where the kidnapped director had been held for ransom.

Stealthily surrounding that house, they shouted the customary invitation to surrender. Silence for a few seconds, then a faint-hearted member of the Salters appeared at the front door with his hands up. He took a step into the open, and dropped dead to the accompaniment of a pistol-report from inside. And the besiegers heard the shrill voice about which they had been wondering:

"Come in and take us. This place is as full of death as a drug store!"

Followed a loud and scientific bombardment with machine guns, gas bombs and riot guns. The mobster who had been placed on guard at the back door showed too much of himself and was picked off. A contingent of officers made a quick, planned rush. More fighting inside, with three more Salters dying in hot blood in the parlor and kitchen. What seemed to be the sole survivor fled to the cellar and locked himself in a rear compartment. The walls were of concrete, the one door of massive planking. The chief of the attacking force stood in front of this door and raised his voice:

"Hello, in there! You're Juney Saltz, aren't you?"

Gruff was the reply: "What if I am? Don't try to crack in here. I'll get the first copper shows me his puss, and the second and the third."

"You can't get us all, Juney. And we've got more men out here than you've got bullets in there. Come out with your hands up while you still have the chance to stand a fair trial."

"Not me," growled Juney Saltz from within. "Come in and catch me before you talk about what kind of a trial I'll get."

There was a keyhole, only partially blocked by the turnkey. One of the G-men bent and thrust in the point of something that looked like a fountain pen. Carefully he pressed a stud. The little tube spurted a cloud of tear gas through the keyhole into Juney Saltz's fortress. The besiegers grinned at each other, and all relaxed to wait.

The waiting was not long, as it developed. Juney Saltz spoke up within, his voice a blubber: "Hey! I—I'm s-smothering—"

"But I'm not," drawled the same high voice that was becoming familiar. "Sit back, Juney, and put your head between your knees. You'll stand it better that way."

"I'm—done for!" wailed Juney Saltz. "If they crack in, I—I can't s-see to shoot!"

"I can see to shoot." The shrill voice had become deadly. "And you'll be the first thing I shoot at if you don't do what I tell you."

A strangled howl burst from Juney Saltz. "I'd rather be shot than—" And next moment he was scrabbling at the door. "I surrender! I'll let you bulls in!"

He had turned the key in the lock just as the shot that killed him rang out. A rush of police foiled an attempt from within to fasten the door again. Sneezing and gurgling, two of the raiders burst into the final stronghold, stumbling over the subsiding lump of flesh that had been Juney Saltz.

Blinded by tears from their own gas, they could not be sure afterward of what the scurrying little thing was that they saw and fired at. Those outside knew that nothing could have won past them, and the den itself had no window that was not bricked up. When the gas had been somewhat blown out, an investigator gave the place a thorough searching. Yes, there was one opening, a stovepipe hole through which a cat might have slipped. That was all. And the place was empty but for the body of Juney Saltz.

"Juney was shot in the back," announced another operative, bending to examine the wound. "I think I see what happened. Squeaky-Voice was at that stovepipe hole, and plugged him from there as he tried to let us in. Then Juney tried to lock up again, just as we pushed the door open."

Upstairs they went, and investigated further. The hole had joined a narrow chimney, with no way out except the upper end, a rectangle eight inches by ten. Even with six corpses to show, the agents returned to their headquarters with a feeling of failure. "In the morning," they promised one another, "we'll give that one Salter we're holding another little question bee."

But in the morning, the jailer with breakfast found that prisoner dead.

He had been caught with a noose of thin, strong cord, tightened around his throat from behind. Suicide? But the cord had been drawn into the little ventilator hole, and tied to a projecting rivet far inside and above.

On the same day, police, federal agents, newspapers and the public generally were exercised by the information that Shannon Cole, popular contralto star of stage, screen and radio, had been kidnapped from her Beverly Hills bedroom. No clues, and so the investigation turned to her acquaintances, among whom was Ben Gascon, recently retired from stage, screen and radio.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN GASCON left the office of the Los Angeles chief of detectives, where he had spent a most trying forenoon convincing his interrogators that he had no idea why he should be brought into the case. He knew nothing of the underworld. True, he knew Miss Cole professionally, but —and his face was rueful—had no reason to count himself a really close friend of hers. He had not seen her since the termination of their latest radio assignment. His personal affairs, meanwhile, were quite open to investigation; he had grown weary of ventriloquism, and had retired to live on the income from his investments. Later, he might resume his earlier profession, medicine. He was attending lectures now at the University of California in Los Angeles. And once again, he had no idea of how he was being brought into this case, or of who could have kidnapped Miss Cole.

But, even as he departed, he suddenly got that idea.

"Tom-Tom!"

It took moments to string together the bits of logic which brought that thought into his mind.

Things had happened to people, mostly gangsters, at the hands of a malevolent creature; that is, if the creature had hands—but it must have hands, if it could wield a gun, a slip-cord, a knife! It must also be notably small and nimble, if it really traveled up chimneys, down ventilator shafts, along power-lines and through stovepipe holes. Gascon's imagination, as good as anyone's, toyed with the conception of a wise and wicked monkey, or of a child possessed by evil like the children of old Salem, or a dwarf.

But the point at which he coupled on his theory was the point at which police had paused, or rather begun.

Digs Dilson had been killed with a knife. So had old Bratton.

He, Ben Gascon, had given old Bratton the dummy that people called Tom-Tom. And old Bratton was forthwith murdered. Gascon had meant to go to the funeral, but something had turned

up to interfere. What else concerned the janitor? What, for instance, had the younger electricians and engineers teased him about so often? "Electricity is life," that was old Bratton's constant claim. And he was said to have whole clutters of strange machinery at his shabby rooms.

Bratton had taken Tom-Tom. Thereafter Bratton and others had been killed. In the background of their various tragedies had lurked and plotted something small, evil, active, and strange enough to frighten the most hardened of criminals. "Electricity is life" — and Bratton had toiled over some kind of electrical apparatus that might or might not be new and powerful in ways unknown to ordinary electricians.

Gascon left the rationalization half completed in the back of his mind, and sought out the shabby street where the janitor had lodged.

The landlord could not give him much help. To be sure old Bratton had made a nuisance of himself with his machines, mumbling that they would startle the world some day; but after his death, someone had bought those machines, loaded them upon a truck and carted them off. The landlord had seen the purchase, and later identified the purchaser from newspaper photographs as the late Juney Saltz.

And Juney Saltz, pondered Gascon, had been killed by something with a shrill voice, that could crawl through a stovepipe hole. . . . "You saw the sale of the goods?" he prompted the landlord. "Was there a dummy—a thing like a big doll, such as ventriloquists use?"

The landlord shook his head. "Nothing like that. I'd have noticed if there was."

So Tom-Tom, who had gone home with old Bratton, had vanished.

Gascon left the lodgings and made a call at a newspaper office, where he inserted a personal notice among the classified advertisements:

T-T. I have you figured out. Clever, but your old partner can add two and two and get four. Better let S.C. go. B.F.G.

The notice ran for three days. Then a reply, in the same column:

B.F.G. So what? T-T.

It was bleak, brief defiance, but Gascon felt a sudden blaze of triumph. Somehow he had made a right guess, on a most fantastic proposition. Tom-Tom had come to life as a lawless menace. All that he, Gascon, need do, was act accordingly. He made plans, then inserted another message:

T-T. I made you, and I can break you. This is between us. Get in touch with me, or I'll come looking for you. You won't like that. B.F.G.

Next day his telephone rang. A hoarse voice called him by name:

"Look, Gascon, you better lay off if you know what's good for you."

"Ah," replied Gascon gently, "Tom-Tom seems to have taken up conventional gangster methods. It means that he's afraid—which I'm not. Tell him I'm not laying off, I'm laying on."

That night he took dinner at a restaurant on a side street. As he left it, two men sauntered out of a doorway and came up on either side of him. One was as squat and bulky as a wrestler, with a truculent square face. The other, taller but scrawny, had a broad brow and a narrow chin, presenting the facial triangle which phrenologists claim denotes shrewdness. Both had their hands inside their coats, where bulges betrayed the presence of holstered guns.

"This is a stickup," said Triangle-Face. "Don't make a move or a peep, or we'll cut down on you."

They walked him along the street.

"I'm not moving or peeping," Gascon assured them blandly, "but where are you taking me?"

"Into this car," replied the triangle-faced one, and opened the rear door of a parked sedan. Gascon got in, with the powerful gunman beside him. The other got into the front seat and took the wheel.

"No funny business," he cautioned

as he trod on the starter. "The boss wants to talk to you."

The car drew away from the curb, heading across town. Gascon produced his cigarette case—Shannon Cole had given it to him on his last birthday—opened it, and offered it to the man beside him. Smiling urbanely at the curt growl of refusal, he then selected a cigarette and lighted it.

"Understand one thing," he bade his captors, through a cloud of smoke. "I've expected this. I've worked for it. And I have written very fully about all angles of this particular case. If anything happens to me, the police will get my report."

It was patently a bluff, and in an effort to show that it did not work both men laughed scornfully.

"We're hotter than a couple wolves in a prairie fire right now," the triangle-faced one assured him. "Anyway, no dumb cop would believe the truth about the boss."

That convinced Gascon that he was on his way to Tom-Tom. Too, the remark about "a coupla wolves" showed that the driver thought of only two members of the gang. Tom-Tom's following must have been reduced to these. Gascon sat back with an air of enjoying the ride. Growling again, his big companion leaned over and slapped him around the body. There was no hard lump to betray knife or pistol, and the bulky fellow grunted to show that he was satisfied. Gascon was satisfied as well. His pockets were not probed into, and he was carrying a weapon that, if unorthodox, was nevertheless efficient. He foresaw the need and the chance to use it.

"Is Miss Cole all right?" he asked casually.

"Sure she is," replied Square-Face.

"Pipe down, you!" snapped his companion from the driver's seat. "Let the boss do the talking to this egg."

"Your boss likes to do the talking, I judge," put in Gascon, still casually. "Do you like to listen? Or," and his voice took on a mocking note, "does he give you the creeps?"

"Never mind," Square-Face muttered. "He's doing okay."

"But not his followers," suggested Gascon. "Quite a few of them have been killed, eh? And aren't you two the only survivors of the old Dilson crowd? How long will your luck hold out, I wonder?"

"Longer than yours," replied the man at the wheel sharply. "If you talk any more, we'll put the slug on you."

The remainder of the ride was passed in silence, and the car drew up at length before a quiet suburban cottage, on the edge of town almost directly opposite the scene of the recent fight between police and the Salters.

The three entered a dingy parlor, full of respectable looking furniture. "Keep him here," Triangle-Face bade Square-Face. "I'll go help the boss get ready to talk to him."

He was gone. His words suggested that there would be some moments alone with Square-Face, and Gascon meant to make use of them.

The big fellow sat down. "Take a chair," he bade, but Gascon shook his head and lighted another cigarette. He narrowed his eyes, in his best diagnostician manner, to study his guard.

"You look as if there was something wrong with your glands," he said crisply.

"Ain't nothing wrong with me," was the harsh response.

"Are you sure? How do you feel?"

"Good enough to pull a leg off of you if you don't shut that big mouth."

Gascon shrugged, and turned to a rear wall. A picture hung there, a very unsightly oil painting. He put his hand up, as if to straighten it on its hook. Then he glanced toward a window, letting his eyes dilate. "Ahhhh!" he said softly.

Up jumped the gangster, gun flashing into view. "What did you say?" he demanded.

"I just said 'Ahhhh,' " replied Gascon, his eyes fixed on the window.

"If anybody's followed you here—" The giant broke off and tramped toward the window to look out.

Like a flash Gascon leaped after him. With him he carried the picture, lifted from where it hung. He swept it through the air, using the edge of the frame like a hatchet and aiming at the back of the thick neck.

The blow was powerful and well placed. Knocked clean out, the gangster fell on his face. Gascon stooped, hooked his hands under the armpits, and made shift to drag the slack weight back to its chair. It took all his strength to set his victim back there. Then he drew from his side pocket the thing he had been carrying for days —a wad of cotton which he soaked in chloroform. Holding it to the broad nose, he waited until the last tenseness went out of the great limbs. Then he crossed one leg over the other knee, poised the head against the chair-back, an elbow on a cushioned arm. Clamping the nerveless right hand about the pistol-butt, he arranged it in the man's lap. Now the attitude was one of assured relaxation. Gascon hung the picture back in place, and himself sat down. He still puffed on the cigarette that had not left his lips.

He had more than a minute to wait before the leaner mobster returned. "Ready for you now," he said to Gascon, beckoning him through a rear door. He gave no more than a glance to his quiet, easy-seeming comrade.

They went down some stairs into a basement—plainly basements were an enthusiasm of the commander of this enterprise—and along a corridor. At the end was a door, pulled almost shut, with light showing through the crack. "Go in," ordered Triangle-Face, and turned as if to mount the stairs again.

But it was not Gascon's wish that he find his companion senseless. In fact, Gascon had no intention of leaving anyone in the way of the retreat he hoped to make later. With his hand on the doorknob, he spoke:

"One thing, my friend."

Triangle-Face paused and turned. "I'm no friend of yours. What do you want?"

Gascon extended his other hand. "Wish me luck."

"The only luck I wish you is bad. Don't try to grab hold of me."

The gangster's hand slid into the front of his coat, toward that bulge that denoted an armpit holster. Gascon sprang upon him, catching him by the sleeve near the elbow so that he could not whip free with the weapon. Gascon's other hand dived into his own pocket, again clutching the big wad of chloroform-soaked cotton.

He whipped the wad at and upon the triangular face. The man tried to writhe away but Gascon, heavier and harder-muscled than he, shoved him against the wall, where the back of his head could be clamped and held. Struggling, the fellow breathed deeply, again, again. His frantic flounderings suddenly went feeble. Gascon judged the dose sufficient, and let go his holds. The man subsided limply and Gascon, still holding to his sleeve, dragged the right hand out of the coat. Dropping his wad of cotton, he took up the big pistol.

"I'm afraid, Gaspipe," said a shrill, wise voice he should know better than anyone in the world, "that that gun won't really help you a nickel's worth."

Gascon spun around. A moment ago he had put his hand on the doorknob. When he had turned to leap at the triangle-faced man, he had pulled the door open. Now he could see inside a bare, officelike room, a big sturdy desk and a figure just beyond; a figure calm and assured, but so tiny, so grotesque.

"Come in, Gaspipe," commanded Tom-Tom, the dummy.

TOM-TOM did not look as Gascon had remembered him. The checked jacket was filthy and frayed, and in the breast of it was a round black hole the size of a fingertip. The paint

had been flaked away from the comical face, one broad ear was half broken off, the wig was tousled and matted. And the eyes goggled no more in the clownish fashion that had been made so famous in publicity photographs. They crouched deep in Tom-Tom's wooden face and glowed greenly, like the eyes of a meat-eating animal.

"You're the only man I ever expected to figure me out, Gaspipe," said Tom-Tom. "And even you can't do much about it, can you? Put away the gun. I've been shot at and shot at, and it does nothing but make little holes like this."

He tapped the black rent in his jacket-front with a jointed forefinger.

"As a matter of fact, I was glad to see your notice in the agony column. I think I'd have hunted you up, anyway. You see, we make a fine team, Gaspipe. There are things we can still do for each other, but you must be reasonable."

"I'm not here to let you make fun of me," said Gascon. "You're just a little freak, brought to life by the chance power evolved by a cracked old intelligence. Once I puzzled it out, I knew that I needn't be afraid. You can't do anything to me."

"No?" said Tom-Tom, with what seemed a chuckle. "Let me show you something, Gaspipe."

His wooden hand moved across the desk-top and touched a button. A section of the wall slid back like a stage curtain, revealing an opening the size of a closet door. The opening was fenced in with a metal grating. Behind it stood Shannon Cole, her long black hair awry, her face pale, her cloth-of-gold pajamas rumpled.

"Ben!" she said, in a voice that choked. "Did he get you, too?"

Gascon exclaimed, and turned as if to spring toward the grating. But at the same instant, with a swiftness that was more than a cat's, Tom-Tom also moved. He seemed to fly across his desk as though flung by a catapult. His hard head struck Gascon's stomach, doubling him up, and then Tom-Tom's arms whipped around Gascon's ankles, dragging them sidewise. Down fell the ventriloquist, heavily and clumsily. The gun flew from his hand, bouncing on the floor like a ball. Tom-Tom caught it in mid-bounce, and lifted it with both hands.

"I won't kill you, Gaspipe," he announced, "but I'll most emphatically shoot off your kneecap, if you try anything sudden again. Sit up. Put your back against that wall. And listen."

"Do what he says, Ben! He means business!" Shannon Cole urged tremulously from behind her bars.

Gascon obeyed, trying to think of a way to grapple that imp of wood and fabric. Tom-Tom chuckled again, turned back to his desk and scrambled lightly upon it. As before he touched the button, and Shannon was instantly shut from sight.

"Good thing I kidnapped her," he observed. "Not only is she worth thousands to her managers, but she brought you to me. Now we'll have a dandy conference. Just like old times, isn't it, Gaspipe?"

Gascon sat still, eyeing the gun. He might have risked its menace, but for the thought of Shannon behind those bars. Tom-Tom, so weirdly strong, might fight him off even if disarmed, then turn on his captive. The dummy that was no longer a dummy seemed to read his mind:

"No violence, Gaspipe. I tell you, it's been tried before. When the Dilson mobsters were through laughing at the idea of my taking over, one or two thought that Digs Dilson should be avenged. But their guns didn't even make me blink. I killed a couple, and impressed the others. I put into them the fear of Tom-Tom." Again the chuckle. "I'm almost as hard to hurt as I am to fool, Gaspipe. And that's very, very hard indeed."

"What do you want of me?" blurted Gascon, scowling.

"Now that's a question," nodded Tom-Tom. "It might be extended a little. What do I want of life, Gas-

pipe? Life is here with me, but I never asked for it. It was thrust into me, and upon me. My first feeling was of crazy rage toward the life-giver—"

"And so you killed him?" interrupted Gascon.

"I did. And the killing gave me the answer. The only thing worth while in life is taking life."

Tom-Tom spread his wooden hands, as though he felt that he had made a neat point. Gascon made a quick gesture of protest, then subsided as Tom-Tom picked up the gun again.

"You're wrong, Tom-Tom," he said earnestly.

"Am I? You're going to give me a moral lecture, are you? But men invented morals, so as to protect their souls. I don't have a soul, Gaspipe. I don't have to worry about protecting it. I'm not human. I'm a *thing*." Sitting on the desk, he crossed his legs and fiddled with the gun. "You've lived longer than I. What else, besides killing, is worth while in life?"

"Why—enjoyment—"

The marred head waggled. "Enjoyment of what? Food? I can't eat. Companionship? I doubt it, where a freak like me is concerned. Possessions? But I can't use clothes or houses or money or anything like that. They're for men, not dummies. What else, Gaspipe?"

"Why—why—" This time Gascon fell silent.

"Love, you were going to say?" The chuckle was louder, and the glowing yellow eyes flickered aside toward the place behind the wall where Shannon was penned up. "You're being stupid, Gaspipe. Because you know what love is, you think others do. Gaspipe, I'll never know what love is. I'm not made for it."

"I see you aren't," Gascon nodded solemnly. "All right, Tom-Tom. You can find life worth living if you try for supremacy in some line—leadership—"

"That," said Tom-Tom, "is where killing comes in. And where you come in, too."

He laid down the gun and put the tips of his jointed fingers together, in a pose grotesquely like that of a mild lecturer. "I've given my case a lot of time and thought, you see. I realize that I don't fit in— humanity hasn't ever considered making a place for me. I don't have needs or reactions or wishes to fit those of humanity."

"Is that why you turn to criminals? Because they don't fit into normal human ethics, either?"

"Exactly, exactly." Tom-Tom nodded above his poised hands. "And criminals understand me, and I understand them better than you think. But," and he sounded a little weary, "they're no good, either.

"You see, Gaspipe, they scare too easily. They die too easily. Just now you overpowered one. They're not fit to associate with me on the terms I dictate. If I'm going to have power, it will turn what passes for my stomach if I have only people—people of meat and bone—under me." He made a spitting sound, such as Gascon had often faked for him in the days when the two were performing. "As I say, this is where you come in."

"In heaven's name, what do you mean?"

"You're smart, Gaspipe. You made me—the one thing that has been given artificial life. Well, you'll make other things to be animated."

"More robots?" demanded Gascon. "You want a science factory."

"I am the apex of science come true. Oh, it's practical. A couple at first. Then ten. Then a hundred. Then enough, perhaps, to grab a piece of the world and rule it. Don't bug out your eyes, Gaspipe. My followers bought up the life-making machinery and other things for me. I have lots of money—from that ransom—and I can get more."

Gascon was finding the idea not so surprising as at first, but he shook his head over it. "I won't."

"Yes, you will. We'll be partners again. Understand?"

"If I refuse?"

Tom-Tom made no audible answer. He only turned and gazed meaningly at the place where Shannon was shut up.

Gascon sighed and rose. "Show me this machinery of yours."

"Step this way." Monkey-nimble, Tom-Tom hopped to the floor. He had taken up the gun again, and gestured with it for Gascon to walk beside him. Together they crossed the office to a rear corner, where Tom-Tom touched what looked like a projecting nail head. As with the door to Shannon's cell, a panel slid back. They passed into a corridor, and the panel closed behind them.

"Straight ahead," came the voice of Tom-Tom in the darkness. "Being mechanical, I have a head for mechanics. I devised all these secret panels. Neat?"

"Dramatic," replied Gascon, who could be ironical himself. "Now, Tom-Tom, if I do what you want, what happens to me and to Miss Cole?"

"You both stay with me."

"You won't let them ransom her?"

A chuckle, and: "I'll take the ransom money, but she's seen too much to go free. Maybe I'll make the two of you a nice suite of rooms for housekeeping—barred in, of course. Didn't you use to carry me around in a little case, Gaspipe? I'll take just as good care of you, if you do what I want."

The little monster did something or other to open a second door, and beyond showed the light of a strong electric lamp. They passed into a big windowless room, with rough wooden walls, probably a deep cellar. It held a complicated arrangement of electrical machinery.

Hopping lightly to a bench the height of Gascon's shoulder, Tom-Tom seized a switch and closed it. There were emissions of sparks, a stir of wheels and belts, and the hum of machinery being set in motion.

"This, Gaspipe, is what brought me to life. And look!" The jointed wooden hand flourished toward a corner. "There's the kind of thing that was tried and failed."

It looked like a caricature of an armored knight — a tall, jointed, gleaming thing, half again as big as a big man, with a head shaped like a bucket. There were no features except two vacant eyes of quartz, staring through the blank metal as through a mask. Gascon walked around it, his doctor-mind and builder-hands immediately interested. The body was but loosely pinned together, and he drew aside a plate, peering into the works.

The principle's wrong," he announced at once. "The fellow didn't understand anatomical balance—"

"I knew it, I knew it!" cried Tom-Tom. "You can add the right touch. Gaspipe. That's the specimen that came closest to success before me. I'll help. After all, my brain was made by the old boy who did all these things. Through it, I know what he knew."

"Why didn't you save him to help you?" demanded Gascon. He picked up a pair of tapering pincers and a small wrench, and began to tinker.

"I told you about that once. I was angry. My first impulse was a killing rage. The death of my life-giver was my first pleasure and triumph. I hadn't dreamed up the plan I've been describing."

Anger was Tom-Tom's first emotion. Not so different from human beings as the creature imagined, mused Gascon. What had the lecturer at medical school once quoted from Emmanuel Kant:

"The outcry that is heard from a child just born was not the note of lamentation, but of indignation and aroused wrath."

Of course, a new-born baby has not the strength to visit its rage on mother or nurse or doctor, but a creature as organized and powerful in body and mind as Tom-Tom—or as huge and overwhelming as this metal giant he fiddled with—

Gascon decided to think such thoughts with the greatest stealth. If Tom-Tom could divine them, some-

thing terrible was due to happen. Stripping off his coat, he went to work on the robot with deadly earnestness.

MORNING HAD PROBABLY come to the outside world. Gascon, wan and weary, stepped back and mopped his brow with a shirt sleeve. Tom-Tom spoke from where he sat cross-legged on the bench beside the controls.

"Is he pretty much in shape, Gaspipe?"

"As much as you ever were, Tom-Tom. If you are right, and this machine gave you life, it will give him life, too."

"I can't wait for my man Friday. Get him over and lay him on the slab."

The metal man was too heavy to lift, but Gascon's hours of work had provided his joints with beautiful balance. An arm around the tanklike waist was enough to support and guide. The weight shifted from one big shovel-foot to the other and the massive bulk actually walked to the table-like slab in the midst of the wheels and tubes, and Gascon eased it down at full length. Now Tom-Tom approached, bringing a spongy-looking object on a metal tray, an amorphous roundness that sprouted copper wires in all directions. He slid it into the open top of the robot's bucketlike head.

"That's a brain for Friday," explained Tom-Tom. "Not as complex as mine, but made the same way. He'll have simple reactions and impulses. A model servant."

Simple reactions — and Tom-Tom had sprung up from his birthcouch to kill the man who brought him to life. Gascon's hands trembled ever so slightly as he connected the brain wires to terminals that did duty as nerves. Tom-Tom himself laid a plate over the orifice and stuck it down with a soldering iron.

"My own brain's armored inside this wooden skull," he commented. "No bullet or axe could reach it. And nobody can hurt the brain of Friday here unless they get at him from above. He's pretty tall to get at from above, eh, Gaspipe?"

"That's right," nodded Gascon, and in his mind rose a picture of the big metal thing bending down, exposing that vulnerable soldered patch. Tom-Tom and he clamped the leads to wrists, ankles and neck.

"Get back to the wall, Gaspipe," commanded Tom-Tom bleakly, and Gascon obeyed. "Now watch. And don't move, or I'll set Friday on you when he wakes up."

Gascon sat down on a long, low bench next to the open door. Tom-Tom noticed his position, and lifted the gun he had carried into the chamber.

"Don't try to run," he warned, "or I'll drill you—maybe in the stomach. And you can lie there and die slowly. When you die there'll be nobody to help Shanny yonder in her little hole in the wall."

"I won't run," promised Gascon. And Tom-Tom switched on more power.

Sparks, a shuddering roar, a quickening of all parts of the machine. The shining hulk on the slab stirred and quivered, like a man troubled by dreams. Tom-Tom gave a brief barking laugh of triumph, brought the mechanism to a howling crescendo of sound and motion, then abruptly shut it down to a murmur.

"Friday! Friday!" he called.

Slowly the metal giant sat up in its bonds.

The bucket-head, with its vacant eyes now gleaming as yellow as Tom-Tom's, turned in that direction. Then, with unthinkable swiftness, the big metal body heaved itself erect, ripping free of the clamps that had been fastened upon it. Up rose two monstrous hands, like baseball gloves of jointed iron. There was a clashing, heavy-footed charge.

Sitting still as death, Gascon again recalled to mind what Tom-Tom had said, what he had heard at medical school.

Tom-Tom gave a prolonged yell,

and threw up the gun to fire. The explosions rattled and rolled in the narrow confinement of the room. Bullets spattered the armor-plated breast of the oncoming giant. One knocked away a gleaming eye. The towering thing did not falter in its dash. Tom-Tom tried to spring down too late. The big hands flashed out, and had him.

Gascon, now daring to move, dragged the bench across the doorway. From a corner he caught up a heavy wrought-iron socket lever, as long as a walking stick and nearly as thick as his wrist. All the while he watched, over his shoulder, a battle that was not all one-sided.

After his final effort to command the newly animated giant, Tom-Tom had not made a sound. He concentrated on freeing himself from the grip that had fastened upon him. Both his wooden hands clutched a single finger, strained against it. Gascon saw, almost as in a ridiculous dream, that immense finger bending backward, backward, and tearing from its socket. But the other fingers kept their hold. They laid Tom-Tom on the floor, a great slab of a foot pinned him there. The two metal hands began to pluck him to pieces, and to throw the pieces away.

First an arm in a plaid sleeve flew across the room—an arm ripped from Tom-Tom's little sleeve, an arm that still writhed and wriggled, its fingers opening and closing. It fell among the wheels that still turned, jamming them. Sparks sprang up with a grating rattle. Then a flame of blueness. Gascon turned his back toward the doorway that he had blocked with the bench, to see the thing out.

With a wanton fury, the victorious ogre of metal had shredded Tom-Tom's body, hurling the pieces in all directions. To one side, the machinery was putting forth more flame and more. The blaze licked up the wall. The giant straightened his body at last, holding in one paw the detached head of its victim. The jaws of Tom-Tom snapped and moved, as though he was trying to speak.

"Look this way!" roared Gascon at the top of his voice.

The creature heard him. Its head swiveled doorward. It stared with one gleaming eye and one empty black socket. Gascon brandished the socket lever over his head, as though in challenge, then turned and sprang over the bench into the dark corridor.

A jangling din as the thing rushed after him. Hands shot out to clutch. Its shins struck the bench violently, the feet lost their grip of the floor, and the clumsy structure plunged forward and down, with a noise like an automobile striking a stone wall. For a moment the huge head was just at Gascon's knee.

He struck. The solder-fastened patch flew away under the impact of his clubbed lever-bar like a driven golf ball. The cranium yawned open, and he jabbed the bar in. Something squashed and yielded before his prodding—the delicate artificial brain. Then the struggling shape at his feet subsided. From one relaxing hand rolled something round—the head of Tom-Tom.

It still lived, for the eyes rolled up to glare at Gascon, the jaws snapped at his toe. He kicked the thing back through the door, into the growing flames. The fire was bright enough to show him the way back along the corridor. He did not know how Tom-Tom had arranged the panel to open and close, nor did he pause to find out. Heavy blows of the bar cleared him a way.

Out in the office, he fairly sprang to the desk, located the button on its top, and pressed it. A moment later, Shannon was staring out at him through her grating.

"Ben!" she gasped. "Are you all right? Tom-Tom—"

"He's finished," Gascon told her. "This whole business is finished." With his lever he managed to rip the grating from its fastenings, and then dragged Shannon forth. She clung to

him like a child awakened from a nightmare.

"Come, we're getting out."

In the second corridor he stooped, searched the pockets of the senseless triangle-faced one and secured the keys to the car outside. Then he shook the fellow back to semi-consciousness.

"This house is on fire!" Gascon shouted. "Get your pal upstairs on his feet, and get out of here."

Leaving the fellow standing weakly, Gascon and Shannon got into the open and into the car. Driving along the street, they heard the clang of fire-engines, heading for the now angry fire.

Shannon said one thing: "Ben, how much can we tell the police?"

"It isn't how much we can tell them," replied Gascon weightily. "It's how little."

WHEN Autumn returned, Ben Gascon was on the air again after all. His sponsors feared that his marriage to Shannon Cole might damage their popularity as co-stars, but radio fans showed quite the opposite reaction. Gascon introduced a fresh note in the form of a new dummy, which he named Jack Duffy, a green-horn character with a husky voice instead of a shrill one and rural humor instead of cocktail-hour repartee.

Sometimes people asked what had become of Tom-Tom; but Gascon always managed to change the subject, and eventually Tom-Tom was forgotten.

THE "COMET" IS HERE

Editorial by Orlin Tremaine

WERE you ever fortunate enough to watch a comet in its course across the sky? Did you ever sit up through the night hours—and forget that they were passing in the glory of the sight of grandeur in the heavens? Some of us have had the experience—and we can't forget it. The sweeping grandeur of the all-encompassing coma, the tail which dims and obliterates the stars and planets, is comparable to nothing else in all the heavens.

A cosmic spaceship which nears the earth like a sightseeing interspacial bus from Jupiter, seems to us to pause just for an instant at perihelion, then continues its course past the outer reaches of the solar universe and on—on into the uttermost magnitudes of space.

It is thus the "COMET" comes to you, pausing at perihelion for new passengers. Our course is not set prosaically like a planet. We are free to roam the outer universe together on a trip through time and space.

I want you to feel that it is our project, our rocket flight into the realm of those super worlds that lie beyond the rim of sight. I want to hear your reactions every month so that we may set our course together through the star lanes. We can do it, you and I, as we have done it before. Remember?

It has to be a cooperative venture for the ship requires fuel for her journey. And you can help to provide that fuel. Will you please? It doesn't require much effort on your part. We both want the finest science-fiction gathered inside one single set of covers. I'm going to do my very best to fulfill that wish in the COMET. This first issue will serve as proof when you consider the galaxy of stars that boarded our craft for its first trip.

Will you pass the word along? Tell your friends that I'm back aboard, and urge them to try just one trip with us? Do it now while the first issue is still on the stands. Give them all the opportunity to start their files with the very first issue.

If you'll do that for me, I'll gather the finest writers in the field together for you, and the best artists, and between us we'll make *our* "COMET" so worthwhile that it will reach out to new fields and a new audience.

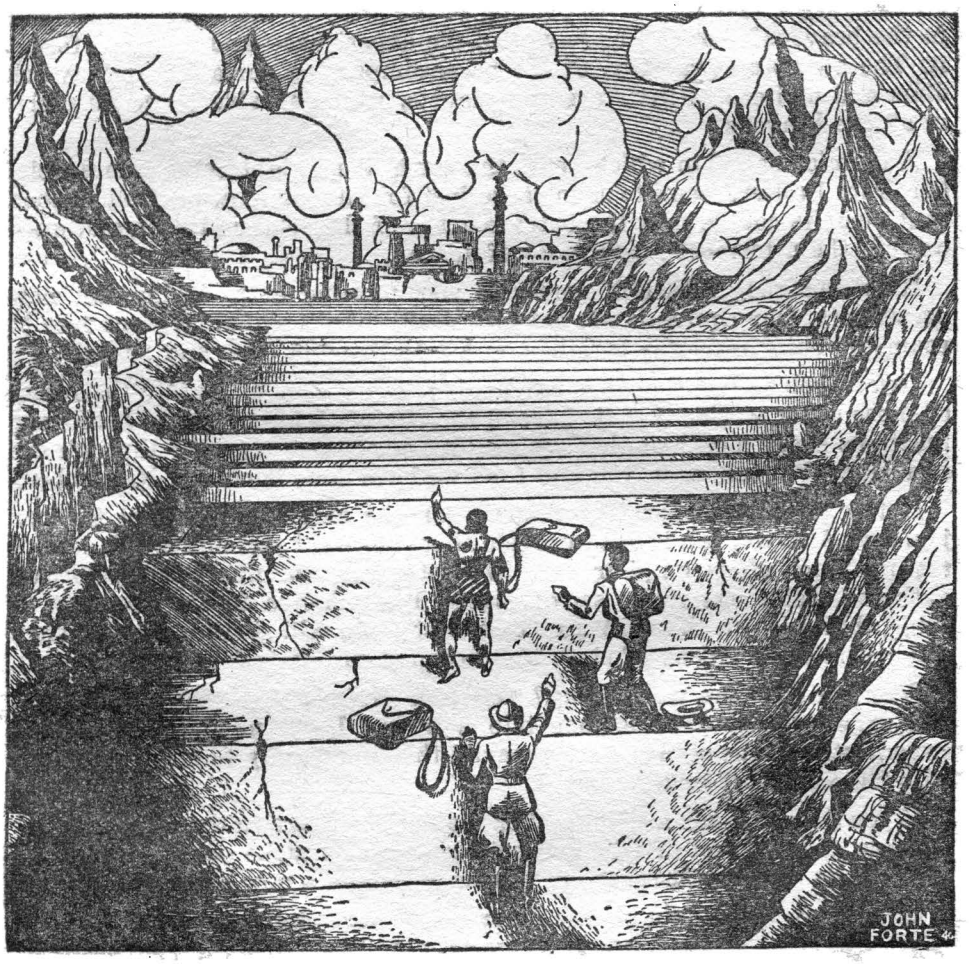
Nothing in this world or any other can be accomplished without united effort. We need a bigger audience every month to support the program of the COMET. I feel confident we'll get it with your help. We have seen the field scattered. Let's draw it together again, you and I.

For me, it's like coming back again into the home circle. There isn't any other place where the feeling of kinship exists as it does in science-fiction. We have dreamed dreams together and watched them come true. We have seen the New York World's Fair demonstrate the world of tomorrow as an actuality. We have seen the war in Europe demonstrate the machines of war described in science fiction years ago. We have seen the atom smashed, as science-fiction foretold that it would be.

And now we are set to go again in our cosmic space ship. The COMET will travel on its itinerary past the milky way, past the blind spot, into the unknown. Let's each of us invite his friends aboard. The ship is big enough to carry everyone. I'm counting on you.

THE PRIMAL CITY

by CLARK ASHTON SMITH



Steps breast high led upward in a giant's pathway. The city towered among clouds that seemed to assume form.

IN these after days, when all things are touched with insoluble doubt, I am not sure of the purpose that had taken us into that little-visited land. I recall, however, that we had found explicit mention, in a volume of which we possessed the one existing copy, of certain vast primordial ruins lying amid the bare plateaus and stark pinnacles of the region. How we had acquired the volume I do not remember; but Sebastian Polder and I had given our youth and manhood to the quest of hidden knowledge; and this book was a compendium of all things that men have forgotten or ignored in their desire to repudiate the inexplicable.

We, being enamored of mystery, and seeking ever for the clues that science has disregarded, pondered much upon those pages written in an

antique alphabet. The location of the ruins was clearly stated, though in terms of an obsolete geography; and I remember our excitement when we had marked the position on a terrestrial globe. We were consumed by a wild eagerness to visit the alien city. Perhaps we wished to verify a strange and fearful theory which we had formed regarding the nature of the earth's primal inhabitants; perhaps we sought to recover the buried records of a lost science. It does not matter what our purpose was.

I recall nothing of the first stages of our journey, which must have been long and arduous. But I recall distinctly that we travelled for many days amid the bleak, treeless uplands that rose like a many-tiered embankment toward the range of high pyramidal summits guarding the secret city. Our guide was a native of the country, sodden and taciturn, with intelligence little above that of the llamas who carried our supplies. But we had been assured that he knew the way to the ruins, which had long been forgotten by most of his fellow-countrymen. Rare and scant was the local legend regarding the place and its builders; and, after many queries, we could add nothing to the knowledge gained from the immemorial volume. The city, it seemed, was nameless; and the region about it untrodden by man.

Desire and curiosity raged within us like a calenture; and we heeded little the hazards and travails of our journey. Over us stood the eternally vacant heavens, matching the vacant landscape. The route steepened; and above us now was a wilderness of cragged and chasmed rock, where nothing dwelt but the sinister wide-winged condors.

Often we lost sight of certain eminent peaks that had served us for landmarks. But it seemed that our guide knew the way, as if led by an instinct more subtle than memory or intelligence; and at no time did he hesitate. At intervals we came to the broken fragments of a paved road that had formerly traversed the whole of this rugged region: broad, cyclopean blocks of gneiss, channeled as if by the storms of cycles older than human history. And in some of the deeper chasms we saw the eroded piers of great bridges that had spanned them in other time. These ruins reassured us for in the primordial volume there was mention of a highway and of mighty bridges, leading to the fabulous city.

Polder and I were exultant; and yet we both shivered with a curious terror when we tried to read certain inscriptions that were still deeply engraved on the worn stones. No living man, though erudite in all the tongues of Earth, could have deciphered those characters; and perhaps it was their very strangeness that frightened us. We had sought diligently during many years for all that transcends the dead level of life through age or remoteness or strangeness; we had longed for the elder science: but such longing was not incompatible with fear. Better than those who had walked always in the common paths, we knew the perils that might attend our ambitious researches.

Often we had debated on fantastic conjectures of the enigma of the mountain-built city. But toward our journey's end, when the vestiges of that pristine people multiplied around us, we fell into long periods of silence, sharing the awed taciturnity of our stolid guide. Thoughts came to us that were too great for utterance; the chill of realization entered our hearts from the ruins—and did not depart.

We toiled on between the desolate rocks and the sterile heavens, breathing an air that became thin and painful to the lungs, as if from some admixture of cosmic ether. At high noon we reached an open pass and saw before us, at the end of a long and vertiginous perspective, the city that had been described as an unnamed ruin in a volume antedating all other known books.

The place was built on an inner peak of the range, surrounded by snowless summits little sterner and loftier than itself. On one side the peak fell in a thousand-foot precipice from the overhanging ramparts; on another, it was terraced with wild clifts; but the third side, facing toward us, was no more than a steep and broken acclivity. The rock of the whole mountain was strangely ruinous and black; but the city walls, though equally worn and riven, were conspicuous above it at a distance of leagues, being plainly of megalithic vastness.

Polder and I beheld the bourn of our world-wide search with unvoiced thoughts and emotions. The Indian made no comment, pointing impassively toward the far summit with its crown of ruins. We hurried on, wishing to complete our journey by daylight; and, after plunging into an abysmal valley, we began at mid-afternoon the ascent of the slope toward the city.

It was like climbing amid the overthrown and fire-blasted blocks of a titan citadel. Everywhere the slope was rent into huge, obliquely angled masses, often partly vitrified. Plainly, at some former time, it had been subjected to the action of intense heat; and yet there were no volcanic craters in that vicinity. I felt a vague sense of awe and terror, as I recalled a passage in the old volume, hinting ambiguously at the fate that had long ago destroyed the city's inhabitants:

"For the people of that city had reared its walls and towers too high amid the region of the clouds; and the clouds came down in their anger and smote the city with dreadful fires; and thereafter the place was peopled no more by those primal giants who had built it, but had only the clouds for habitants and custodians."

Plainly a pre-historic rationalization of the danger of electrical storms.

We had left our three llamas at the slope's bottom, merely taking with us provisions for one night. Thus, unhampered, we made fair progress in spite of the ever-varying obstacles offered by the shattered scarps. After a while we came to the hewn steps of a stairway mounting toward the summit; but the steps had been wrought for the feet of colossi, and, in many places, were part of the heaved and tilted ruin; so they did not greatly facilitate our climbing.

The sun was still high above the western pass behind us; and I was surprised, as we went on, by a sudden deepening of the char-like blackness on the rocks. Turning, I saw that several grayish vapory masses, which might have been either clouds or smoke, were drifting about the summits that overlooked the pass; and one of these masses, rearing like a limbless figure, upright and colossal, had interposed itself between us and the sun.

I called the attention of my companions to this phenomenon, for clouds were almost unheard-of amid those arid mountains in summer, and the presence of smoke would have been equally hard to explain. Moreover, the gray masses were different from any cloud-forms we had ever seen. They possessed a peculiar opacity and sharpness of outline, a baffling suggestion of weight and solidity. Moving sluggishly into the heavens above the pass, they preserved their contours and their separateness. They seemed to swell and tower, coming toward us on the blue air from which, as yet, no lightest breath of wind had reached us. Floating thus, they maintained the erectness of massive columns or of giants marching on a plain.

I think we all felt an alarm that was none the less urgent for its vagueness. Somehow, from that instant, it seemed that we were penned up by unknown powers and cut off from the possibility of retreat. All at once, the dim legends of the ancient volume had assumed a menacing reality. We had ventured into a place of peril—and the peril was upon us. In the movement of the

clouds there was something alert, deliberate and implacable. Polder spoke with a sort of horror in his voice, uttering the thought that had already occurred to me:

"They are the sentinels who guard this region—and they have seen us!"

We heard a harsh cry from the Indian, who stood gazing and pointing upward. Several of the unnatural cloud-shapes had appeared on the summit toward which we were climbing, above the megalithic ruins. Some arose half hidden by the walls, as if from behind a breast-work; others stood, as it were, on the topmost towers and battlements, bulking in portentous menace, like the cumuli of a thunderstorm.

Then, with terrifying swiftness, many more of the cloud-presences towered from the four quarters, emerging from behind the great peaks or assuming sudden visibility in mid-air. With equal and effortless speed, as if convinced by an unheard command, they gathered in converging lines upon the eyrie-like ruins. We, the climbers, and the whole slope about us and the valley below, were plunged in a twilight cast by the clouds.

The air was still windless, but it weighed upon us as if burdened with the wings of a thousand evil demons. We were overwhelmingly conscious of our exposed position, for we had paused on a wide landing of the mountain-hewn steps. We could have concealed ourselves amid the huge fragments on the slope; but, for the nonce, we were too exhausted to be capable of the simplest movement. The rarity of the air had left us weak and gasping. And the chill of altitude crept into us.

In a close-ranged army, the Clouds mustered above and around us. They rose into the very zenith, swelling to insuperable vastness, and darkening like Tartar gods. The sun had disappeared, leaving no faintest beam to prove that it still hung unfallen and undestroyed in the heavens.

I felt that I was crushed into the very stone by the eyeless regard of that awful assemblage, judging and condemning. We had, I thought, trespassed upon a region conquered long ago by strange elemental entities and forbidden henceforward to man. We had approached their very citadel; and now we must meet the doom our rashness had invited. Such thoughts, like a black lightning, flared in my brain, even as my logic tried to analyze the reason for the thoughts.

Now, for the first time, I became aware of sound, if the word can be applied to a sensation so anomalous. It was as if the oppression that weighed upon me had become audible; as if palpable thunders poured over and past me. I felt and *heard* them in every nerve, and they roared through my brain like torrents from the opened floodgates of some tremendous weir in a world of genii. Lightning crashed.

Downward upon us, with limbless Atlantean stridings, there swept the cloudy cohorts. Their swiftness was that of powered aircraft. The air was riven as if by the tumult of a thousand tempests, was rife with an unmeasured elemental malignity. I recall but partially the events that ensued; but the impression of insufferable darkness, of demonic clamor and trampling, and the pressure of thunderous onset, remains forever indelible. Also, there were voices that called out with the stridor of clarions in a war of gods, uttering ominous syllables that man's ear could never perceive.

Before those vengeful shapes, we could not stand for an instant. We hurled ourselves madly down the shadowed steps of the giant stairs. Polder and the guide were a little ahead of me, and I saw them in that baleful twilight through sheets of sudden rain, on the verge of a deep chasm, which, in our ascent, had compelled us to much circumambulation. I saw them fall together—and yet I swear that they did not fall into the chasm: for one of the clouds was upon

them, whirling over them, even as they fell. There was a fusion as of forms beheld in delirium. For an instant the two men were like vapors that swelled and swirled, towering high as the cloud that had covered them; and the cloud itself was a misty Janus, with two heads and bodies, melting into its column. . .

After that I remember nothing more except the sense of vertiginous falling. By some miracle I must have reached the edge of the chasm and flung myself into its depths without reason, as the others had. How I escaped is forevermore an enigma.

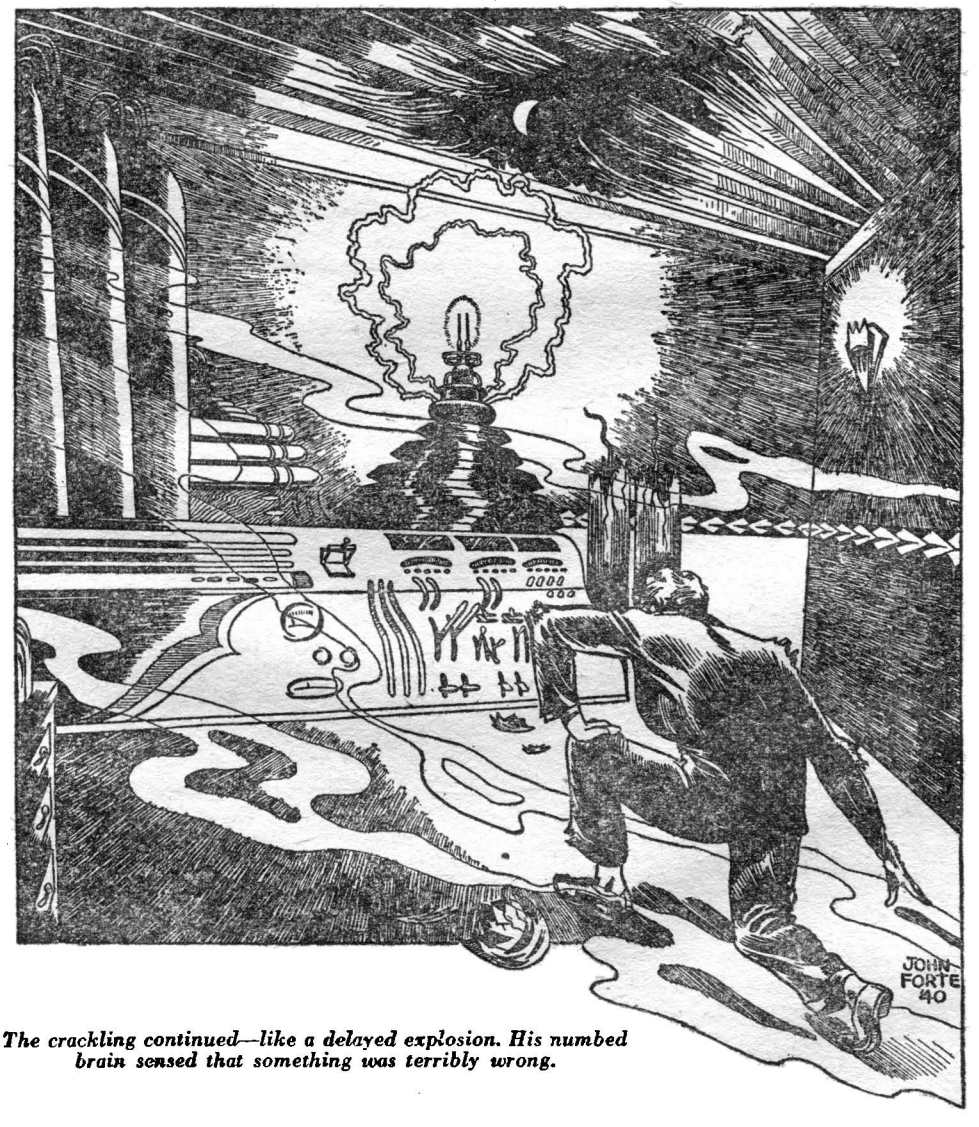
When I returned to awareness, stars were peering down like chill incurious eyes between black and jagged lips of rock. The air had turned sharp with nightfall in a mountain land. My body ached with a hundred bruises and my right forearm was limp and useless when I tried to raise myself. A dark mist of horror stifled my thoughts. Struggling to my feet with pain-racked effort, I called aloud, though I knew that none would answer me. Then, striking match after match, I searched the chasm and found myself, as I had expected, alone. Nowhere was there any trace of my companions: they had vanished utterly—somewhere among the crevices.

Somehow, by night, with a broken arm, I climbed from the steep fissure. I must have made my way down the frightful mountainside and out of that nameless haunted and guarded land. I remember that the sky was clear, that the stars were undimmed by any semblance of cloud; and that somewhere in the valley I found one of our llamas, still laden with its stock of provisions.

Plainly I was not pursued by clouds! Perhaps they were concerned only with the warding of that mysterious primal city from human intrusion. Some day I shall learn their true nature and entity, and the secret of those ruinous walls and crumbling keeps, and the fate of my companions. But still, through my nightly dreams and diurnal visions, the dark shapes move with the tumult and thunder of a thousand storms; my soul is crushed into the earth with the burden of fear, and they pass over me with the speed and vastness of vengeful gods: I hear their voices calling like clarions in the sky, with ominous, world-shaking syllables that the ear can never seize. Yet I know that, whatever opiate dust invests the atmosphere of the mountaintop, I can build a gas mask to withstand it. Whatever drug made a thunderstorm appear to create such awful menace, I shall overcome it. I'm going back—alone as soon as my chemical analysis of my thermos bottleful of air has given me the power. And I wonder if perhaps I may not find my companions wandering, madly among the ruins.

EYES THAT WATCH

by RAYMOND Z. GALLUN



The crackling continued—like a delayed explosion. His numbed brain sensed that something was terribly wrong.

The Guardians of Space Keep Constant Vigil.

HE, Sam Conway, was back from Mars now. Back from red, ferric, deserts no Earthly boot had ever touched before. Back from bitter cold and aching dryness. Back from dazzling yellow hazes of dust and suspended ice crystals. No more need to wear oxygen armor in a thin, ozone-tainted atmosphere now. Back from solitude, and the endless

fight to keep alive out there. Back from the enigma of Martian civilization's extinction, uncounted ages ago. . . . Back, back, back. . . .

Home, now! From the window Sam Conway could see a row of maples, orange and golden in the autumn warmth. Kids were playing football in the street. Sam's oxy-hydrogen rocket ship, blued and battered and burnt, was suspended for all time from massive girders in the Smithsonian Institution. But even that was far away from Bryton, here. It should have been finished, now—the adventure. Sam Conway should have relaxed. Even Ellen Varney was beside him now. That should have helped. It did, a little. Yet only for only for moments at a time.

Those twenty months of exploration on another world, had become like a phantom in Sam's thoughts. Faded, distant, contrasting; yet starkly vivid too. Every hour had been a struggle. Extracting food substances from the tissues and juices of strange plants. Roasting native potassium chlorate in a small sun-furnace to extract oxygen from it, and compressing the precious gas into steel flasks. All this had been necessary, the dying Martian atmosphere contained only a low percentage of oxygen.

It had been a strange hand-to-mouth existence out there——a kind of game in which a fellow tried always to keep one small jump ahead of Death.

Hauling a crude little metal wagon, in which his supplies were packed, across the sand for miles and miles at a time, until his brain had reeled. Sleeping in a tiny airtight tent, when afield from his rocket. . . . Sam had never expected to survive those experiences. But he had, somehow; and it had done something to his soul—— hardened it, and maybe killed part of it; and maybe beautified another part. For in spite of everything, those vast, ghostly solitudes of Mars *were* beautiful——

And there was more. Climbing the steep wall of an ancient artificial gorge not far from the south polar cap; gripping at odd prickly vines to keep from falling into the hardy thickets below, where tough-shelled worms crawled sluggishly, he had found something in a small, sand-drifted cell that was part of a ruin. Something that meant power.

What kind of power? All kinds, perhaps. Scientific learning greater than that of Earth. Power like that of gold and jewels, but far exceeding it. Power to wreck and to create, power to destroy worlds. Power, maybe, to sway minds. Sam still could not guess how far it might extend, or how deep——

No the adventure was not over, yet. It was just beginning. It wasn't just nostalgia that tied the consciousness of Sam Conway to a planet, millions of miles away, whose people had perished in a strange travail ages ago——a catastrophe whose marks lay in fused, glassy ruins, and in machines melted and rusted beyond recognition.

Sam had that secret of power hidden away now in a little aluminum box that had once contained concentrated food rations. And having that secret—though it thrilled him—still made him wish nervously that he also had eyes in the back of his head. . . .

Ellen Varney's slim fingers tightened on his arm.

"Sam!" she said almost sharply. "You're dreaming again. What is it?"

He looked at her almost furtively, conscious of the familiar room around him, the old bookcase, the piano with a shaft of sunlight touching it gently; the radio and television cabinet. The colonial rag rugs, bright colored and homey. . . .

Sam wondered wistfully if sometime soon his power would enable him to preserve in timeless youth the fragile beauty of Ellen Varney. Dark wavy hair, and an earnest face whose wisdom one could never forget. May-

be now even immortality would be possible.

Sam was nervous. Haste and preoccupation pressed him. But he put on a good show for the girl's sake. The lines of worry dissolved around his grey, deep-set eyes. He ran stubby fingers through his stiff mop of ash-blond hair, and the tightness of his lips and jaw relaxed into a sheepish grin.

"Sure I'm dreamin', Honey," he chuckled. "What man in my shoes wouldn't? Three years back I was nobody, working my way as a student engineer. Then Joe Nichols and his experts found out that my reflexes were better than those of anybody they'd tested. And that my brains and my emotional stability were okay. So pretty soon I was flying out there toward Mars——all for the glory of giving the Joe Nichols Food Products a publicity splurge. And now——well don't get the wrong idea of how I feel about it, Ellen——they've made a big-shot out of me. The newspapers, the radio, the scientists. I've got a lot to do. I——you know!"

Ellen Varney was perhaps sure she did know. She smiled faintly, like the Mona Lisa smiling at the naïvé of men, and their little-boy vanities. But there was a shadow of worry in her eyes, too.

"You won't stay here for supper, then, with the folks and me, Sam," she said wistfully. "L i k e old times. . . ."

Sam couldn't think of anything nicer. But the pull of something else was much more strong.

"No, Honey," he said. "I——"

"Don't stumble, Sam," the girl returned. "Tomorrow night, then?"

"Maybe. I hope. . . ."

He kissed her. A moment later he was out in the golden afternoon. He avoided the kids playing football out there in the street just as he used to play. He would have liked to talk to them. But——not now.

He climbed into his car. There he sat quietly for a moment, thinking. The autumn shadows, cast by the houses and trees, were long and blue. They reminded him of the shadows on Mars; and he felt a slight, notunpleasant, chill of loneliness and mystery plucking at his nerves. The sound of the wind, wasn't so very different here either! Only out there it was shriller and much fainter and more sad, in the thin air, and through the muffling fabric of his oxygen suit.

Not so long ago Sam had seen those Martain winds s h r e d d i n g plumes of rusty red dust from the desert. He'd seen them blow balled masses of dried, prickly vegetation, like tumbleweeds, across the undulating red plain, and into the deep machine-dug gorges, all but waterless now, that on Earth were called the "canals."

He'd seen those dried bundles of weeds collected in rows against the granite masonry of walls that were cold and crumbled in their ancientness but which looked fused along their low crests, like old lava, telling a story of violent and enigmatic calamity.

Thus Sam Conway's reveries became unpleasant once more. He wanted to hurry again. He started the car, and drove swiftly out of the village. The tires crunched in dead leaves as he swung into the driveway that led down by the lake. Premonition must have been working in him, accentuating his caution and his haste.

There was a fair-sized brick building there, an old garage. He unlocked the heavy door and went inside. The large main room of the structure was to be his laboratory; the office, his living quarters.

He surveyed the dingy interior critically. Everything, so far as he could see, was exactly as he had left it except for a small smear of ash on the floor in the office room. Driveway ash. Part of a man's footprint. His own? With the panic of a disturbed miser, Sam Conway thought back carefully. It could be his own

footprint; but he couldn't remember —couldn't be sure!

His heart began to throb in mounting anxiety at the thought that the lair of his secret might have been entered during his absence. He pulled the shades carefully. Then he clawed his way through the clutter of paraphernalia in the little room—mostly boxes of new laboratory equipment, as yet unpacked. And a few glass jars containing plant samples, and specimens of odd Martian fauna —souvenirs he hadn't been required to turn over to the scientists.

He was sweating profusely from panic when he reached the carefully fitted mopboard in the corner after pulling aside a small desk. He pressed part of the wooden ornamentation, and a section of the mopboard turned on hinges. Feverishly he drew his precious aluminum box from the hiding place he had contrived, and unfastened its lid. From within came a reassuring, cryptic gleam; and Sam Conway almost wilted with relief.

But he wasn't satisfied yet. His fear of possible burglary wasn't the result of miserliness alone. He was afraid to have so gigantic a secret as he possessed get beyond himself—yet. And he was well aware that man would kill to own what he owned—and distrusted, withholding it from Nichols and his scientists.

Carefully he put the aluminum container back, and searched the premises. The windows. The doors. Everything. But he found no telltale marks of intrusion. The footprints, then, in the office room must have been his own. But he'd bar the windows tomorrow. He'd put alarms on the entrances, and he'd find a safer place for his aluminum box.

Now he prepared to work, getting his notebooks ready, putting a little collapsible table in the center of the office room, securing the heavy wood shutters of the windows, turning on the lights, and taking the aluminum box, which was his storehouse of miracles, once more from hiding.

As he sat down at the table, he placed a loaded pistol within easy reach at his elbow. Thus prepared, he lifted his treasure from its homely metal container, and set it lovingly before him. A cube, perhaps four inches square. Like glass. Almost crystal in its transparency, except for a dim misting of pearl. Crowning the cube was a metal pyramid, much tarnished with age, and a dial. That was all. But Sam's gaze was almost gloating, as his mind filled with mighty visions of his own future. He was no different from any other man in this respect, for the touch of power was on him.

He turned the dial of the Martian apparatus. Within the cube spots of fire began to move, around and around a glowing center that was composed of myriad parts. It was all like a three-dimensional cinema—illustrating, in this instance, some mystery of the atom—its revolving planetary electrons, its nucleus of neutrons, positrons. . . .

In a strange eight-fingered hand, which left the rest of its eon-dead owner's anatomy unpictured, a metal pointer was lifted, indicating this and that. It was like being in school on old Mars, whose people had been extinct for untold millions of years. . . . Maybe this apparatus, which held, in pictured, illustrated form, all the scientific lore of another time and world, had been a kind of school book.

Sam didn't understand much of this first lesson——yet. There were soft clinking noises—perhaps speech —which accompanied the fading, waxing, moving illustrations; but those music-box notes were perhaps forever beyond him as far as meaning went.

The atomic structure views were replaced at last by pictures of machines and apparatus—and that was a little better. Before his eyes Sam saw complicated pieces of apparatus taken apart and reassembled. He saw complicated processes actually carried out step by step.

Sam Conway's concentration was like a frozen hypnosis, and his brain was quick. But in the corners of the room there were faint shadows, and he was conscious of them. Still he took notes, and made drawings feverishly until the strain began to tell. Of course he could always refer back to the machine, repeating the views if necessary.

It was a month before he began to build. And then his first effort was only to produce a furnace and an alloy; the latter a product of the former. It was harder and more flexible than any steel yet produced. And it was worth money, providing the means to carry on his study and his work.

Work. . . . . Sam seldom saw Ellen Varney now. He saw little of anybody. He told lies to be alone, and to continue his solitary efforts. His sense of struggle was like being on Mars again fighting for life, plodding through a thin feathery fall of snow there, in the dazing cold, close to the polar regions. And he dreamed of gigantic altruisms—the remaking of civilization.

In four months after his beginning, he had achieved things. Under a beam of specialized vibrations he saw a mouse do amazing tricks, its brain stimulated temporarily to an intelligence far beyond normal. It was awesome, and frightening too, watching that tiny animal turn—without error, and after it had been shown how only once—the complicated combination lock of a small door beyond which lay food.

Sam thrilled to the spectacle of the rodent laboring so keenly with its teeth and forepaws. What if the same waves were applied to the brain of a man? He would have tried those waves on himself, but his enthusiasm changed to dread when, with the removal of the beam, the mouse shuddered into a convulsion and died, its nervous system exhausted.

Biology revealed further mysteries and possibilities. In a glass flask, packed in a radioactive compound, and filled with water to which food substances had been added, Sam grew huge amoebae, whose ancestors had been microscopic. But these creatures were translucent globules, almost a quarter-inch in diameter. Somewhere here, perhaps, lay hidden the secret of life itself. But the amoebae died of a strange disease, the germs of which were perhaps generated out of those same life processes. . . . To be sure of safety, Sam poured sulphuric acid into the culture flask.

He changed his direction now, back to the atom. Eight weeks more, and he was ready for another test. The main room of the old garage was crowded with apparatus. Then, one night, Sam closed a switch cautiously.

The result was not much different than the shorting of a high-tension electric current across a broad arc. A snap. An avalanche of rattling blue flame, whose glare made everything look sharp and unreal. Then wires glowed to white heat and crumpled. A huge vacuum tube exploded into an incandescent puff of metallic vapors, superheated. The current was dead now—cut off. The experiment was a failure.

There were perhaps ten seconds like this—a sort of unsuspected hang—like that of a rifle cartridge whose defective primer cap fails to ignite the powder immediately when the firing pin strikes it. The garage interior was still illuminated, for the lights were on a different circuit. Smoke was blue along the raftered roof, and the red glow had faded from heated metal.

Then, at a moment beyond all expectation, a searing glare leaped out from between two close-pressed copper electrodes which had been the center of Sam's experiment. A wave of rays and heat, and stunning electrical emanations. Sam Conway's mind was far too slow for him to grasp just what happened. He only remembered a little when, battered and scorched, he picked himself up

from the concrete pavement after a minute or more.

The points of the electrodes were shattered, but they still glared, incandescent, providing the only light now, for the light bulbs were shattered. Staring from aching, ray-reddened eyes, Sam saw only that glow, for he was temporarily all but blinded. But there were little pits in that hot copper——pits out of which the metal must have literally exploded.

He wasn't afraid right away. Not until his brain recalled did he realize. That hang, after his apparatus had burnt itself out, then that flash, or whatever you wanted to call it, was atoms breaking down more violently than they had ever done in the crude experimental atomic engines so far developed on earth.

Now there was another flash from one of those electrodes—just a tiny, incredibly brilliant speck—like a spark that flares and dies, failing to ignite tinder. Almost though. Almost an inconceivable conflagration, that might have spread and spread, from one atom to others.

Sam's sore eyes could see the broken roof now, and the springtime stars shining calmly through its splintered rifts. The sky itself was dimly luminous as with diffused light. Suddenly he was afraid of those stars, for they were like watching eyes; watching and inscrutable. And there was ozone—triatomic oxygen—metallically tanging in the atmosphere, mingled with the odor of burnt insulation. Sam wanted to leave the building, to go out into the night and cool his dizzied senses and his blistered body. Yet he had to keep guard to be sure to note anything further that might happen, for he knew what had just taken place.

Yes, he knew all right! Nature had been probed in its darkest lair by a clumsy hand. Nature had growled back threateningly. It had almost bitten. Almost. . . . .? Sam Conway's ribs seemed to shrink about his wildly pounding heart.

He leaned against the cracked brick wall, trembling. In memory he was on Mars again seeing those ruined buildings, sheered off, buried by the dust—smelling the metallic reek of ozone that had seeped back through the breath-vent of his oxygen helmet. Even as here, now. Ozone built up from the commoner form of oxygen by electrical discharges!

And by swift suggestion, Sam's thoughts went beyond Mars itself. Outside of the Martian orbit was the Path of Minor Planets—the asteroids. Broken up fragments. Perhaps a single world, once, that had been caught in catastrophe. . . .

There was more, too. What were the rings of Saturn? What cataclysmic circumstance had made them? Atlantis and Mu, the lost continents. Why had they sunk beneath the sea, taking with them their splendid civilizations? And there were the novae far out in interstellar space; normal stars suddenly blazing forth in spectacular ruin. Yes there must be many other inhabited worlds in the universe, other folk, studying, learning to control and curb matter and energy. Sometimes knowledge must get dangerously ahead of itself, lacking a sound foundation of understanding. And then?

There was silence outside the building. So the crunch of hurrying footsteps in the cinders of the driveway penetrated easily to Sam's eardrums and excited nerves. A loud knock sounded at the outside door of Sam's sleeping room.

He staggered back from his ruined laboratory. From a small chemical cabinet he procured a flashlight. And he drew the pistol he always carried now, from his pocket, before he unfastened the heavy bar of the door.

It was Ellen Varney out there in the dark. Sam hadn't seen her in almost a week. He had never permitted her to come here when he was busy. To the rear, down the driveway, the headlamps of the girl's car made a

white lantern-glimmer through the bushes.

For one frightening instant Ellen saw the pistol muzzle levelled toward her before Sam was able to recognize her and lower the weapon. But she didn't ask the reason for the gun at all.

"Sam," she stammered. "I couldn't sleep and I heard a funny, sharp explosion. It seemed to be in this direction. And when I looked out of the window I saw a glow in the sky—very faint. But it was in this direction too. I guess I had a hunch, so I drove out here. All the way I could smell ozone in the air. You can hardly see the phosphorescence in the sky from up close at all. But it's right over What's wrong, Sam? What have you *really* been doing?"

The girl's tense fears, strong enough to make her come here, after midnight, to his laboratory, emphasized Sam's own private anxieties.

"I haven't been doing much, Honey," he told her hesitantly, and not too convincingly. "You'd better just run along home to bed. Research causes accidents once in a while. I'll get everything straightened out all right."

But in the reflected rays of the flashlight, the girl's face and eyes were determined.

"I won't go, Sam," she said very definitely, "until I find out that everything *is* all right. First place, you're hurt, and I'd be stubborn for your sake. But there's more. That glow in the sky. That smell of ozone—not only here, but everywhere here. . . . What does it all mean, Sam?"

Conway looked nervously toward the heavens. Yes, he could see a halo of light, sure enough. He had thought it was only the diffusion of starshine by the moisture in the atmosphere. Now he knew better. It was a little too bright and too low to be an aurora. It could be *like* an aurora, of course, something electrical and yet not quite the real, normal thing.

The breeze outside bore a slight yet unmistakable pungence of ozone too. It was just as Ellen had said. The gas was not only in the lab. It was here, too, as though all the atmosphere in the neighborhood had been affected by some electrical process.

"Listen!" Ellen said suddenly.

Sam strained his ears. At first he could detect nothing at all. Then he noticed a dim, lonely humming, that seemed to emanate from the ground, and from the bricks of the laboratory.

The sound seemed to be getting gradually louder. It made Sam shudder with the mystery of hidden things. And he began to feel, too, a sharp ache in his muscles, quite distinct from the soreness of his minor injury.

Suspicion grew on him again; suspicion that his latest experiment had been not entirely without lasting effect. Something *had* happened! Something had been started after all!

Sam grasped Ellen by the arm. "Come inside, Ellen," he said. "I've got to make a few tests."

He did this very quickly, working in the beam of his flashlight, which the girl held for him. Meanwhile he made a complete confession, telling her what he'd found on Mars and what he'd been doing.

He found now that he couldn't keep an electroscope charged. This meant that the air was ionized—that it would promptly conduct away any electrical charge that the instrument might hold. And atmospheric ionization meant, or could mean, the presence of radioactivity—of atomic disturbances.

He tried exposing a bit of photographic film in the dark. In the developing fluids it turned entirely black. There were strong invisible rays then, to affect it; rays coming from the walls, the ground, the very air itself perhaps. Rays probably from bursting atoms. The sound—the humming—must be some incidental phenomenon of their breakdown.

Dully Sam felt of the walls. Their temperature was already higher than that of the air and they vibrated distinctly with that steady hum. Sam's whole body felt hot, as though a strange flame was blazing in his own flesh.

He was sure, then. He had started a slow, progressive form of atomic disintegration in all the materials around him. In his own body too! It hadn't been the sudden fire of violent incandescence. That *might* have come. It had just been missed. The igniting spark hadn't been quite strong enough. Instead there was only a sort of smouldering. But, undeniably, atomic power was being released in a deadly, and uncontrollable if gradual, form.

The flashlight lay on the table shedding its white beam. Sam saw that Ellen's face was pale and her eyes glassy.

Sam had not the faintest idea of what he might do to check what he had started. "Get out of here, Ellen," he growled thickly. "Beat it! I've gone and tried to play God. And now hell's broken loose! Tell everybody to scram away from here!"

Very unsteadily the girl arose from the chair where she had seated herself. "I don't want to go, Sam," she stammered. "I can't leave you now."

He had to stumble forward then, to catch her before she fell. Her face was hot and damp with a weird fever. Her body had been affected too, by coming into the zone of influence. Sam Conway winced with an awful anguish as he picked Ellen up and tried to carry her toward the open door, and the safer night air outside.

It was only then that he realized how weak and sick he was himself. Strange rays were tearing at his nerves and brain. His very flesh was slowly—very slowly—giving up its atomic power, in a gradual radioactive decay!

He stumbled at his first step and fell crashing to the floor. Paralysis rushed over him, and that droning sound was like a death-dirge in his ears. He tried to drag Ellen's unconscious form toward the door, but the effort was useless. He couldn't even crawl. He just lay there, panting torturedly, his hot brain working in a chaos of fever. He understood now.

The death of Mars all over again. The fused walls. The melted machines. The ozone in the air. A slow, creeping smouldering destruction had burnt itself out at last; perhaps when a new balance had been reached in the atoms of the Martian crust. A crust. A cancerous disease moving in an irregular path, depleting air and water. But there still must be a tiny part of the old process of atomic breakdown continuing on Mars today, maintaining, by electrical disturbances, the ozone in the air.

And he, Sam Conway, had started that same creeping horror here on Earth. It would go along now, spreading and spreading. The walls around him would soon be melting. And there was nothing a man could do to stop it. Not even the science of Mars had been able to save the world that had given it birth. Only in scattered places where the erratic horror had not reached, perhaps in deep crevices in the rocks, had a few plants and low animals been able to survive for a new beginning after most of the fires had died.

Sam Conway cursed himself for his eagerness and lust for power. He'd been like an old gold miner, he thought savagely, ready almost to kill his own brother to preserve his secret until he could use it for himself. There were too many men like that. And now Ellen and all the rest of the world had to suffer.

Mu. Atlantis. The asteroids that had perhaps once been a plant, destroyed, maybe, by a much more violent form of atomic breakdown. But who knew just what accidents might have caused these respective catas-

trophes? Science must sometimes get ahead of itself, without even outside influence. There was always a risk.

SAM'S mind began to fade out, toward the nothingness of oblivion.

Then the real miracle began to happen. The violence of it jarred his brain swiftly back toward a semblance of awareness. Suddenly everything around him was spouting blue electric flame. The table, the chairs, the walls, even the grass and trees beyond the open doorway rippled with a sort of aura. The phenomenon lasted for only two seconds. It snapped and growled like the first dash of some gigantic code signal. Then it broke off. Then it began again.

Once more it stopped. And started.

Sam, even had his mind been clear, could not have guessed how widespread the phonomenon was. He could not have known that, within a twenty mile radius fuses were blowing out, transformers were smoking in their oil-baths and generators were groaning under a terrific overload, as though their armatures had been gripped by an invisible colossus.

But Sam could guess some of the might of the new phenomenon. His body convulsed like the body of a condemned culprit in an electric chair as shocks ripped through him. He could not imagine the origin of what was happening now, unless the forces he had unleashed had entered a new phase of destruction.

Yet this did not seem to be true, for after the first spurt of unknown power had passed, that sonorous hum of doom had been completely strangled. Before the second spurt stopped there was a violent ripping explosion and the tinkling of broken window panes in the adjoining laboratory room. And that constricting paralysis and heat were gone from Sam's body. There were five bursts of strange energy, in all. Then it was over.

Prodded by sheer startlement Sam got to his feet and found that, in spite of weakness, he could stand. His brain was clearer, too. Ellen Varney, unconscious before, was trying to rise. He helped her up and supported her against him.

They stared out of the doorway at the sky. The auroral glow was gone. But they saw, for just an instant, a huge phosphorescent shape, hanging high against the stars. It was a little like a colossal image of a man, but it couldn't have been solid. It was like the aurora itself—as tenuous, as luminous—a kind of gigantic photograph projected in the air. The arm of the vapory figure extended; then the whole image vanished, as if at a speed far exceeding that of light, to some colossal distance.

Sam didn't even speak of the being right away. He helped the girl out of the building into the open.

"Wait here for a few seconds, Ellen," he said in a tone that trembled with awe.

Then he stumbled back into the old garage. All electrical devices were dead, even his flashlight. He had to find his way to the laboratory by burning matches. Every bit of apparatus was in fused ruins now, faintly reddened with heat. But there was no ominous hum in the hot, black stillness. Something deadly had been burned out of diseased substances by counter fire. Even Sam's own flesh had submitted to a curative force.

He found his way to one corner of the room, where, beneath a heavy block of concrete, he had prepared a new hiding place for his aluminum box, and the Martian demonstration apparatus it contained. Tugging the block of concrete free, he looked below it, lighting another match. Somehow the lid of the box had been blown off. Within, the Martian machine was the same as before, except that the crystal cube was no longer clear. Instead it was blackened all the way through, like a black diamond. And there were cracks in it that destroyed its usefulness forever. It, too, had

been touched by those counter waves of energy. Touching the cube with his fingers, Sam found that it was hot.

He left the thing in its hole and returned to Ellen, his mind full of colossal realizations.

The girl's voice quavered with awe as she spoke there under the quiet stars.

"We had help, didn't we, Sam?" she stammered, remembering the cloud in the sky, and what Sam had told her about his work. "Somebody from another world. But who? Where. . . . ?"

"I don't know, Honey," Sam answered raggedly. "It wasn't Martian help. As far as I know, all Martians are dead. Besides, I've seen their bones. Manlike, but very slender. The being—pictured in the sky was heavily built."

Sam nodded significantly toward the sky.

"Lots of planets up there," he continued. "In other solar systems. Lots of different kinds of beings. I suppose some of those races, on planets of the older stars, have really grown up mentally and scientifically, till they know all about time and space and dimensions and energy, and how to handle and conquer them. And I suppose that somehow they keep careful watch across the awful distance because they've learned by experience that it may be safer. It's not just to save the necks of lesser beings but to guard themselves, too. I was messing around with something pretty big, Ellen. You can't tell how far a danger may sometimes go. A whole universe may be thrown into chaos—"

Sam's fists were clenching and unclenching absently. It was better for science to develop gradually, with a race. And even then there would sometimes be mistakes. Atlantis. Mu. The asteroids. Maybe some of the novae——

"We'd better get back into town, Sam," Ellen offered practically. "There may be damage done there—with all that's been happening We'd better see."

A chuckle found its way through Sam Conway's awe. "Yeah," he said. "Like your car. I see the headlights have gone out. Good thing it's a diesel, with no electrical ignition to blow, and with a cartridge starter on the motor."

But Sam was too grateful over the miraculous escape from final tragedy he'd just witnessed, to worry much about damage suits over ruined electrical equipment.

And he was very grateful for Ellen, too. He might fly out to Mars some time again, or even farther. But when he touched the girl's warm shoulder he knew that he was truly home at last.

IN THE EARTH'S SHADOW

by JOHN L. CHAPMAN

The adventure of a man who sat alone in space for six years!

FERRIS was in the tiny cupola, admiring the immense sphere of earth above him, when the bell sounded. Galsworth again, no doubt. It had been Galsworth every time for twenty-four hours. What did he want now?

Ferris went below, preparing himself for the same ugly face, the usual grating voice. He sat before the screens and snapped a switch. The screen colored, took form. He was right.

Galsworth said: "Fuel Station 12?" As if he didn't know. When Ferris nodded, the company head announced: "Replacement will be in effect within ten hours. You'll prepare for the trip."

"Replacement!" Ferris gasped. "For what reason—"

"You'll have the details when you reach earth, Ferris. Be ready when Brooks arrives. He'll be there shortly."

"Brooks! Who's he? The kid?"

"You're asking too many questions, Ferris. Brooks is young, yes, but he'll fill the position. We'll explain later. That's all."

It took a few minutes for Ferris to recover. Replacement! After six years of service at the number one fuel station between the earth and moon. Why, he was the only man who could handle Station 12! And Galsworth was sending Brooks, a green kid barely out of SM school. What was the guy thinking of?

Angered, Ferris got up from his stool and paced the floor. It was easy to picture Galsworth sitting at his desk. He'd be chewing a big cigar, pounding a pudgy fist into his palm, telling young Brooks that Station 12 needed a stalwart lad willing to face numerous cosmic dangers in order that commerce between the earth and moon would not fall below its present status. Only Galsworth would say it like that.

Well, what was wrong with the present status? Ferris had kept the company heads above water; he hadn't fallen down on the job. But they apparently weren't satisfied. Something was wrong, and it seemed that Galsworth was taking it out on Ferris.

Still perplexed, Ferris entered his living quarters and began packing. He dismissed Galsworth from his mind, wondered whether or not Brooks could meet the task of operating the station. It was a lonely job, sitting there in the cylindrical island of space, watching ships approach and pass in the cold void that housed him. Brooks would grow weary of it, just as Ferris had at first. There wasn't a more dismal existence in the solar system, but to Ferris it was home, and even the thought of that was comforting.

The sound of a hissing airlock brought Ferris to his senses. Brooks was ahead of schedule—

Ferris went back to the control room. A tall fellow stood there, his hair drooping, his space tunic ripped open at the collar. His face was stonelike.

"You aren't Brooks," said Ferris. "What do you want?"

"Fuel," the other dropped a hand to a belt holster. "I need fuel for my

ship—a lot of it. And you're the only fellow in my path who's got it. Let's not waste time."

"You've come to the wrong place," said Ferris, starting forward. "The barrels here are under government combination seal, and can't be opened by anyone other than the inspectors who accompany our regular ships."

"Nevertheless," the tall fellow drew his beam gun, "you have fuel in your repulsion tanks, and that's as good as any."

For a moment Ferris stood there, undetermined. Then he remembered a police bulletin not so long ago. A convict had escaped from one of earth's interplanetary prisons. He understood now.

"You're Siegal," he said.

The other nodded. "My ship hasn't the fuel to carry me to the Moon. I don't like to insist, but I'm going to drain your tanks."

"The station will fall," Ferris warned. "If the repulsion tanks are drained, gravity will take hold."

"Unfortunate," said Siegal, "but it's me or the station. I've brought a hose along—also a container. I'll give you the pleasure of filling it for me. Hurry."

Ferris had no choice, so he did as directed. Siegal had the drop on him, and it was best to play safe. Perhaps he could talk the fellow out of his wild plan. There was a chance.

"Think you'll make it to the Moon?" queried Ferris as he loosened a valve and inserted the hose. "It's a long trek for such a small amount of fuel. Besides, you'll burn up half the stuff getting started. There's no launch here, you know."

"I left earth without a launch," said Siegal crisply. "I can do it again."

The syphon began a steady flow.

"You won't make it," remarked Ferris. "And if you do get there, what then? There's no place for you on the Moon. They'll track you down in a few days."

Siegal laughed. "You seem quite certain of all this."

"Besides," went on Ferris, "I'll tell them all about you. They'll know just where you are, and they'll be waiting for you when you reach the Moon."

"Not if I destroy your radio," said Siegal, "and not if you ride the station back to earth."

For a long minute there was silence. The only sound was the trickling of the liquid fuel. Ferris became uneasy.

"That's murder," he said at length.

"True," agreed Siegal. "That is murder, isn't it?"

The container was full. At the point of Siegal's gun, Ferris carried the fuel to the airlock, where he was forced to don a space tunic and transport the container to the lone ship that was anchored outside. He made several trips, until the station's tanks were nearly empty. Through vision screens, the glow of the repulsion jets could be seen, receding gradually.

"The station will move in a matter of hours," said Ferris. "It's a devilish trick, Siegal, and I hope they get you for it."

"Never mind. Just fill the container again. I want to be sure the tank is empty."

Ferris set to work again. As he bent over the tanks, the floor gave a sudden lurch and threw him against the wall. Siegal clutched a door frame and steadied himself.

"No tricks, Ferris."

"But the station's moving. Can't you see?"

"Sooner than you expected. Perhaps you can tell me why."

"I don't know, Siegal. Something's happened."

"It's all right, Finish your work."

Ferris complied. Once more the precious liquid trickled into the container. Minutes passed.

"Brooks reporting, sir."

Siegal turned, astounded. The redheaded youngster stood there, a look

of bewilderment on his face. Then Ferris leaped, caught Siegal about the hips and sent him sprawling over the station floor. But the convict was elusive. He twisted free, somewhat dazed, and stood erect. He fired a beam at Ferris, who rolled across the floor in pain. Brooks, realization having dawned upon him, started forward. Siegal emitted a shrill noise, grabbed the container and ran for the airlock. Brooks blocked his way, and went down as the gun struck his skull. Siegal leaped over him, vanishing a moment later beyond the airlock.

HIS brain in a turmoil, Ferris got slowly to his feet and looked about. The room was empty. No Siegal, no Brooks. The station was tilted at an angle, swaying slightly. It was falling, due to the excess weight applied when Brooks anchored his cruiser.

Ferris nursed his aching head. The beam had shaved his neck just below the ear, breaking his space tunic's glass helmet, otherwise doing no harm.

Ferris made his way to the airlock. Through the heavy glass he glimpsed a portion of Siegal's ship. Quickly, a plan formed in his mind.

He removed a metal space suit from a locker, donned it and clumped awkwardly up a stairway leading to the upper level. He crossed to a second airlock, advanced through, and stepped lightly onto the top of Siegal's ship. He dropped flat and crawled to the supply lock, through which a ship's food bundles were loaded. He grasped the latch firmly, and waited.

A minute later the little cruiser moved into space. Behind, Fuel Station 12 continued its earthward fall. Ferris watched it go, his heart heavy. All his belongings went with Station 12, all the things he had called his home for six long years. He wondered about Brooks. The fellow's cruiser was drifting lifelessly to one side, no doubt having been cut free by Siegal. There was no evidence of Brooks' whereabouts.

Ferris clung to the heavy latch as Siegal's cruiser slipped away in space. Above and all around him hovered the vast outline of earth, the continents and oceans showing dimly through the deep shadows. To the left was the Moon, drifting aimlessly along the great star-curtain.

Ferris tugged at the latch. It moved a little. He tugged again and it sprang free. Ferris stood up, straddled the circular lock, and pulled back the cover. Air rushed out. Through the narrow hole he saw the tiny storage compartment. Satisfied, he let himself through and dropped to the floor, pulling the cover back in place as he did so.

The room was small—only a few feet higher than Ferris, not much longer. The sound of the oxygen pumps grew louder for a moment, as the semi-vacuum was being replaced.

Ferris waited several minutes, then removed the space suit. Finding the air suitable, he stepped to the compartment door, opened it a crack, and peered out.

Steps led downward to a brief corridor. Beyond the corridor, a portion of the control room was visible.

Ferris moved out, went down the steps and proceeded cautiously along the corridor.

He put a hand to his forehead; a sudden dizziness swept through him. He leaned against the wall, rubbing his eyes. There was blood on his sleeve.

He couldn't remember how long he waited there; it may have been a number of minutes. He could feel his sickness overcoming him. He was weakening.

A footstep sounded, and Ferris tried to open his eyes. Then he turned to go back, but a voice stopped him. It was Siegal's.

There was no use resisting. Siegal still had the drop on him. The con-

vict led him into the control cabin, forced him into a seat.

"You're a good man, Ferris," Siegal said, "but not good enough. I might be able to use you, though—more or less as a shield when I get to the Moon."

Somewhat revived, Ferris looked up. His head still hurt him, but he was able to recollect his surroundings. He thought of Fuel Station 12—it would be nearing earth now. Soon it would strike, and then Galsworth would be notified. Things would begin to happen.

"Brooks reporting."

Siegal swung, shouting angrily. But the youth was on him, knocking the beam gun away, pinning him against the wall of the cabin. Ferris watched dazedly, wondering where Brooks had come from. Nauseating sensations swept him again, and things went black for a moment. He heard Siegal's yells. A blow was struck, and Brooks tumbled back.

Ferris pushed himself from the stool and fell over the beam gun. As Siegal bore Brooks to the floor, Ferris rolled over, brought up his arm and pulled the trigger. His aim was bad, but the beam did its work. Siegal simply went limp.

For a long minute Ferris lay there, looking up at the youthful form of Brooks over him. He grinned.

"Good work, Brooks. You make a better stowaway than I do."

"THIS is the first time," said Galsworth, "I've ever seen bandages on you, Ferris."

"I came to talk business, Galsworth. At least, you called me here for that reason, didn't you?"

The company head placed a pudgy fist against his palm. "Of course. I thought you'd like to know why you were called in from 12."

"Because you wanted to send Brooks there. Well, that's okay. He's a good man—"

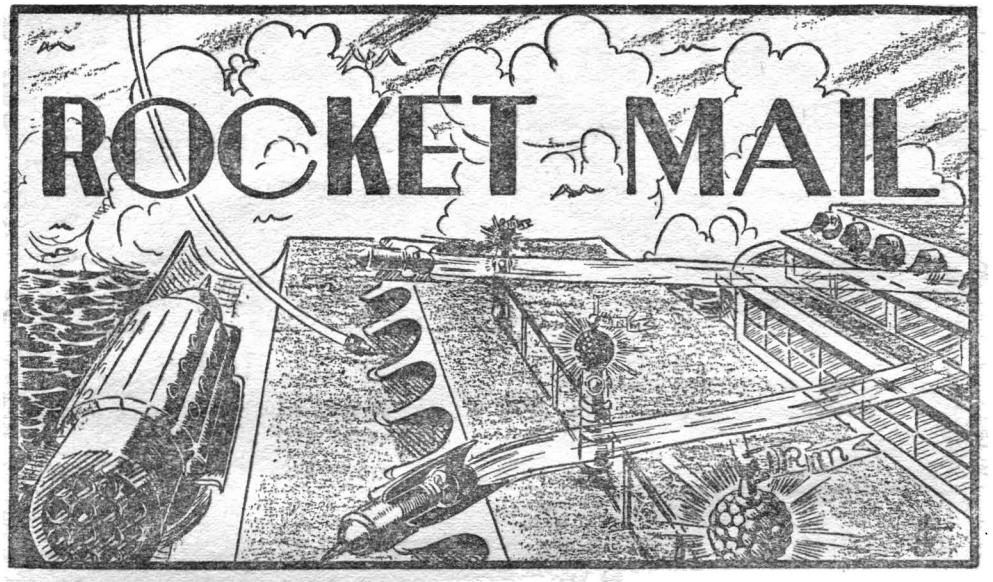
"No, not just that. We've a passenger pilot's license for you, if you want it. Something we've been planning for some time. You're the only one of our station operators who has passed the exams."

Ferris grew red in the face. "Then, all this was just a—promotion?"

Galsworth nodded. "When the new Station 12 is situated, Brooks will take over. We've better things for you. Willing?"

To Ferris, it was overwhelming—more so than it had been aboard Siegal's cruiser. He felt suddenly as if he would faint—the wound—

He did faint right there in Galsworth's office, but when he revived Galsworth was still smiling. It was all right—after six years!



Dear Readers:

Here's the department, ready, and waiting for your letters. The landing field is ready to receive your private rocket with its message. We expect it to be alive with letters as soon as you have had time to read, consider, and react to the first issue of the COMET.

This is my first chance to write a letter to the department, so I'm taking full advantage of it. I'm not going to rate the stories. That will be up to you. But please don't delay doing it. The weeks fly past, and the second issue will be coming. I'm hoping to have enough quick letters so that I may stick them into the second issue before it goes to press. But this will be possible only if they are mailed in within the first few days of publication of this issue.

I have received letters from many of our favorite authors——I might almost say all of them——promising to write for the COMET. Some of them say very nice things, but I felt it would be sort of anti-climactic to publish them.

Let's make this space expand and keep it alive. We can. But don't forget to tell your friends about the COMET!—FOT.

N. B. I no sooner completed the above letter than one from Sam Moskowitz came to my desk with a fan's summation of the field today, and saying things which obviously I could not say. It is a pleasure to know that some of us remember you can well believe. Here it is:

Dear Mr. Tremaine:

It is indeed a pleasant task to write you telling of my sincere delight at learning of your new post at the head of a new science-fiction magazine. As usual "*Fantasy News*" blared the news out to the fantasy world, but in an unusually large headline.

Upon learning of your position I hotfooted it to New York, accidentally bumped into Jimmy Taurasi, and visited your offices, but unfortunately came on a Tuesday, upon which day, the receptionist informed me, you do not come to the office.

I hope you plan to do what I think you're going to do. Set a blistering pace for the other science-fiction magazines to follow as you did in 1934, '35, and '36. It seems a shame that now, when the fans have what they have been praying for for years——a practically unlimited supply of science-fiction, new and old, there should not be *one*, not even one, out of a score of fantasy magazines that is publishing *new* stories of even a breathable color.

On every side one sees hack, hack, hack. Editors so infatuated with *names* that stories do not count. One editor brazenly informed me at an interview, that because he pays a low rate per word he has told numerous scientifiction authors that when their yarns have been rejected by every other fantasy magazine, he would take them——sight unseen! ! !

But that's not all. There's more. Not content with getting the most worthless tripe some of these popular hacks are capable of turning out (stuff so terrible that fan mag fiction is beginning to read like polished material to me), he must print these stories under a *pen name* because the writers do not want the one-cent markets to know that they are selling their stuff at half rates or less!

Now by all that is holy under heaven,

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why? Why? If after purchasing a prominent author's most terrible fiction you are *not even allowed to use his name*—what is the earthly sense in purchasing it? Where is the advantage?

Why not give the new writers a break and purchase *good* stuff?

So there's the situation. We have magazines featuring novels. Magazines featuring novelettes. Magazines featuring short stories, or a variety of all lengths. There are magazines featuring straight science-fiction, science fantasy, science adventure, fantasy, fantastic adventure, and weird. But there is no fantasy magazine printing new material, featuring *good* science-fiction. We are told that "the great mass of unknown readers" whoever they may be will not read good science-fiction. And they must appeal to the great unknown mass of readers who have never written in, yet whom they are so certain would not take kindly to good quality science-fiction.

During 1934, 1935, 1936, and even in 1937, as editor of *"Astounding"* you printed *scores* of stories that were out and out classics of science-fiction. I'll never forget them as long as I live. It isn't necessary for me to refer to my old issues to remember their titles. Only a scant few of them are "Farewell to Earth," "Colossus", "Rebirth", "Short-Wave Experiment", "Manna from Mars", "Succubus", "Rex", "Twilight", "Man of the Ages", "The Mole Pirate", "Old Faithful", "The Lotus Eaters", "Night", "The Mad Moon", "Davey Jones Ambassador", "The Red Peri", "The Adaptive Ultimate", "Alas, All Thinking", "He from Procyon", "The Far Way", "Stars", "The Plane People", etc., etc., etc. You ran anywhere from one to five stories an issue that might be called classics of science-fiction.

Still you found time to discover science-fiction authors who are among the most prominent of our time. Ross Rocklynne, R. R. Winterbotham, Oliver E. Saari, L. Sprague De Camp, Thornton Ayre, Eric Frank Russell, Willy Ley, Nelson S. Bond, Robert Moore Williams, Harry Walton, John D. Clark, Ph. D., D. L. James, and quite a number of others, not to mention those many obscure authors you developed into big names over a period of a few years.

And despite the fact that you printed first class fiction and used new authors I have always been under the impression that *"Astounding"* had a pretty nice circulation under your editorship during a time when science-fiction was unpopular.

I guess what I am driving at is fairly clear.

So wishing you luck is quite superfluous ——unnecessary. I'm almost *certain* your new magazine will be successful.

To round things up, I wish you'd take this letter as an open invitation to attend the meetings of the Queens chapter of the SFL. We have gatherings averaging about thirty prominent authors, artists, editors and science-fiction fans every month, and I feel certain you would enjoy the meetings, and gain valuable contacts from them also.

Sincerely yours,

SAM MOSKOWITZ,
603 S. 11th St., Newark, N. J.

Dear Sam:

You and I are opening the *Rocket Mail* pages with a blaze of glory; but you offer me a chance to write a second letter. Thank you for yours. It touches on observations which must have been made by many of us.

Yes, I hope to set a blistering pace for the other science-fiction magazines to follow. There'll be plenty of room in the sweep of the COMET'S tail for a whole field. But if it is within the realm of possibility we will lead the way starting today.

I'm glad you said what you did about the writers we found a place for and gave an opportunity to. *They* haven't forgotten. I have ample evidence of that in the letters now on my desk from writer after writer after writer.

And that same opportunity is going to be offered now, from now on, to everyone who reaches a point of excellence comparable to the standard we will set for the new "COMET".

We have set in motion the same thought machinery that developed the stories for science-fiction to a point of excellence once before. I have written to those I know, and told them what I want—which is what you want—them to do. They are now trying to do it.

For you know, Sam Moskowitz, this is going to be a good market. And it's going to be more than that if we have the cooperation we expect from you, and the myriad other readers who remember, in passing the word along that the "COMET" is the magazine to watch—and buy. I'll need that cooperation in a field as cluttered with titles and covers as ours is today.

You see, I don't believe the "unknown audience", "the vast mass of readers", is any different in its tastes from those of us who are articulate. In other words I believe in our readers, all of them, and I believe they want the best available stories in science-fiction.

So we're flying the standard high. Watch the stories develop once the writers realize that fact.—FOT.

EDITOR'S NOTE BOOK

—STF—

A COMET is a luminous heavenly body, generally irregular in form, often having a long, nebulous train, or tail, and following an orbit about the sun. It is not known whether the comets originated in the solar system or have been captured by the sun in its journey through space. They are usually of very small mass, although their dimensions are enormous, in some cases exceeding, if the tail is included, those of the sun. They move in elongated orbits, some of them approaching very near to the sun and then receding to very great distances. They are invisible except in the nearer part of their orbits. Periodic comets, which return to the sun at fixed intervals, have elliptical orbits; but others move in a parabola or hyperbola, and so are expected never to return.

A comet's head commonly consists of a bright nucleolus surrounded by the coma, a luminous fog which sometimes consist in part of one or more envelopes. The tail is an extension of the coma, which develops as the comet approaches perihelion; it is usually directed away from the sun.—Webster's New International Dictionary.

—STF—

After long debate, we agreed on the final title for the letter department. But having decided, we feel that *"ROCKET MAIL"* is the natural and obvious heading. It includes both the inter-planetary lanes, and the earth's own air mail lanes. We feel that it will become a welcome channel for the exchange of opinions unhampered by any limiting policy other than good taste. I am looking forward to your letters, and will read them all carefully.

—STF—

Every author of outstanding science-fiction will appear in COMET if it is possible for us to locate him.

Always providing his contribution equals or exceeds in interest, the ones which made him a favorite of science-fiction fans.

—— S T F ——

This month's cover, illustrating "MOMUS MOON", is the contribution of one of the all time favorite artists in science-fiction. I think it is a masterpiece of color, worthy of the story it illustrates. So the first story in the first issue of the COMET is by EANDO BINDER, and it is illustrated by LEO MOREY.

—— S T F ——

The substantial quality of the science-fiction audience is best proved by the continued existence of more than a score of "Fan" papers and periodicals. Their very life is an important contribution to the field, for constructive comment and criticism is healthy and to be desired. Destructive criticism, which is unhealthy, has seldom appeared in these papers. They are for the most part restrained and helpful, remembering that their purpose is to build. They serve as points of contact between readers who are often widely separated geographically.

They are not elaborate magazines, but we must always remember that the finest products sometimes come in the smallest packages! I recommend their hearty support, and suggest that every reader of COMET subscribe to at least one.

—— S T F ——

Winterbotham's story "EQUATION FOR TIME" offers the opportunity to do some geometrical calculating to those who are inclined toward mathematics. I like the fact that it raises what appears to me to be a real new thought in connection with triangular relativity.

—— S T F ——

If we can pull together, inside the covers of COMET, the favorite authors and artists of science-fiction, we shall have re-created the atmosphere of scientifiction at its best. If we can

add to that galaxy of stars, every new writer who gives us comparable stories, and every artist who appears to offer real quality in his work; and if we can add *new* features of unusual interest to such a content, we shall exceed the finest moment of the past. This is a simple statement of my policy and aim. Its success depends largely on your support. We have known each other a long time in science-fiction. Will you help me by telling your friends, fans and non-fans, that you think they should read the COMET?

—— S T F ——

The "SPACEAN", our new feature, is to my mind the very spirit of science-fiction. It treats the year two thousand and eight as if it were today, and makes you feel as if you were actually reading present-day news. The very word "spacean" is uniquely fitting. Just what would we call the oceans of space if we were living in the day of space travel? It may very likely be called the "spacean". "I've crossed the spacean to Mars several times", may be an ordinary remark some day.

And who knows but that one day in the not too distant future there may be a new "A.E.F.," an expeditionary force, dispatched to Mars, or Venus, or both? It is easily within the realm of possibility. Then why should not we, who think in terms of the future, visualize ourselves as living it through the "SPACEAN", the Interplanetary Journal published by the crews of the Space Liners, an edition aboard every ship?

Here lies new thought for serious writers of S T F. Here plots will grow through the "News Columns of the Future."

Be sure to let me hear your reaction to the "SPACEAN" in the first Rocket Mail to descend on this office.

—— S T F ——

Early in August of this year, 1940, Dr. Thomas O'Connor Sloane, scientist, editor, and author—and one of the greatest figures ever to touch the

field of science-fiction—set forth on his last great adventure. He was 88 years of age keen alert, and forward-looking.

Those of us who knew him over a period of long years feel that it is not fair to let his departure from this world pass without more than casual attention. To my mind his passing is one which releases him from the limitations of the present. He dreamed of the outer universe, and I believe that he has gone out, past Proxima Centauri, beyond the outer nebula of that space of which he wrote, and dreamed; A great soul on the greatest Adventure. Let's keep that memory.

—— S T F ——

Letters from Jack Williamson, Raymond Z. Gallun, Murray Leinster, E. E. Smith, Catherine Kutner (formerly C. L. Moore), E. DeWitt Miller, Donald Wandrei, Warner Van Lorne, Frank K. Kelly, and Ross Rocklynne. Nat Schachner dropped in. All are encouraging in their attitude toward *THE COMET.*

—— S T F ——

The idea of creating a *Short, Short Story Corner* seems to hold considerable merit. It would give newcomers a chance to crack the field and get reader-reaction to their efforts. It would be a real opportunity spot for locating the most promising writers of the new group. And it would have a place for those numerous brief stories by well-known authors which have often been turned back because of their brevity.

Be sure to tell me when you write just how you feel about this new approach to our problem of keeping the door of opportunity wide open. It can effect all of us who are trying to break through into print—and four "short-shorts" won't take up any more space than one short story.

Remember, we are editing this book together, you and I. So don't leave me in the dark as to your opinions.

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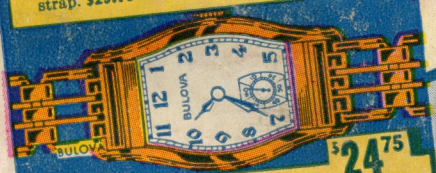

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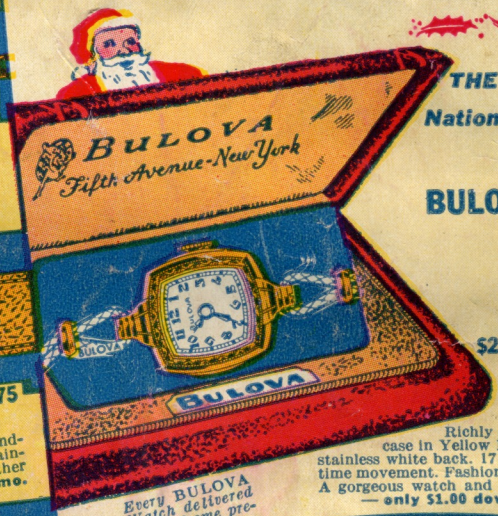

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