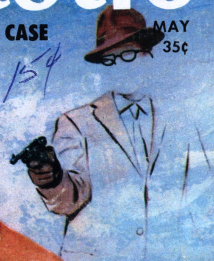


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fantastic

MAY

1958

Volume 7

Number 5

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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SID GREIFF



FICTION

THE INVISIBLE MAN MURDER CASE

By Henry Slesar..... 6

THE ILLEGITIMATE EGG

By Genevieve Haugen..... 26

THE CHEAT

By Alexander Blade..... 39

PROGRESS ZERO

By G. L. Vandenburg..... 48

SNAKE PIT

By Lawrence Kingery..... 56

TWO BY TWO

By E. K. Jarvis..... 64

SPAWN OF THE DARK ONE

By Robert Bloch..... 72

FACT

THE RIDDLE OF LEVITATION

By Eric Frank Russell..... 92

FEATURES

EDITORIAL..... 5

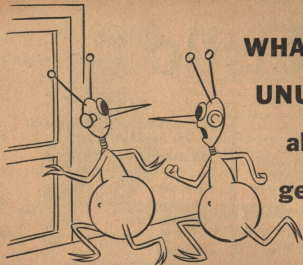
ACCORDING TO YOU... 124



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THEY'RE LAUGHING AT US—

—in the taverns along the Martian canals. It's not generally known, but they get our newscasts and TV shows up there and think it's all pretty amusing. They heard about the eight hundred people stranded in a restaurant on the turnpike in Pennsylvania during the snow storm last March and our strenuous efforts to rescue them. As a result, the Martians have a little routine that goes like this: One Martian says, "The Earthlings are going to the moon." "What Earthlings?" asks the other, and the first Martian replies, "The ones who can't find the Pennsylvania Turnpike in a snow storm." Oh, those Martians!

Seriously, we'd like to call your attention to the subscription invitation on the opposite page. Until now, both *Amazing* and *Fantastic* have been newsstand publications because you, our readers, indicated that you preferred it that way. But lately, we've received a great many subscriptions and subscription inquiries, so we've simplified the process with a blank and a break pricewise to show our appreciation.

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The police didn't have to apologize to anyone. They were on their toes. They picked up drunks and gave out traffic tickets and trapped killers. But they found new methods were necessary when confronted with——

THE INVISIBLE MAN MURDER CASE

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

WHEN you come right down to it, I'm a pretty nice guy. I'm not so homely that you couldn't face me across a luncheon table, and not so handsome that you wouldn't mind bringing your girl along. I make pleasant small talk, and know how to listen sympathetically. I'm relatively modest about my accomplishments, even if I am a sort of celebrity (my last book sold one million four hundred thousand copies in the paperback edition). So, being fully aware of the general niceness of me, Jeff Oswald, it came as a rude shock to realize that there was somebody in this



The invisible menace tore



viciously at the terrified girl's clothing.

world who hated my guts. Someone who despised me.

I got my first hint of this alarming fact when the Mystery Authors Association extended me an invitation to take their podium for half an hour. It was a big moment for me, being asked to speak before such an auspicious gathering. I had just published my first novel (*Kill Me Quietly*, Wharton Publishers, \$2.95) and the ink hadn't dried on my second contract. As you might know, the book became something of an instantaneous best-seller, and there was a public clamor for further adventures of my private eye hero, Rufe Armlock. Always alert to public demand, I've since responded with nine more novels, each slightly gorier (and more successful) than the last.

Anyway, the MAA slipped me a nice note, asking me to lecture, and I willingly obliged. I don't believe my speech made any great impression, but I think the membership was amused to get a look at me. After reading about Rufe Armlock, they must have expected something different. (*His face was like a granite slab, chiseled on by a bad sculptor. His shoulders were too wide for most door-*

ways. When he smiled, he could chill a hood's blood or boil a woman's.) Actually, my face is more the kind you see in graduation class photos, the big-eared kid in the back row with the pink cheeks and silly grin. I guess I didn't look like the author of *Kill Me Quietly* at all.

It was after the lecture that I met the man who hated me. I didn't realize the enmity at first; I was too flattered just to be introduced to Kirk Evander. Evander had been a kind of hero of my childhood, when I discovered his intricate detective novels after exhausting the output of Conan Doyle, S. S. Van Dine, John Dickson Carr, Ellery Queen, and the rest. Once I had thought that an Evander novel was the epitome of the classic mystery yarn, but his most recent efforts hadn't held the old magic. He was past sixty now; he was beginning to plagiarize himself.

"Gee, Mr. Evander," I said, in a voice that sounded boyish to my own ears, "this is a great pleasure for me."

He was a small, wispy man with mournful features, but there was a lot of incandescence in his eyes and he shook hands as if we were trading fish.

"Thank you," he said dryly.

"This book of yours, Mr. Oswald. Did you say it was called *Kill Me Quickly*?"

"*Quietly*," I corrected. "I'm afraid it's one of these hard-boiled novels, Mr. Evander. Nothing like the things you write."

"I imagine not." He pursed his lips. "And do you seriously classify this work as a mystery?"

"I don't classify it at all. You see, I have this private detective character called Rufe Armlock. He's a sort of tough—"

"Spare me," Evander said, shutting his eyes. "I've heard quite enough about private detectives, Mr. Oswald. The occupation has been an excuse for the worst offenses against good taste that I have ever known. You will pardon me if I am *not* amused."

I admit I was disappointed. Not because Evander didn't like my book; I expected that. But my picture of the author was shattered by meeting him. He looked like a dissipated college professor, and talked like a refugee from a bad English play. I shifted uncomfortably, and began to eye the crowd in search of interesting females.

But Evander wasn't through with me yet.

"Do you know something,

Mr. Oswald? Young men like yourself, with their Freudian nightmares translated into violent images of 'private eyes' and 'naked blondes' and assorted cruelties, are primarily responsible for the decline of the detective story."

"Gee, I'm sorry, Mr. Evander—"

"Sorry? If you were truly sorry, Mr. Oswald, you would do the world a favor. You would chop off your hands before they ever touched a typewriter again. Or, if that cure seems too drastic, you would burn every manuscript you write before the world ever sees it."

I still didn't get upset. I told you I was nice.

"Well, Mr. Evander, I don't think I could do that. You see, I write for money."

"Why?"

"To eat, I guess."

"Why?"

I began to get the idea that Mr. Evander wasn't partial to me. I took the hint and wandered off in search of the before-mentioned females. Luckily, I found one. Her name was Eileen, and she turned out to be an admirer of mine. It was nice to talk to her, especially since she was a lot prettier than Kirk Evander. After the meeting, we went to her apartment in Greenwich Village.

Eileen was an Associate Member of the Mystery Authors, which meant she hadn't sold anything yet. She read me the first chapter of a suspense novel called *Black Night at Bennington*. It was terrible. Unfortunately, I said so, and the evening ended badly.

It was almost six months before I saw Kirk Evander again, and by that time, my second novel (*A Fistful of Blood*) had become the best-selling paperback on the stands. I went to another MAA meeting, with the vague hope of running into Eileen again. I had already forgotten Evander's acid comments, and even if I hadn't, I was too swelled with my own success to let them worry me. When I saw the little guy, looking as if he had worn the same rumpled suit from the last meeting to this, I greeted him cheerfully.

"How's everything?" I asked. "Got a new book on the fire, Mr. Evander?"

The man standing next to the writer, a snooty-looking guy that worked for *Wharton Publishing*, the outfit that produced my books and Evander's, coughed and moved away. Evander turned on me and smiled without humor.

"My new book," he said bit-

ingly, "is, indeed, on the fire. As I'm sure you've heard."

I batted my eyes. "Huh?"

"It seems the public doesn't want crime literature any more. It wants filth. It wants garbage! Unfortunately, there are people like you, Mr. Oswald, to provide it in ready supply."

He whirled on his heel and stalked away. Just then, Eileen appeared out of the crowd and pulled me to one side.

"For heaven's sake!" she said, tapping her foot. "Are you still shooting off your mouth, Jeff Oswald?"

"Gosh, it's nice to see you again, Eileen." It *was* nice. She was a remarkably pretty girl, with Oriental eyes and auburn hair.

"I guess you'll never learn," she sighed. "Why must you be so tactless?"

I shifted my feet guiltily. "I'm sorry about that. I wouldn't have told you that about your novel, but you *begged* me for an honest opinion—"

"I don't mean that. I mean Kirk Evander. Didn't you know about his last book?"

"No."

"Well, it was the flop of the year. He considered it his masterpiece, but the reviewers called it a pompous bore. One

of these real period pieces. A locked-room murder in the family mansion, with millions of obscure clues."

"Gee, that's too bad. I used to admire that guy."

"He's nothing but an old fool. And maybe something else . . ." She looked into the crowd thoughtfully. Then she bit her lip, and added: "And how he hates you."

"Hates me?"

"I've heard him carry on about you in other meetings. He thinks you're the sole reason for his failure. He practically has a stroke when your name is mentioned."

"Gosh! I hardly even know the guy."

"That doesn't matter. You're some kind of symbol to him. All the hate that's been building up in him for the last few years — he's directing it at you."

I frowned. I didn't like being hated.

"Ah, the heck with it," I said, trying to be bright. "You and me need a drink."

"You and I," she said primly. "Some writer you are."

So we had a drink. As a matter of fact, we had several. That was my mistake.

Around eleven o'clock, I was carrying seven or eight martinis in my pouch, and my

head felt like a sputnik, revolving slowly around the meeting room. I wasn't used to so much alcohol, even if my hero, Rufe Armlock, was. (*He cracked the cap on a bottle of bourbon and tilted the neck into his mouth. He didn't lower it until the brown stuff was below the plimsoll line, but when he put it down, his steely eyes hadn't changed in focus or alertness.*) As a matter of fact, I was pie-eyed, and saying a lot of stupid things. Like telling Kirk Evander just what I thought of him and his "classic" detective novels.

"You're a bore," I said, poking a finger into his chest. "Thash what you are. A bore. And you know what your novels are? Impopable. I mean *improbable*. All those locked-room murders and junk like that. That kind of thing never happens. Never!"

Evander remained calm while I lectured him. But out of my drunken fog, his eyes shone like yellow lanterns.

"Never happens," I said again. "People don't get bumped off that way. Unnerstand, Mister Evander?"

"Of course," he said bowing slightly. "Thank you for the opinion, Mr. Oswald."

"S'all right," I grinned. "Nice to help. You jus' listen to ol' Rufe Armlock. I mean

Jeff Oswald. The public does not *believe* that stuff any more. They want *action*. Not that ol' locked-room junk. Understand?"

"Perfectly," Kirk Evander told me.

By this time, Eileen had the good sense to pull me away. She coaxed me out of the meeting hall and took me to her apartment, where I made one slobbering attempt to kiss her. It failed miserably, and she thrust me out the door like a cat. Somehow, I got myself home.

In the morning, an air-raid siren woke me up. After a while, I realized it was only the doorbell. I got up and let my visitor in. It was Aaron Snow, my agent.

"What's the matter with you?" he said.

"What time's it?" I groaned.

"Three." Aaron frowned at me, in his fatherly way. He was a year older and fifty years wiser, and he looked like an aging quiz kid. "I've been trying to reach you, but your phone's off the hook. I wanted to report on that Wharton meeting this morning."

"What meeting?"

"I guess you didn't know. Kirk Evander stormed in there this morning, and gave 'em an ultimatum. Either they

strike you from their list, or him."

"What?"

"That's the truth. He must have been crazy to do it; his last book sold about eight hundred copies, and I suspect he bought 'em all himself. He should have known they wouldn't drop a hot-rock like you."

"So what happened?"

"They tried to placate him, of course. He was once important to their Mystery Division. And who knows? He might come through with a big book yet. But Evander stood his ground. Either you go—or he does."

"What did Wharton say?"

"What could they say? They simply refused to accept. He stormed out again, promising never to darken their door." Aaron sighed. "Feel sorry for the old guy. He was really a great writer. He'll never get lined up with a first-grade publisher now."

"Gee, that's rough."

"Don't let it worry you. Just concentrate on that next opus of yours. Got a title yet?"

"Yeah, tentatively. *To Kiss A Corpse*. Like it?"

Aaron grimaced. "No. That must mean it's good."

It took me four months to

reach the last chapter of that novel. One night, hammering away on my old Remington, the doorbell sounded. I cursed at the interruption, because I had just reached a very crucial moment. *(She swayed toward him, her arms reaching out for the unfinished caress, the shreds of her clothing waving in the breeze from the opened window. But Rufe Armlock wasn't interested; he raised the automatic in his hand and tenderly squeezed the trigger. The bullet ripped into her soft white...)*

"All right, all right!" I shouted, as the ringing persisted.

I flung open the door, and there was Kirk Evander.

For a moment, I was frightened. To tell you the truth, I scare easily. Even the stories I write sort of scare me sometimes, and the realization that my visitor was a man who hated me intensely was disturbing.

But he was smiling.

"Good evening," he said cordially. "I wonder if I could come in, Mr. Oswald?"

"Sure," I gulped.

When he got inside, he took off his shabby homburg and peeled off a pair of gray suede gloves. There was a large hole in the right index finger.

"I hope you'll pardon this intrusion. But I discovered something very interesting in the evening paper, and I thought you'd like to see it."

I blinked at him.

"It relates to our conversation at the MAA meeting," Evander said sweetly. "I believe you made certain statements, about the type of crimes I write about. You said they were—improbable."

"Listen, Mr. Evander, I'm sorry if—"

"No, no," he said quickly, lifting his hand. "I quite understand. But I knew you would be as intrigued as I was—to read this."

He handed me a newspaper clipping. I took it to the desk lamp and read:

PUBLISHER'S AIDE KILLED IN LOCKED HOTEL ROOM

INEXPLICABLE MURDER
BAFFLES POLICE

March 12, New York. A murder mystery straight out of a Kirk Evander novel took place last night at the Hotel Belmartin, where Winston Kale, 46, publisher's assistant, met his death under mysterious circumstances. Mr. Kale, an employee of the Wharton Publishing Company, whose

specialty is mystery novels, was shot and killed in a room securely locked and bolted from the inside.

The unusual nature of the crime was noted by the police when they were called to the scene by Zora Brewster, 24, a friend of the deceased. Miss Brewster claimed that she had left Mr. Kale's hotel-apartment at one, leaving him in "good spirits." When she closed the door behind her, she heard Mr. Kale lock and bolt the door. As she was waiting outside for the elevator, she heard a shot, and rushed back to the door. When Mr. Kale failed to respond, she called the police. Mr. Kale's body was discovered on the floor, a bullet having penetrated the back of his head, causing instantaneous death. Upon examination of the room, the police could find no trace of any intruder or weapon. The room was located on the nineteenth floor of the residential hotel, and the windows were locked.

In an interview with Captain William Spencer, Homicide Detail, the police official stated: "The circumstances of Mr. Kale's death are certainly unusual, but we are confident that a logical explanation will be found. We have ruled out suicide completely, due to the

direction of the bullet and the lack of any weapon."

Miss Brewster, an actress and singer, is being held as a material witness.

I looked up from the clipping with astonishment evident in my face, because Evander chuckled and said:

"An 'improbable' murder, wouldn't you say, Mr. Oswald?"

"Gosh," I said. "Winston Kale! I saw him only last week—"

"The poor man," Evander clucked. "But if he had to die, what a delicious way to do it. I'm sure the Wharton Publishing Company is pleased by the publicity."

I realized that Wharton wasn't the only one pleased. Kirk Evander's glowing eyes indicated that he was pretty happy himself. The news story was practically an advertisement for his novels. It was a natural promotion gimmick.

"What about this girl?" I said. "Zora Brewster. Maybe she's the one."

"Nonsense. Miss Brewster is an old, er, acquaintance of mine. She's charming and harmless, and her brain compares in size to a pea. She wouldn't have either motive or intellect to commit such a crime."

I decided to be a good sport. I grinned.

"Well, I guess you made your point, Mr. Evander. Guess there *are* improbable crimes. Too bad about old Winston, though."

"Bah. Winston Kane's not worth mourning. He was a sycophant, a yes-man for Douglas Wharton."

I scratched my head and studied the item again.

"But how was it done? You've had experience with this kind of thing, Mr. Evander. In your novels, I mean. How could he get killed in a locked room?"

"That," and Kirk Evander smiled, "is a story I just might reveal. In my next novel, for Gorgon Press. I've just signed a contract with them, for a book to be called *Death of a Publisher*. I imagine this publicity won't harm sales, eh? Good night, Mr. Oswald!"

He picked up his hat and gloves, and left with an air of triumph.

I couldn't get back to work after that visit. I felt as I had when I was a kid, puzzling over a John Dickson Carr or Kirk Evander murder mystery, trying to solve it before the author's revelation on page umptieth. But the fact that this murder was *real*, and

that I actually knew the dead man made it too upsetting for logical thought. It could have been coincidental, but that seemed as improbable as the fact that such a crime had actually taken place.

And then an even more disturbing idea intruded. The mysterious death of Winston Kale had come along as a stroke of luck for Kirk Evander. People would be talking about "locked room" murders again, and that meant talk about Kirk Evander fiction. It seemed awfully convenient.

Was it maybe *too* convenient?

I gave a shiver, and tried to warm myself over the type-writer.

A few weeks later, I learned that I was right about one thing, and wrong about another. People talked about the locked-room murder, all right, and Gorgon Press announced the new Kirk Evander novel with appropriate fanfare. But the publicity didn't last. The newspapers got awfully quiet about the strange death of Winston Kale, and people started to forget.

Then they were sharply reminded.

Late one morning, I opened the newspaper and saw a front-page bulletin:

ACTRESS KILLED ON STAGE; POLICE BAF- FLED BY "IMPOSSI- BLE" CRIME

CHIEF WITNESS IN KALE
MURDER STABBED DURING
PERFORMANCE

April 7, New York. Zora Brewster, attractive songstress in the Broadway production of "Live It Up," was killed last night in circumstances as unusual as the death of Winston Kale on March 11.

Miss Brewster, chief witness to the "locked room" murder of the publishing company executive, suddenly collapsed on stage during a musical number and was taken to her dressing room. It was later revealed that she had been stabbed to death by a blow from behind. However, Miss Brewster was the only performer on the stage of the theatre at the time . . .

The article went on for considerable more lineage, and once more the death of Winston Kale came in for examination. Kirk Evander's name was mentioned three times, and his new novel, *Death of a Publisher*, was also cited. It was great publicity, all right. Too great.

The thought that had troubled me some weeks ago came back. It was all too pat. Evander knew both Kale and Zora Brewster; he might not have liked either one too much. More importantly, they may have been natural victims of some nutty scheme to revive interest in the "classic" detective yarn.

"No," I said aloud. "That's crazy! He wouldn't do such a thing—"

Then I remembered Kirk Evander's eyes, and I began to wonder if he was more than just an embittered author. Maybe he was a mental case, a desperate man.

If anybody could concoct such murders, Evander was the one. He'd spent his whole life thinking about them.

And what if Zora Brewster's death wasn't the last? What if the murders went on, maintaining interest in Kirk Evander's books? All he had to do was keep knocking off people he didn't like, in some inexplicable manner. . . .

People he didn't like?

I swallowed the boulder that had lodged in my throat.

If Evander killed the people he didn't like—who was a better choice than Mrs. Oswald's son, Jeff?

My hand was shaking like a bongo-player's, but I got it

steady enough to pick up a phone.

Aaron Snow's voice had a nice quality of gruff reality.

"I think you're nuts," he said, when I babbled out my suspicions. "But if it's going to worry you, why not get in touch with Captain Spencer, the detective on the case? At this point, I think he'd be happy to listen to *any* theory."

"Then you really think I should?"

"Sure. It's about time you met a *real* detective, anyway."

I was too nervous to take offense. I hung up the phone, squared my shoulders, and called police headquarters.

I got even more rattled when I met Captain Bill Spencer. I mean, it was a shock. He was a great big guy, with shoulders almost too wide for my apartment door. He had a strong, rugged face, like chiselled granite. He was practically a double for Rufe Armlock.

"Okay," Spencer frowned, taking a seat. "Let's get down to business, Mr. Oswald. And do me one favor."

"What's that?"

"Stick to the facts. I'm not fond of fiction; particularly your kind."

"You've read my novels?"

"If you want literary criti-

cism, Mr. Oswald, you called the wrong guy. All I'm interested in is murder. Real murder."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," I said eagerly. "I've got an idea about these two crimes, and I think it makes sense."

"I'm listening," Captain Spencer said.

He leaned back and lit a cigarette while I talked. I told him everything, right from the beginning. I told him about Evander and his hatred for me, and how he bemoaned the decline of the classic detective story. I told him about his fight with Wharton Publishers, and how he knew the girl, Zora Brewster. I told him all I could think of, without putting my theory into a single crisp sentence.

He finally forced me into it.

Spencer said: "Let's get it straight, Mr. Oswald. Are you making an accusation?"

I blinked.

"I guess I am," I said. "I don't have any proof, of course. But I think Kirk Evander killed them both. He had plenty of motive."

"And did you also figure out how?"

"No. But if anybody could, Evander could. His own books prove it."

The Captain stood up.

"Well, it's an interesting theory, Mr. Oswald . . ."

"But you don't believe it?"

"As a matter of fact, I think you may be right. I'll follow it up at once."

I couldn't help looking surprised.

Spencer scowled. "I know what you're thinking. You've read so many novels, you always think the cops never listen to anybody, and go blundering ahead on their own. Well, you're wrong. Some of our best leads come from outside. I happen to believe your theory's a damn good one."

And he went out.

I have to admit I was flabbergasted. I *had* expected Spencer to scoff at my idea; I thought the cops always did. They sure did it in Rufe Armlock novels.

About three days later, I learned that Captain Spencer had acted swiftly.

I was hunched over the typewriter, trying to get Rufe into trouble, when I heard the pounding on the door. It was Kirk Evander, and he was too angry to use the doorbell. He burst into the room like a small tweedy cyclone and said:

"So! I meet my accuser face to face!"

"I don't understand—"

"You don't, eh? Then you

deny it? You deny that you accused me of murder? That you were responsible for having me dragged into the dirty hands of the police, like some common hoodlum?"

I didn't know what to say. I would have gladly invented a lie, but I couldn't think of one.

"You thought I wouldn't realize, eh? But I know it was you, Oswald. You couldn't *bear* the fact of my success, could you? So you resort to *this*!"

"Look, Mr. Evander, I'm sorry if—"

"I don't want your apologies!"

He went to the door, but turned before going out.

"All I have to say is this, Mr. Oswald. *Be careful.*"

He laughed, and shut the door.

Well, let me tell you, I was scared. Evander hadn't actually *denied* anything, and his last words sounded like a pure and simple threat.

Even though it was only eight-thirty, I decided that the best place for me was in bed and under the covers.

I couldn't fall asleep until an hour later, and then my dreams weren't the kind I liked to dream.

About ten-fifteen, I thought I heard a sound outside. It

might have been a knock on the door, so I padded out of the bedroom and opened the front door. There was nothing there but a breeze, so I went back to my comforter.

A few minutes later, I was in the middle of a dream involving a guillotine. I didn't care for it. I forced myself awake, but when I opened my eyes, I saw that the shreds of the dream were still clinging. There was a shining blade over my head.

"Go 'way," I murmured.

But the blade didn't go away. It started descending. Only now it wasn't a guillotine blade any more; it was a meat-chopper, and it seemed interested in the white meat on my neck.

I froze on the bed.

Then the doorbell rang, and just as suddenly, the meat-cleaver disappeared out of sight.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. It *had* been a dream, then. But what a dream.

I opened the door and there was Eileen, tapping her foot.

"Well," she said. "Is that how you usually dress for a night out?"

"Huh?" I looked down at my pajamas.

"It's rather unusual, but you might start a fad. Or did

you just forget about our date?"

I slapped my forehead. "Holy cow! I was supposed to meet you at ten. I forgot—"

"I suppose you were keeping a date with dear old Rufe Armlock. Or was it one of those blonde beauties he's always shooting in their soft white —"

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Eileen, it slipped my mind completely. And for good reason, believe me."

I pulled her inside and made her sit down. She was pretty cool towards me, but when I told her about Evander's visit, she got all warm and solicitous.

"You poor thing," she said, patting my cheek. "No wonder you were upset."

I took advantage of her sympathetic attitude for a while, but half an hour later, the telephone's jangle cut off any further ministrations of mercy. I picked it up, and Spencer's rough voice said:

"Oswald? This is Captain Spencer. Thought you might like to know that there's been another murder."

I gasped. "Whose?" I said.

"That's the tough part. I decided tonight that we had enough of him to pull him in for serious questioning, so we dispatched a couple of men to

bring him back. That's when we found him."

"Evander?"

"Dead, murdered, just like the others. Only maybe a little worse. Think maybe you ought to come down here."

"All right," I said, trying to stop my trembling "Where are you?"

"At Evander's apartment, on Central Park South. Better get here before midnight."

"Right," I said.

Eileen insisted on coming down with me, but the police barricade that had been stationed outside Evander's apartment door declined to admit her. She waited outside while I walked in. Captain Spencer was standing by the body, and at first, all I could see was Kirk Evander's slippered feet.

"Just like the last time," Spencer said quietly. "Door was locked from the inside, and so were all the windows. But this is how we found him."

I looked down. Nobody had to tell me that Kirk Evander was dead.

His head was missing, neatly severed from his body.

I didn't get sick or anything. Not me. But when I got outside, *then* did I get sick! Boy!

As you might guess, the news of Evander's murder, the third such mysterious event in a period of less than three months, brought about a journalistic picnic. There wasn't exactly rejoicing in the streets, but in certain circles, like *Gorgon Press*, there were secret smiles of satisfaction. They knew that Evander's last book would be a best-seller, even before the galleys were made up.

Evander's earthly remains were put in the family vault by the author's only living relation, a brother named Borg Evander. This Borg was quite a character, too, and here's how I came to meet him.

About a week after the murder, my agent Aaron Snow showed up at my apartment, looking enthused. Aaron doesn't get enthused very often.

"Great idea," he said, tossing his hat on a chair. "I didn't think Wharton's publicity department had a good idea in them, but this time they came across."

"What are you talking about?"

"Take a look."

He pulled a mimeographed sheet from his pocket. I saw it was a standard news release, with the *Wharton Publishing Company* masthead.

I'd seen them before, but this one made me sit up. The heading read:

MYSTERY AUTHOR VOWS TO DISCOVER MURDERER OF KIRK EVANDER

Jeff Oswald, author of "Kill Me Quietly," "A Fistful of Blood," and the forthcoming "To Kiss A Corpse" (Wharton Pub. Co.) has vowed to find the killer of his friend, Kirk Evander, the famed mystery novelist. Evander met his death in circumstances as strange as . . .

I stopped reading, and said:
"This is screwy!"

"No, it isn't. It's a real sweet publicity idea. I know you don't like that 'friendship' bit, but it was necessary."

"That's not what I mean. How can I solve these murders? Even the police don't know where to start. I couldn't possibly—"

"You can make a try, just for appearances sake. Nobody will blame you if you fail."

"But we're doing all right without phoney stunts—"

"We want it to continue, don't we? The public's fickle. Look at the way Kirk Evander's old novels are selling; you couldn't give 'em away six months ago. They could

forget about Rufe Armlock in an awful hurry."

"But how do I go about it?"

"Well, you know Captain Spencer pretty well. He can supply you with information. And you can pay a call on Borg Evander, for instance."

"Borg Evander? Who's that?"

"Kirk's brother, who showed up when he was killed. He might know something. Look, I even brought you his address." He dug into his wallet for a scrap of paper. "Dr. Borg Evander, 80 Wiffletree Road, Queens . . ."

"All right," I said glumly. "If I have to."

"You have to. Especially since I okayed the release this morning."

"You mean the papers will be printing this thing?"

"I hope so."

"But then—what if the murderer sees it? What if he thinks I really *know* something?"

"You're not scared, are you?"

"Who, me? Of course."

The next morning was bright and clear, and the sunshine helped dispel some of the murkiness that surrounded my errand. I went to pay a call on Borg Evander, who lived in a section of town I

knew nothing about. After wandering about the streets, I finally found the old wood-frame house at the end of the unpaved street. It was isolated from the rest of the structures on the avenue, and from the moment I walked up to the front door, I knew it was just as well. The place smelled bad.

I rang the doorbell, but heard no sound. Instead, a panel in the door slid open noiselessly, and a light shone in my eyes. I blinked, and swore I saw a lens staring at me. Then the panel slid shut hastily, and a voice said:

"Please state your name and business."

I did, and the door opened. I started to say how-do-you-do to the man behind it, but there wasn't any man. As the door shut behind me, I got the idea that Dr. Borg Evander was one of these gadgeteers.

"Enter the door at the end of the hallway," the voice said.

I obeyed the instruction, but I gasped when I opened the door. There was nothing but air behind it, and a railed platform some four feet square.

"Please step on the platform," the voice told me.

I stepped on. A motor whined, and the platform de-

scended. It took me down about fifteen feet, to the floor of what was obviously a basement laboratory, crowded with scientific paraphernalia. It all looked very imposing and professional, but I couldn't tell if the junk scattered around the place was intended to locate a cure for warts or repair television sets. My host was nowhere in sight.

Then, out of a partitioned area at the end of the basement, out he came. He looked a lot like Kirk Evander, but he was easily five years older. He didn't have Kirk's hot-lamped eyes, either. They were brown and soft.

"I hope you don't mind the elevator," he said gently. "I detest stairs. And my heart —"

"I understand. I, er, gather you're some kind of scientist, Dr. Evander?"

"Ah," was all he said.

"Dr. Evander, I thought maybe you could help me. You see, your brother was a close friend of mine, and I'm interested in uncovering his murderer. I thought if we had a little talk—"

"But I've already spoken to the police," he said, looking bewildered.

"And what did you tell them?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. I hadn't seen Kirk for almost eight years, until he showed up a few months ago. He was always rather distant towards me... Then, when I learned of his death, I came forward to claim his body. That's really all I know."

It was a disappointment, but out of politeness, I chatted a few minutes longer. I was just about ready to leave when he said:

"Would you care to look around? I've been working on several fascinating experiments. The police didn't seem very interested, but you, a writer —"

"Well," I said, looking at my watch.

"It won't take very long. I don't see people very often, Mr. Oswald. I suppose they consider me—odd."

"I wouldn't say that, doctor. But you'll have to admit. That odor—"

"Odor? What odor?"

"Well, frankly, Dr. Evan-der, there's a smell in this house that's a little hard to take."

"Oh, dear." He put a finger on his mouth. "It's been here so long I've become immune. It's the acaphenimatin compound, probably, a new kind of plant food I'm working on. Or

perhaps you're smelling the sulfaborgonium." He lowered his eyes shyly. "A chemical I have named after myself; a scientist's vanity. It has a pungent odor, but only in formulation. I suppose I *could* stop making it, since it doesn't seem to have any practical application."

"Well," I laughed feebly, "it sure stinks, don't it?"

"Yes," he answered vaguely. "Kirk used just that word. Yet he seemed infinitely more interested in the sulfaborgonium than any of my experiments."

I perked up at that.

"Kirk was interested? Why?"

"I really don't know. He seemed utterly fascinated by its properties. As a matter of fact, he suggested a splendid use for it, if I could manufacture it in sufficient quantities. But that would be most impractical. The distillation process requires months, and produces only the smallest quantities from an exorbitant amount of raw materials."

"What use did he suggest?"

"Oh, an esthetic one. Kirk was always the esthete of the family. He thought that the unsightly portions of public structures might be painted with the chemical. Bridges

and things. In order to make them more attractive."

"I don't think I understand."

"Well, since sulfaborgonium is an anti-pigment and a total barrier of light rays, it would naturally render these ugly portions invisible. However, I don't think—"

"Wait a minute. Would you go around that corner again, doctor?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Did you use the word *invisible*?"

"Yes, of course. Once transmuted into chemical form, sulfaborgonium becomes a soluble fat, with the consistency of a—well, a facial cream, for instance." He chuckled impetuously. "Yes, Kirk was very amusing about that. He called it Vanishing Cream."

I was staring at the doctor until my eyes were hurting.

"Go on," I said. "Tell me more."

"Well, because of its resistance to pigmentation, and its complete barrierization of light, the chemical renders anything it covers invisible. If I didn't stain it with methyl blue, I wouldn't be able to find it myself." He chuckled again.

My head was swimming, and I wasn't sure if it was the

odor or the wild words of Dr. Evander.

"Let me get this straight. If you spread this stuff on something, that something can't be seen?"

"Exactly."

"*Anything*?"

"Oh, yes."

"Even a human being?"

The doctor looked puzzled.

"I suppose so. But why would anybody want to be invisible?"

"Dr. Evander," I said, licking my lips, "you mean to say you can't think of a single, solitary reason why somebody would want to be invisible? Have you ever heard of H. G. Wells? Have you ever been to the movies? Have you ever—" He wasn't reacting, so I put it more simply. "Criminals, doctor! Just think about what an invisible criminal can accomplish! Or a spy! An army, doctor! Think of how many battles you could win with an invisible army! A plane, a tank, a ship—imagine those invisible! Big things, little things. Good men, bad men! A general or a peeping Tom or a detective . . ."

"I never thought of it that way," Dr. Evander murmured. "But now that you put it into words . . ." His face suddenly had more wrinkles than before. "But most of the things

you mentioned are terrible things. Evil things—”

“That’s right,” I said grimly. “Take murder, for example. It would be pretty easy to kill somebody, and not get detected—if you were invisible. In a locked room for instance. All you have to do is walk in and kill somebody, then lock all the doors and windows. When the police finally break in, you walk out. Or on a stage, in front of thousands of witnesses—you could kill someone without the fear of being detected. The perfect crime.”

“How awful!”

“I think your brother might have realized these potentials, doctor. I’m not saying he used your chemical to commit the murders which took place. He might have made it available to someone else, however. And that someone may be responsible for all the deaths—including the death of Kirk Evander. And he’s free to kill again.”

“It can’t be true!”

“It must be true, doctor. If this stuff can do what you say—”

Something was making my ankle itch. I reached down and scratched it. My hand touched something furry.

“What the hell,” I said.

“Oh,” Doctor Borg said,

seeing my expression. “That must be Socrates.”

He reached down and picked up an armful of nothing. Then he stroked the nothing tenderly.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“It’s Socrates, my cat. I rubbed the sulfaborgonium on her last week, as an experiment. To see if the substance was harmful to animals. But she appears to be perfectly all right.”

I put my hand out, gingerly.

Socrates was fine. When I pulled my hand away, there were three thin scratches on the skin.

When I got home, I sat down and stared at the typewriter and talked to it like an old friend.

“What would Rufe Armlock do in a case like this?” I said.

The Remington didn’t answer, but the thought of Rufe Armlock conjured up another image. Why not go right to Captain Spencer, and tell him the story? It was simple and it was direct, so that’s what I did.

“Oh, no,” he said. “No, no, no.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean no, and that’s all I mean. I appreciate your ideas, Mr. Oswald, don’t misunder-

(Continued on page 106)

The Illegitimate Egg

By GENEVIEVE HAUGEN

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

"Father, I just found out I'm a boy. Why do you dress me like a girl?" "The better to hide your tail, my son." The author of this story called it science fiction. We call it just plain fun.

THE dreaded moment arrived with unexpected suddenness at twilight. Only a minute ago all had been well at the isolated Johnson farmhouse as the little family peacefully consumed an evening meal of pork chops, corn-on-the-cob and bread pudding. In the barn, cows were contentedly chewing cuds and out in the fields a gentle breeze rippled the ripening wheat.

Although their farm was small, their home humble and their lives a monotonous routine of unremitting toil, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson had never been so happy as during these past seven years. It was seven-year-old Egbert who destroyed their idyllic complacency with one shattering question. Chomping on a cob

of buttered corn he casually asked, "Am I *really* your own child, Mom and Dad, or am I adopted?"

Husband and wife exchanged stricken glances. Both were middle-aged, average-looking persons with calloused hands, fair skin, graying blond hair and blue eyes. Egbert's eyes, however, were brown, his complexion olive and his hair almost black. Was that why he suspected the truth?

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson could almost read one another's thoughts at this crucial moment. We should have told him sooner, perhaps right from the start. Will he love us less to know that we are not his real parents? Will it make him feel unwanted or insecure? We always intended to



"I've come for my child," the stranger said.

tell him one day, but when God sent him into our lonely, childless lives we naturally couldn't bear to think of him as other than our own flesh and blood or have him think of us as other than his natural parents. Now the moment we dreaded so long has arrived and we are unprepared.

Mr. Johnson dropped his fork and coughed, pretending to have swallowed the wrong way. Mrs. Johnson created a similar diversion by spilling something on the floor, muttering "land's sake!" and hurrying to fetch a rag. Both were frantically thinking of how to answer the boy's question.

It was Mr. Johnson who recovered first. Forcing a sip of coffee and then a chuckle, he mildly inquired, "Why do you ask? Think we're treating you like a stepchild or something?"

"'Course not," laughed Egbert. "Gosh, I think you're the swellest mom and dad a kid ever had."

Mrs. Johnson was so affected that she had to rush to the sink and turn her back, spending an unnecessary amount of time rinsing out the rag until she could stem the happy tears. She was

thankful that her sturdy husband had better control.

Mr. Johnson took off his specs and wiped them, remarking nonchalantly, "Seem to be getting an allergy to something around the farm. Eyes start watering now and then. Well, now, let's see—you were saying something about being adopted? What gave you that idea?"

Little Egbert tackled the pudding with zest, talking with his mouth full. "Well, for one thing, I've just found out I'm a boy instead of a girl."

There was a long moment of silence during which both adults seemed smitten with paralysis, then Mrs. Johnson gasped, "I *told* you he's too young to read books on anatomy. You should be more careful what you bring home from the public library in Centerville to keep him amused."

"But he asked for an anatomy book," protested her husband. "He's already tired of fairy tales. Besides, he's too young to understand those scientific words anyway. He probably caught on by looking at the illustrations and diagrams."

"That's right," admitted Egbert. "Most of the words are too big for me, but I can

understand pictures. My reproductive organ is that of a male instead of a female, so why do you dress me in long skirts and have me wear curls? And why did you give me the name Egbertha? I believe the masculine equivalent is Egbert." His tone was neither accusing nor aggrieved, merely brightly curious.

His parents glanced nervously at one another before replying, then Mr. Johnson confessed, "You are right, son. Your true name is Egbert and you *are* a boy. It—it's time we told you the truth—we, we didn't know just how to go about explaining, but you see, well, er—"

By now it was Mrs. Johnson who was able to assume command while her husband faltered under the emotional strain. With a determined smile she gently explained to their pride and joy, "It's because you are *different* from other children. Not inferior, you understand, just different." Gathering strength and inspiration, she drew an analogy. "You know how it is in the chicken coop. If one of the hens is different, the others peck it to death. Well, it's the same with children. They don't mean to be cruel and don't realize what they are doing, but they will plague

and tease another child just because he is different. That is why we haven't sent you to school as yet, but taught you ourselves how to read."

Egbert smiled good-naturedly and started drinking his glass of milk. "I think I know what you mean, Mom. I guess I'm different because other kids don't have tails."

Mrs. Johnson nodded courageously. "By dressing you in long, full skirts your tail doesn't show."

Suddenly the gleam of a new thought lighted Egbert's eyes. He plunked down his glass of milk and exclaimed delightedly, "Now I know why you arrange my hair in old-fashioned curls instead of a pony tail. It's because I don't have any ears—only auricular orifices—and the curls cover it up."

By now Mr. Johnson had rallied. With hearty good cheer he boomed, "Well, I guess that just about answers your question, son. You happened to be born a little bit different from most kids, and in order to spare you embarrassment we dressed you like a girl so nobody could see the difference."

Mrs. Johnson eagerly chimed in. "Don't for one moment think we love you less just be-

cause you happen to be a wee bit different."

"Gosh no, Mom," said Egbert cheerfully, and took a second helping of pudding.

Husband and wife breathed inaudible sighs of relief and started eating their own deserts. The crisis appeared to be over. Again they could almost read one another's thoughts. We will have to tell him, of course, that we are not his real parents, but meanwhile we have satisfied his curiosity enough to postpone that moment until tomorrow. After he has been put to bed we'll talk over the best way of breaking it to him.

Mrs. Johnson was all set to rise and clear away the dishes when little Egbert piped up again. "You haven't *really* answered my question yet."

Stifling a moan, she threw a glance of helpless appeal to her husband. Taking up the ball, he sputtered, "er—what do you mean, son?"

The boy looked puzzled as he toyed with the salt and pepper shakers. "I don't know exactly," he confessed. "It's that anatomy book, I guess. Except for the ears I don't have and the tail I do have, I seem to be like everybody else. The book says something about atavisms and muta-

tions, and I kinda think it means I was born a two-way freak, but—"

"The very idea!" Mrs. Johnson exclaimed indignantly. "You're no such thing. Something must have gone wrong with your chromosomes and afreets—or is it genies—? I've read about them somewhere—but the point is you're far more normal than any child I've ever seen. Gracious! Most of them can't even read anatomy books at your age."

Mr. Johnson groaned at this unreasoning logic and hastened to assure his son, "What she means is that you're not really so different that you have to worry about it."

The youngster smiled calmly but his tail swished so restlessly that his skirts quivered in betrayal. His doting parents knew this meant he was bursting with curiosity. No longer could they parry his questions with evasions.

Mr. Johnson sighed, then took the bull by the horns. Forthrightly he blurted out, "You've guessed the truth, son. We are not your real parents. You are a foundling. I hope you won't let it make any difference in your feelings toward us—Drat that

allergy!" He snatched off his glasses and started wiping them while Mrs. Johnson, who had given up all pretense, frankly sobbed.

The boy gazed at his foster parents in bewilderment. "Gee, Mom and Dad, you look all shook up. Why *shouldn't* I love you same as always?"

Overcome with relief at his well-balanced acceptance of the facts, both adults collapsed in an admixture of tears and laughter. "Well now," Mrs. Johnson said, "what were we worrying about all this time, afraid to tell our baby the truth."

"You're so right," agreed her husband.

Egbert smiled placidly. "Where did you find me?"

Mr. Johnson chuckled again. "I guess there's just no satisfying your curiosity. All right, Maw—you go ahead and tell the story. No reason not to now."

His wife beamed lovingly at the boy as she described the unusual circumstances attending his entry into their lives . . .

It had been a Sunday morning in autumn seven years ago and the Johnsons were returning from church in their old Ford. Both were in a cheerless mood. "No use

praying any longer," said Mrs. Johnson sadly. "God just didn't see fit to bless us with children."

Mr. Johnson patted her hand consolingly. "It's a lonely struggle out here on the farm," he admitted, "but at least let's be thankful we have each other."

They put the car away and went toward the back door to enter their home. As they approached, Mrs. Johnson exclaimed, "Somebody's been here while we were gone! They left something on the back porch."

As visitors were rare, they speculated with lively interest on whom it could have been. "Looks like a basket. Perhaps old Mrs. Brown brought over some preserves."

Hurrying up the steps they saw it was a bright new wicker picnic basket of conventional design. "Mercy!" said Mrs. Johnson. "There's a baby blanket inside. Something must be wrapped in it."

Carefully they unfolded the blanket, then gasped simultaneously. "Why, it's an egg—the biggest egg I've ever seen!" said Mr. Johnson.

His wife was mystified. "No hen ever laid an egg that size. In fact, it's even too big for an ostrich."

"This is mighty strange," mused Mr. Johnson. "Who could have left it here? And what are we supposed to do—eat it?"

"Oh, no," protested Mrs. Johnson. "Most likely they meant for us to hatch it."

They took the basket into the kitchen and examined it carefully but could find no clue to identify the anonymous donor, no note of explanation. The oval was a beautiful shade of blue, about a foot in length, and its shell shimmered like mother-of-pearl. With tender care they prepared an incubator in the oven and watched over the egg day and night, keeping it at an even temperature.

A month passed and Mr. Johnson said, "Maybe we're wasting our time. Perhaps it won't hatch, and even if it does I can't imagine what kind of a bird it could possibly be."

His wife counselled patience, pointing out that such a large egg must take a long time.

Another month passed, when one midnight Mrs. Johnson shook her husband awake. "I hear a noise downstairs. Sounds like a lost kitten mewling. Maybe it strayed into the house."

He listened sleepily and

yawned. "Mighty peculiar. I could swear it sounds more like an infant crying."

"Let's go down together," said Mrs. Johnson. "Some poor little animal must be in distress. Perhaps we can help it."

As they descended the stairs they ascertained that the noise was coming from the kitchen. Turning on the light, they surveyed the room but could see no sign of a living being. Then a lusty squall came from the incubator and they rushed to look inside.

What they saw left them stunned with incredulity. The egg had hatched! Its shell had fallen away, revealing a human baby uttering its first cries.

It was fully a minute before either of them could move or speak, then Mrs. Johnson whispered in awe, "It's a miracle."

Mr. Johnson sank to his knees and reverently clasped his hands. "Thank you, God. Forgive us for having lost faith. This is Your way of answering our prayers. . . ."

They named the baby Egbert because it had been hatched from an egg, but called it Egbertha for reasons now explained to the boy. Throughout the years

they had successfully kept the secret of his origin, and passed him off as their own. Their few and distant neighbors marvelled at the lack of signs of pregnancy which Mrs. Johnson had displayed but had no reason to doubt the parentage of the little "girl."

Now that their foster son knew all, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson anxiously awaited his reaction. They were worried to see a pucker of disappointment on his brow. "Aw shucks," said Egbert, "I still don't know who my real parents are."

Seeing the stricken expressions on their faces he laughed and hastened to assure them, "Golly, don't get me wrong. I wouldn't trade you for any other mom and dad in the world. I'm just curious, that's all."

The two adults wiped their brows in relief, and that's how things stood the night of the mysterious disappearance of the Johnson family. The happy trio went upstairs and were about to undress for bed, blissfully unaware of what the evening was yet to bring, when they were startled to hear a knock on the back door. Although visitors seldom came, they were especially rare at this late hour.

Agog with interest, all

three hurried down to the kitchen and Mrs. Johnson opened the door. An attractive young lady stood on the back porch, attired in a close-fitting sheath evening frock. "How do you do?" she smiled. "My name is Mrs. Zen. May I come in?"

"Of course, and welcome," said Mrs. Johnson hospitably. "You must be a new neighbor although, my stars, you sure look too stylish to come from one of the farms hereabouts. Nice of you to pay a call. I'll have some coffee ready in a jiffy."

Even as she spoke, Mrs. Johnson was thinking there was something oddly familiar about the young lady even though she was positive they had never met before. She had large brown eyes, a smooth olive complexion and glossy dark hair that fell to her shoulders. Reminded one of Egbert's coloring; in fact, even her facial features kind of put one in mind of—

As she closed the door behind her visitor, Mrs. Johnson's face suddenly blanched. Her husband was also staring at Mrs. Zen in dawning realization, and it was at this moment the young woman spotted Egbert across the room. Although he was clothed in his usual feminine ap-

parel she cried, "My boy! My own little boy!"

Rushing to him, she caught Egbert into a loving embrace. The back of her skirt rustled agitatedly and the practiced eyes of the Johnsons identified this phenomenon as being caused by the swishing of a tail. There was no longer any doubt in their minds that this woman was who she purported to be.

Numb with shock, they stood like frozen statues while Mrs. Zen hugged the boy, explaining, "I am your real mother, dear, and I've come to take you home."

This jolted Mr. Johnson's vocal chords into action. "Now wait a minute!" he cried. "Egbert is *ours*, do you hear? We hatched him from an egg after you abandoned him on our doorstep. You no longer have any claim on him!"

Mrs. Zen released Egbert and drew a dainty handkerchief from her purse. Dabbing at tear-filled eyes, she sobbed contritely, "I know I owe you an explanation, and I hate to do this to you after all you have done for my child, but for seven long years I have lived only for the day when I could be reunited with him."

In spite of their alarm and dismay, the Johnsons could not help being touched by her distress. With heavy hearts they led her to a chair and listened patiently to her story. Egbert seemed least moved of all and watched his natural mother with more curiosity than emotion.

"I am not absolving myself of guilt," moaned Mrs. Zen, "but believe me, I have paid for my sins. My son—I notice you call him Egbert—is, well, I am ashamed to confess it, but he is—" She lowered her head and blushed, then bravely continued, "Egbert was an illegitimate egg."

The Johnsons tsked and shook their heads. Despite their disapproval of the poor woman's mistake they permitted her to talk, but not before Mrs. Johnson hastily assured Egbert, "This is no reflection on *you*, dear. It simply means that your real parents weren't properly married."

Mrs. Zen then proceeded to pour out the old, old story of two lovers who were forbidden to wed by over-strict parents and were legally barred from marriage until reaching the age of consent. The fortunes of war had suddenly intervened and the poor girl's lover was soon listed as

"missing in action." Meanwhile, she had been forced to abandon her egg lest others discover her secret and ostracize both herself and the child.

After years of hope, prayer and penitence, a joyous reunion took place. The war ended and her lover was safely returned from an enemy prison camp. They were now husband and wife, and all they needed to complete their happiness was their offspring, little Egbert.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Johnson doubted the veracity of this story, but despite their sympathy for the young lovers' bitter struggles and a sincere desire for a happy ending, they pointed out that their own situation was equally worthy of consideration.

"Egbert is all we live for," wailed Mrs. Johnson. "We were a childless couple facing a lonely old age when you brought him to our doorstep. We thought God had created him especially for us in answer to our prayers. Even though we now know this isn't so, we still thank Him for the seven years of joy He brought into our barren lives."

She broke down and her husband took over with an impassioned plea. "You are

young and can still have more eggs, but we have only Egbert. How can you ask us to give him up?"

Mrs. Zen burst into tears again. "Perhaps I am being selfish," she sobbed, "but you don't know what it means to have empty, aching arms for seven long years, yearning for your firstborn. No matter how many eggs I may have in years to come I shall love them all the same and I could not bear to be parted from a single one."

Fighting desperately for her happiness, and feeling sure of her foster son's devotion, Mrs. Johnson suggested, "Who of us is to be the judge in a case like this—who but the person most concerned—Egbert himself!"

"That's right," concurred her husband eagerly.

"That's not fair," Mrs. Zen fought back. "My darling baby hasn't had a chance yet to know and love me. However, perhaps there are questions he would like to ask."

Little Egbert, who had been weathering the emotional storm from a safe distance, looked wide-eyed at the three adults from across the room and said, "Gee whiz, do I have *questions*?!" He stared wonderingly at his foster par-

ents. "Golly, Mom and Dad, don't tell me *you* don't have any more questions."

"Why, what do you mean, dear?" asked Mrs. Johnson. "Mrs. Zen has explained the whole situation clearly. If there is anything further you wish to know I'm sure she'll be glad to answer."

Little Egbert took a deep breath and started:

"How come I was hatched out of an egg when everybody else gets born differently? Why do I have a tail? How did you know I was a boy instead of a girl when you first saw me? How could my real father have been missing in a war all these years seeing as how we haven't had a war since I was born? You say you want to take me home, but where is home? What is—"

"Wait a minute," laughed Mrs. Zen indulgently. "These are all minor points but I'd better answer quickly before I forget the questions. I knew you were a boy because you were a blue egg, dear. Girl eggs are pink. All Venusians have tails and are hatched from eggs. Your home is the planet Venus and we were at war with Mars. Does that answer your questions?"

Egbert looked stupefied. He glanced at his foster parents

to get their reactions. They merely shrugged and Mr. Johnson muttered, "Mars, Schmars, what's the difference? War is wrong whether it takes place between little countries or big planets."

Although grasping this bit of philosophy, little Egbert was impressed for different reasons. "But *we* haven't even invented space travel yet!"

Mrs. Zen saw an opening and smiled coaxingly at her son. "How would you like to take a little joy ride to the moon? We could be back in an hour. My flying saucer is parked behind the barn and it's powered with the latest anti-grav unit."

"Oh, no you don't," objected Mr. Johnson. "How can we be sure you'll bring him back?"

Things were temporarily at a stalemate until Mrs. Zen had a triumphant inspiration. "We are all being selfish, considering only ourselves instead of the most important thing of all—Egbert's future."

"And what about Egbert's future?" Mr. Johnson demanded suspiciously. I can see you're richer than we are—stylish clothes, private flying saucers and all that, but money isn't everything."

"Of course not," agreed

Mrs. Zen. "It's Egbert's emotional life once he reaches puberty. You can't disguise him forever as a girl."

Mrs. Johnson answered defiantly. "We've been saving up money, and as soon as we get enough we'll take him to a plastic surgeon to give him prosthetic ears. After that no one will be able to tell he's not an American—that is, after his tail is amputated."

Mrs. Zen shrieked in horror. "Oh, you fiends! Cut off my poor baby's tail? Do you realize what you'd be doing?"

The Johnsons began to feel uneasy. "Why, er no," stammered Mr. Johnson. "Does it serve some sort of useful function?"

Still shuddering, Mrs. Zen explained, "It's the antenna of our emotions. It is an automatic release of our repressions. It's a sensitive instrument which quivers with the delicacy of a butterfly when expressing our tender moods, and a safety valve which literally swishes away emotional stress when we become overcharged with negative feelings."

Her own tail was now doing just that as evidenced by the undulations of her skirt. "Otherwise we'd all go stark, raving mad. That is why we

have no need of mental hospitals or psychiatrists. The only reason we were forced to go to war with the tailless Martian monsters was because they were raiding our spaceships and cutting off our tails."

The foster parents were dejected to hear this. Mrs. Johnson wept in quiet despair. "I guess we're licked then," she admitted. "Egbert's future *does* depend upon his tail. I don't expect he could ever find a nice girl to marry or hope to lead a normal life hereabouts when everyone would consider him a freak."

Once again her husband started wiping the allergy from his specs, and bravely looked at the boy. "I guess you'd better take that ride in the flying saucer, son. It'll be for your own good in the long run."

Egbert's tail lashed with such violent sorrow that his skirts billowed like a ballerina's. "But I don't want to leave you, Mom and Dad!" he cried.

Mrs. Zen went to him and tenderly clasped him to her bosom, soothingly stroking the folds of his skirt over the turbulent tail, until it gradually subsided. "My poor child," she murmured. "This

has been a terrible strain on you, but you will soon learn to love me too. Believe me, darling, you'll be better off on our native planet."

It was at this moment that little Egbert thought of a solution to the whole agonizing problem. It was such a simple solution that everyone exclaimed in delight. All he did was look up at his real mother and ask, "Do you have room enough in your flying saucer for two extra passengers?" . . .

After a while the neighbors missed the old couple; then they realized the farm had been abandoned. Why? No one could say for sure. There were rumors about a UFO dropping down and picking them up but that was silly, of course. The local authorities did a little digging, looking for the bodies, but nothing came of that either. Finally the farm was sold for taxes and people went back to worrying about the Cold War.

THE END



"They said something about meteor dust in their jet tubes."

THE CHEAT

By ALEXANDER BLADE

ILLUSTRATOR LLEWELLYN

*Peter bore a fanatical hatred
for his mother's fiance. Only
her rejected suitor could
discover the reason.*

MRS. PARKER FARLEY to see you, Mr. Haber." Neal jerked his eyes up as though the intercom had turned a handspring on his desk. He said, "Send her in please."

A minute intervening, he opened a mental file marked, *Friends—inactive*. Under a subhead labeled, *Close*, he found: *The Farleys—Marcia—Peter*. And one more: *Parker—deceased*.

It had been—good lord! nine—no, ten months since Parker's spectacular death. A sleek convertible rocketing down Stony Point Road; a sharp bend; the car hurtling over; turning a colorful career into a legend. The headlines had—

The door opened suddenly. "Neal! Darling!" It was a typical Marcia entrance;

wide-eyed, direct. Long slim legs moved her swiftly across the room. Someone had once described her as a whirlwind of beautiful innocence. The description remained with Neal.

"Marcia!" He took her extended hands and led her to a chair, his eyes working overtime. Her fragile blonde beauty was still intact. The same Marcia he had introduced to Parker Farley sixteen years before.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Dear old dependable Neal!" Not the most wisely chosen of words but nothing to what followed: "You drifted away from us over the years, darling."

He turned his face sharply away from her gaze. Good Godfrey! You introduce your

best girl to your best friend. They promptly announce their engagement. What are you supposed to do? Buy the house next door?

But his annoyance vanished quickly. One expected such tactlessness from Marcia. A part of her never quite grew up. Basically though, she was—pretty wonderful.

He sat down. Marcia leaned forward. So far as she was concerned, there had been enough time-bridging small talk. "Neal, I'm in dreadful trouble! It's—it's Peter. He has actually defied me!"

Neal's eyebrows went up. Peter. Around fifteen now. He recalled the boy as he'd last seen him; at Parker's funeral. Poised, exquisitely mannered; a handsome youth, handing his mother from the limousine with tender consideration. A lad to be proud of.

"A boy like Peter? Why, he couldn't possibly—" Neal checked himself, instinct warning him. He wanted no part of this. Things were fine; the old wounds nicely scarred over; the old doors closed and locked. *Don't let anyone palm a key off on you*, a small voice advised. Neal hunted desperately for an out. Automatically, he thought of Tom Messner.

Messner and Parker Farley; very close in the latter years. They'd played together—gambled together—before Tom's affairs took him to Seattle. Neal had never cared for the man but now he blessed the mother who had born him.

"I heard Tom Messner is back in town."

The sudden deviation puzzled Marcia. "Why, yes. He returned shortly after Parker's accident. He's been very helpful but—"

"He's the man to talk to, Marcia. Far better acquainted with Peter. I scarcely know the boy."

"But that's impossible. Tom is—well, involved in the problem. "Neal—you've got to speak to Peter. You really must!"

"Speak to him! Marcia—please. I'll advise you, but—"

"That isn't enough. He needs the guidance of a strong male hand. He needs—"

"But I'm no child-psychiatrist. I'm an architect."

Her eyes pleaded. "You're the only one I can turn to. After all, it isn't as though you were a complete stranger."

Not far from it, Neal thought. He shrugged. He would surrender eventually, so why not now? "Tell me."



He studied the men with bright interest.

Marcia rushed into it. "As I said, Tom has been a real friend—helping with the little things—taking responsibility off my shoulders. And I thought he and Peter were getting along very well until the other night."

"What happened?"

"The most astounding thing you ever heard of. Tom and I sat chatting on the loveseat. It was rather late and I thought Peter was asleep. But he wasn't. Suddenly he walked into the room and confronted us. He stared at Tom very coldly and said—" Marcia flushed. Neal waited.

"These," Marcia said miserably, "were Peter's exact words: 'I think you're planning to marry my mother. If so, please get the idea out of your head. I forbid it.' With that, he marched out of the room, leaving us speechless."

Neal stifled a quick grin. "I can imagine."

"Tom left and I went to Peter's room to tell him how horrified I was. I asked him why he'd done such a terrible thing. Neal—his answer fairly chilled me. He said, 'Mother, I love you very much and I'll obey you whenever possible. But I won't let you marry Mr. Messner. I'll fight it with everything I've got.' That from a fifteen-year-old child,

Neal! What's got into the younger generation?"

"Are you planning to marry Tom?"

"That's beside the point! We're talking about a child trying to move adults around like so many chessmen—"

"What does Peter have against Tom?"

Marcia raised helpless hands. "I wish I knew. It's maddening! When I ask him he looks at me as though I were the child—as though I can't be told such things. I'm going to send him to you, Neal. You must talk to him."

Neal sighed. "Make it tomorrow afternoon . . ."

After Marcia left, Neal's thoughts drifted to Parker Farley. Parker the Magnificent. Farley the Fabulous. These had been actual newspaper appellations for a man who had treated a great talent contemptuously. Parker Farley could have been a writer of stature but he was a gambler first.

The highlights of his colorful career kept reporters and columnists happy. The time he lost ten thousand dollars in a three-day poker session. Then, after sleeping seventeen hours he spent the next three weeks writing a novel only to take the two-thousand-dollar ad-

vance to Hialeah and come away with twenty thousand at the end of the meet. He wrote only when his luck went bad. Unfortunately, he was a good gambler with a fine instinct for things of chance so his books were few and far between.

Parker Farley—a flashing rainbow of a man. What sort of a son had he left?

A son remarkably like himself, even to the mannerisms, but lacking the gay overtones that put the gleam on Parker's personality. Neal discovered this the next afternoon when Peter came quietly into his office and sat down. "Mother asked me to come," he said. Then he waited politely.

Neal felt as awkward as a man on stilts. He hoped his smile was bright. "Your father and I went to college together."

Peter did not return the smile. "I know," he said gravely.

Neal turned it on again, wondered why he felt like a visitor in his own office, and said briskly. "Your mother asked me to talk to you."

"I know."

"Then we'll come right to the point, eh?"

"That's always the best way."

"Of course. This—ah, aversion you have to your mother's remarriage—"

"You must have misunderstood."

"But she was quite clear on the point."

Peter regarded Neal from beneath long, thick lashes. "You misunderstood. I'm sure Mother will marry again. She—she *needs* someone. To protect her. I guess some women are—that way."

Neal felt a surge of resentment. No child of fifteen should have such adult thoughts—such an adult way of putting them. "Then it's Tom Messner that you resent."

"Yes."

"Tell me why. I know Tom fairly well. He's a fine man. Perhaps I can straighten you out on what's bothering you. What is it, Peter?"

"Nothing bothers me." There was no impertinence; merely a grave statement of fact.

"Then you don't care to tell me what you have against Tom?"

"I'm sorry."

Neal got up and began pacing. He took another tack. "Did it ever occur to you that you might be cheating your mother?"

This interested the boy. "Cheating her?"

"Yes. You admit she needs someone. Yet you stand between her and Tom. Aren't you cheating her of happiness?"

Peter considered this for a long time. He appeared to scan it from every angle. He reached a decision. "No. I think not."

Neal sought other niches in Peter's armor. A youth of fifteen, he told himself desperately, certainly had niches. But he found none. After a while he held out his hand and said, "It was delightful meeting you, Peter."

Peter took this as dismissal. He shook hands solemnly and started to leave. He turned at the door and said, "You've been very nice to me. There's something I'd like to give you."

"I'd be delighted."

"May I bring it to you?"

"Of course."

Neal expected Peter back the next day but Peter didn't come. Nor the next. He's forgotten all about it, Neal thought, and phoned Marcia to report his failure. "He's quite a remarkable boy," Neal said. "Sorry I couldn't have been of more help."

"Neal—I don't know. I just don't know."

Poor Marcia. Neal was thinking about her when Peter was announced a week later. "Send him in—by all means." Neal got up from his chair. *By all means?* Why such enthusiasm? How about a little dignity?

But Neal did not try to temper his enthusiasm for what Peter brought—a small wood statuette of a batter crouched over the plate—delicately carved. "Mickey Mantle," Peter said shyly. "I made it for you."

"You carved—this? Why it's beautiful!"

"Carving is my hobby. I have a lot of them."

Neal looked suddenly at his watch. "Say! I've got an idea. The Yankees are playing in the Stadium today. Let's take it in." He thought Peter's eyes sparkled just a trifle but he wasn't sure.

They sat in a box off first base and watched the Yankees beat Cleveland. In the fifth inning the count went three-two on Phil Rizzuto. "Get a hit!" Neal bellowed.

"The odds are five to four that he'll foul it," Peter said gravely. Rizzuto lifted a high foul behind the plate for the third out.

Then, to Neal's growing wonder, Peter began calling

the pitches. Strike—ball—ball—foul—hit. He called twelve out of sixteen, quoting the odds on each.

Looking up, he caught Neal's eyes and lowered his own almost guiltily. "Park taught me. I used to come to the games with him and his friends. They'd bet on every pitch. Once Park called a double at twenty to one. Duke Snider hit it. Park could call them."

Neal hunted for words. "Your father was quite a man."

"Park was—tremendous!" This was the first real emotion Neal had ever heard in Peter's voice. But it was strange. Awe—admiration; but no affection.

After the game, Peter turned shy again. "If you aren't going to be busy maybe you could come for dinner. I'd like you to see my collection."

"Hadn't you better ask your mother?"

"I'm sure Marcia would be delighted."

Marcia *was* delighted. They dined by candlelight and Peter went upstairs immediately afterward to put his carvings away. "I'm completely amazed at the boy's talent!" Neal said. "Some of those pieces are absolute works of art!"

"It's a nice hobby," Marcia said vaguely. "He's such a dear boy. Neal—have you got to him at all?"

"Sometimes I think I'm making a little progress. I certainly hope so."

Then that subject was dropped for another and another and they sat quite late on the balcony. Neal left, knowing there would be other dinners. He met Tom Messner at the Farley's several times and it seemed to him that Peter had withdrawn his objections to Messner.

But he was too preoccupied to give it much thought; too busy with self-analysis. For years he had carried a distortion in his mind. Parker Farley had not taken Marcia away from him. He himself had been at fault. He'd been too sure of himself; had taken too much for granted; considered her his property without formally staking his claim. Give a man like Parker Farley an edge like that and—

He made no such mistake this time. Tom Messner never really had a chance after that first dinner. He and Marcia sealed their bargain with a kiss she appeared to have been awaiting for years. Then she drew back, wide-eyed. "What about Peter?"

"Leave Peter to me," Neal said. He spoke firmly to hide his anxiety.

But there was no need for worry. Peter was gravely delighted. Neal walked on air. "Things will be fine, now," Peter said. He looked at Neal as though mentally debating a point, then said, "And I guess you've got a right to know."

"Know what?"

"Would you come with me to my room?"

Upstairs, Peter cleared a table and sat Neal down. He took a chair opposite and surprised Neal by taking a deck of cards from a drawer. "I want to show you something," he stated resolutely.

Neal watched spellbound as the cards performed like live things in Peter's slender fingers. "Park taught me," Peter said. "Now watch. I'm going to deal a hand. Watch closely."

Five cards spun off the deck so fast Neal could not follow them. He picked them up. Peter stared at his face and said, "The jack and queen of clubs. The seven of diamonds. The ace and nine of hearts."

Neal's jaw dropped. What on earth—!"

Peter was wearing a ring. He turned his hand to reveal

a tiny mirror on its underside. "A shiner. Crooked gamblers use them. The cards are flashed in the little glass as they're dealt. One night Park had a poker game in the den. Tom Messner and two other men. It was a pretty big game. I watched from the stairs. I was supposed to be in bed."

"And—?"

"Tom Messner was using one of these."

So that was it. Neal felt suddenly sick. Looking over a bannister from outside a room, a child had thought he saw a dishonest act. But it was a mistake. It had to be. Tom Messner was honest. Of this, Neal was certain. Because of a child's mistake, a great injustice had been done. It had to be that.

Neal started to speak and caught himself. There was another angle to be considered. Suppose he now convinced Peter he had been wrong? What would it do to him. How badly would it hurt him?

Neal said, "Peter! Why didn't you tell your mother? Why didn't you tell me? A thing like that—"

"Park didn't expose Tom Messner, so I couldn't." To Peter, it was as simple as that.

"You mean Park knew Tom cheated?"

Peter smiled fleetingly. "Do you think anybody could ring a shiner in on Park? Tom Messner was crazy to try. I guess he was pretty desperate for money."

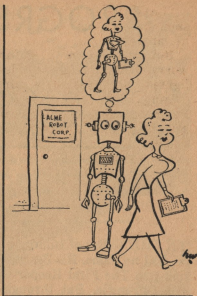
"What did Park do?"

"He gave the two men back what they'd lost and they left. Then he sat looking at Tom Messner for a long time. After a while he threw a roll of bills across the table. He said, 'Get out—and don't come back.' Tom Messner took the money and left. Right away he went to Seattle and stayed there until after Park's accident. Then he came back."

Neal got slowly to his feet. He put an arm around Peter's shoulders. Peter was holding the deck. He laid it on the table and pushed it away. "I never cared much for gambling. I didn't want to let Park know that, though," he confessed quietly.

They walked to the window. Neal said, "But suppose your mother had insisted on marrying Tom? Would you finally have exposed him if things had turned out that way?"

Peter Farley looked up and smiled. "But they didn't turn



out that way, did they?"

"No—no, they didn't."

Neal's arm tightened around Peter's shoulders. As Peter had said—things were going to be fine now. Except that he would always remain somewhat in awe of his new son. A son whose acquaintance he'd only now made.

But was that bad?

Neal smiled.

He looked at his watch. "There's a night game at the Polo Grounds. We've got time."

"Let's go," Peter said. And this time, there was no doubt about the sparkle in his eyes.

THE END

PROGRESS ZERO

By G. L. VANDENBURG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

There are some who maintain we are all part of a Great Plan that was blue-printed even before the beginning of time. Then what would happen if Man were to throw the Master Mechanism out of line?

IN THE Valley of Infinity he had no name. His designation was The First Keeper of The Chronicle. But throughout the Universe he had many names. He chose the names himself and used them individually according to his assignment. On the planet Earth, or Planet 3981275 as it was known in Infinite circles, he called himself Kronosiris.

The prodigious book he carried bore no title. It was known simply as The Great Book. Its total contents were known to no being, for The Great Book was without beginning and without end.

He had just returned from Planet 107, a large body on the edge of Galaxy 49 and one of the oldest Plans of the Council of Creation. He would enjoy but a moment's rest in

the Valley of Infinity before embarking upon his next journey. One eonic moment in Time in order to browse through the pages of The Great Book and familiarize himself with the billions of details of his new assignment.

He never ceased to marvel at the miraculousness of the Council of Creation. It had created how many Plans? Billions? The figure was beyond mental, even spiritual comprehension. And each Plan always progressed according to design. Never a failure. Not once, since he became First Keeper of The Chronicle had the sequence of events in any given Plan failed to comply with the outline of the same events in The Great Book.

His next journey promised



HIROSHIMA
AUGUST 8.1945

to be exciting. He derived particular enjoyment from his duties on the younger Planets and of these Planet 3981275 was the youngest. He regretted that his visits to these places were all too infrequent. But such was the enormity of his job, which took him throughout the Universe, that he could not afford more than a few moments in any one place, be it old or young.

This gave him pause to wonder sometimes just why the Council of Creation could not alleviate his extraordinary burden. It was quite enough, he told himself, to keep track of all creation. But it was rather generally known that the Universe was expanding and eventually that would mean more work, a heavier schedule. But then the Council's decisions were never questioned any more than their countless Plans were ever deviated from.

His thoughts returned to Planet 3981275. He had made his last appearance there during the fiftieth year of Nostradamus. The great French astronomer and physician was his contact during that visit. Nostradamus, as he remembered, had been a most engaging and provocative companion. He had made Kronosiris'

trip an unusually pleasant affair.

It seemed like only a few eons had passed since that summer day when he materialized in the Frenchman's garden and began their long accounting of the events in The Great Book. Actually, one hundred and fifty thousand revolutions of the Earth had been completed since then. It amused him that that was almost an eternity by Earth's standards.

He skimmed through The Great Book recalling the specific details of his meeting with Nostradamus. They had covered a multitude of events beginning with the Hegira of Mohammed and including The Magna Carta, The Crusades, Copernicus' Heliocentricity of the Solar System theory, The Divine Comedy, Joan of Arc and the imminent birth of Galileo. They had touched finally on the Renaissance and Kronosiris remembered telling the Frenchman of the lasting effect it would have on art and artists for hundreds of years to come.

With his memories warmed and a feeling of great expectation penetrating his whole being Kronosiris closed The Great Book. He began to concentrate in preparation for his journey. His mind's eye con-

jured up an image of the individual who would serve the same function so graciously performed by Nostradamus four centuries before.

The image was of a tall man, well but not carefully dressed, a great mane of silver hair, gentle penetrating eyes, a kind and cheerful smile. And yet there was something basically wrong with the image, something momentarily indefinable that told Kronosiris the image was anachronistic to the Earth year 1964.

Doctor Wilfred Starling stood on the patio of the famous two-story home in Arlington overlooking the banks of the Potomac. He lit his pipe and stretched out on the chaise lounge. Relaxation in any form was a rare pleasure for the celebrated astro-physicist and philosopher. He hadn't enjoyed anything resembling a day off in twenty years.

His theories, his discoveries, his preachings, all stressing the divine oneness of Man and God, had succeeded in bringing the world at least as far as the threshold of peace. Not that war was no longer possible. It was simply not the inevitability it once was.

Wilfred Starling's long and tireless devotion to the better-

ment of mankind had taken an enormous toll on his mental stamina. Yet he remained, in his sixty-third year, a doggedly inspired and dedicated human being. His working day still consisted of eighteen hours, every minute of which was channeled toward the enlightenment of his fellow man.

But today was different. He could relax on this sunny spring afternoon, his head clear of all the world's remaining problems. He could sit back and wonder anew at all the unsolved mysteries of the Universe. And he could pray that a few of those mysteries might be answered by the visitor he was expecting.

The telepathic instructions had come to him in his study the night before. They fully oriented him as to the time and purpose of the visit. And he had no trouble accepting such mental thought projection. The voice had been clear and precise, if somewhat formal. He had no trouble accepting because he believed, as any devout man would, that he was in communication with God.

In the next moment Kronosiris was standing before him, a formidable-looking figure in his glistening gray robes. The Great Book rested under his arm.

Doctor Starling spent a few moments looking at him in breathless awe. Then he rose from the chaise lounge and extended his hand.

"You are . . ." the doctor had difficulty with the next word.

"No," said the visitor, declining the doctor's hand, "not who you think I am. You may call me Kronosiris."

Doctor Starling took an awe-inspired step backward. A handshake was obviously impossible. His guest was a reality but not a very solid one.

"Please sit down, Doctor."

The doctor resumed his position on the lounge.

Kronosiris watched with a curious frown on his celestial brow. He still did not know what it was that seemed out of the ordinary about Doctor Starling.

"You understand the instructions?"

"Completely," Starling answered. "I must confess I have not been able to contain myself since last night. To receive a visit from . . . well, it's extraordinary! I mean we here on Earth seem possessed of so many preconceived notions of creation. Perhaps I should say we have a tendency to seek easy solutions to that

which we judge to be incomprehensible."

"I understand," said Kronosiris. "What you speak of is quite common among the younger planets. The degree of naivete in your attitude has always mystified me."

"Mystified . . ." the doctor was perplexed. "How can you possibly be mystified . . . if everything is according to Plan. . . ?"

"You interpreted my revelations to you quite literally. The mind is an entity formed, according to Plan, in a state of absolute freedom. If it is ever controlled it is controlled by other minds, never by the Council of Creation."

"Then war and disease are products of man and therefore not a part of the Plan?"

"Not quite. You see, the mind is also formed in a state of imperfection. It is therefore known when the Plan is implemented, that war and disease and millions of other flaws are inevitable. Eventually the mind will utilize the full power of its freedom to eradicate these imperfections. You yourself have been working toward that goal, Doctor."

"I wonder then, could you tell me, Kronosiris . . ." the doctor paused, ". . . what it is like . . . that is, what happens . . . ?"

The visitor laughed. "What is death like, is that what you are asking?"

The doctor felt somewhat childish. "Well . . . yes."

"Another very prevalent question on the younger planets," said Kronosiris. "Do you remember what it felt like being born?"

"No."

"You will not remember what it feels like to die either. Does that answer your question?"

"I think so."

"Now, if you will forgive me for halting our digression, Doctor, we do have a great amount of work to do. We'll have later opportunities for our random thoughts. There are several ways we can accomplish the purpose of our meeting," said Kronosiris, opening The Great Book. "Here in the Book we will find everything faithfully recorded as a point of reference. Frankly, I prefer to memorize all the events and then simply listen to my host account for them. I then check my findings later against those in the Book."

"Aren't you concerned that you may make a mistake?"

"Impossible. My memory is perfect. And the Book has never contained a mistake. Are you ready, Doctor?"

Wilfred Starling looked

deep into the eyes of his visitor. His sense of excitement was unbounded. He felt as though all weight had left his Earthly body. He even looked to see if he might be transparent as his visitor was. But his lighter-than-air feeling was only a manifestation of the infinite joy that had smothered him.

The long discussion began. It continued for four days. At first it seemed odd to Doctor Starling that only the major events of four hundred years were being accounted for. But it was soon apparent and logical that major events gave natural birth to millions of minor events. The minor events in turn led to another major event.

During the whole accounting, covering electricity, the law of gravity, the vaccination, the Boston tea party, the Witch trials, Abraham Lincoln, the Pilgrims, Napoleon, Spectrum Analysis, the Quantum Theory, Psychoanalysis and all the great motivating forces and events of four hundred years, Kronosiris gradually moved closer to the truth of what was out of proportion about Doctor Wilfred Starling.

On the fifth day, in the midst of recounting events of

the twentieth century, the Celestial visitor suddenly halted the proceedings.

Doctor Starling opened his eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Kronosiris regarded him with mixed concern and surprise.

"Something has interrupted your thoughts," he said. "That is quite out of the ordinary in as much as you have been in a trance."

"A trance!"

"Yes, it was necessary for me to utilize a state of hypnosis in order for your mind to operate flawlessly. Yet some deep concern from your conscious was potent enough to penetrate that trance and substantially affect you."

"What was it?"

For the first time during their meeting Kronosiris looked genuinely perplexed.

"You have a defective heart, Doctor Starling."

There was poignancy in Doctor Starling's brief smile.

"Yes, I know. I suppose I worry about it because I'm afraid I won't live long enough to complete my life work."

"It is incredible," said Kronosiris, "for a man of your age to have heart trouble."

The doctor shrugged. "Well, I'm sixty-three years old. I

guess I'm lucky to have lasted this long."

"But you're still a young man! Your heart shouldn't trouble you for at least another forty years."

"Forty years!" cried the astonished doctor. "I'll be pretty grateful if I live to be seventy."

Kronosiris' perplexity turned to apprehension, then to subdued annoyance.

"Surely you're not going to sit there and tell me, Doctor, that you don't expect to live out the full measure of your life expectancy!"

"Perhaps," replied the doctor, "but as I said, that's only seven more years at the most."

"The life expectancy on Planet 3981275, Doctor Starling, is one hundred and twenty-five years!" Kronosiris' insistence was a trifle unbecoming for a Celestial visitor.

"One hundred and twenty-five years!" the doctor exclaimed. "Where in heaven's name did you ever get that idea?"

The visitor's apprehension grew. He knew now what it was about the original image of Doctor Starling that had disturbed him. That great shock of white hair! According to The Great Book the doc-

tor should not have white hair at his age. Unless it was prematurely white.

"Doctor . . ." Kronosiris tried to remain calm in the face of an unforeseen but catastrophic error . . . ". . . the scientific formula for increasing, in fact doubling, the life expectancy on this planet has been discovered, has it not?"

Even though Starling knew the answer he was slow in delivering it. "No, it has not."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Doctor! The Great Book has never been wrong. My own memory has never failed me! I distinctly remember the event." He opened The Great Book and feverishly began to turn pages.

Now the doctor began to worry. He knew Kronosiris must be right and the thought of it terrified him. He knew and believed in the accuracy of The Great Book. Yet he trembled and went weak inside because he also knew that he himself could not possibly have been ignorant of such a milestone in man's progress.

Kronosiris spun the pages

by with an implacable determination. He had to be right! How could it be any other way? There had never been a mistake! There could not be a mistake now!

He stopped.

Vindication formed a tight smile on his lips.

"You see," he began, "it is right here. We would have accounted for this event by this evening." He looked into the Book and read: "The formula for increasing the life expectancy of the human being to one hundred and twenty-five years . . ."

Doctor Starling took an uncertain step toward the visitor. "Who discovered the formula?"

Kronosiris continued to read from the book. "Discovered and perfected by Toshio Yanase on the Eighth day of August, 1945, in a laboratory in Hiroshima, Japan."

He smiled a smile of Infinite satisfaction, closed The Great Book and turned to his host. "Now then, Doctor, about your heart. . . ."

THE END



SNAKE PIT

By LAWRENCE KINGERY

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

After finishing this manuscript, one of our readers looked up, with a stunned expression and said, "It's like a bucket of ice water right in your face." We can't put it any better.

BIG Andy laughed down at me from the ledge twenty-five feet above the pit of writhing rattlesnakes. He had thrown his sheepskin jacket wide and his red face and bloodshot eyes shone through the smoke rising from the fired leaves in the bottom of the pit.

"Look at 'em," he roared, swinging his oaken cudgel around his head. "Look at those swarming sons of Satan. Must be fifty of the sleepy fat vipers."

"Watch out," I yelled up at him.

"Whassat, whassat?" he roared. "I ain't scared—"

"There," I shouted hoarsely, "To your right, Andy."

"Where?" He twisted awkwardly on the narrow ledge.

"Higher, Andy. You move to the left. There's one sliding out of the rocks right there."

Andy's alcohol-fogged eyes blinked in the smoke. "I don't see nothing."

"His head, for God's sake. Right there by your shoulder."

With horror, I watched the pitted, fluke-shaped head of the huge rattler sliding like brown oil out of the crevice not six inches from Andy's drunken hulk. The adroit neck swung and then I heard the deadly whir of its rattles. The rattler is excellently camouflaged. You can be looking right at one and not see it unless it moves. Sometimes when it warns you with a rattle, you still have trouble spotting it under the best of conditions. Up there in the smoke, Andy couldn't seem to see this one. But then he heard it. And then he saw it and his mouth stayed

open in a frozen laugh while his eyes bulged with hate and a spurt of reflexive terror.

A harsh bellow came out of Andy's thick neck. He was a huge man, weighing over two hundred pounds, and he swung his oaken cudgel with enough force to brain a bull. The fat, arm-thick coils of the snake flopped out of the crevice, its smashed head wagging. Andy roared obscene oaths at it and stomped at it with his hob-nailed boot.

He got his cudgel under the twitching coils and swung around, hurling it writhing into the smoke. Then with a sickening suck of horror in my gut, I saw him lose his balance, teeter wildly on the edge of the ledge, clutch at the wall of rock, the rocks crumbling, his arms windmilling.

Then I saw his flailing bulk crash down through the smoke.

I heard the scream of paralyzed horror rip from my lips. I saw his body hit flat on its back with a shuddering thud. I heard the awful squashing sound of writhing bodies crushed under his weight.

"Roy," I heard him yelling in terrified agony. "Oh, God, Roy."

I saw him trying to move down there in the rock-bound

pit ten feet deep. His arms threshed to either side and I watched the wide jaws gaping. A chorus of deadly excited rattles whirred. Forty or fifty rattlers were no longer sleepy and Andy was surrounded by a cauldron of them down there.

I broke out of frozen fright and leaned over the edge of the pit. "Andy—get up. Don't try to crawl out. Into the cave. Get into the cave, Andy."

He threshed and wriggled down there like a huge grotesque baby in a crib.

"I can't. My back," he shrieked. "Roy—something's wrong. My back—I can't—"

I started down into the pit. The rustling scales below me filled me with a sick fear as though they were crawling over raw exposed nerves. The scent of reptilian death rose up around me with the smoke and I could feel my entrails drawing in and a rebellious instinctive terror squeezing my throat.

It had been a fresh warm spring morning in New England. Saturday had been winter. Sunday was the first day of March and not only was it spring officially but the sun came out so warm that you knew it would turn hot by noon.

Andy had asked me if I

would go hunt rattlers with him the first warm day of spring, and I had said I would rather not. But then his wife called and said no one else would go with Andy either, and would I please go.

"You know Andy," she said. "He always has to go hunt snakes come spring. People ought to let them things alone way up there, Roy. They don't ever hurt nobody unless you rile them up. But Andy's just got to do it. You've got to go up there with him, Roy. You know how he is."

"All right, Martha," I said. She was very grateful, and Andy came by for me in his pick-up truck and we drove up the muddy road, turned at the fork and went up the slushed hill road through the second-growth timber, and on up toward the ridge.

Sure, I knew Andy. A child-like brain in a giant's body. The town clown too big and dangerous for anyone to play jokes with. He worked at a sawmill and among other childish activities in his spare time, he went up to the ridge every spring to kill rattlers, and milk juice from their poisonous fangs.

The way he drove, the way he laughed, and the red face told me that Andy was already loaded and it wasn't ten in the

morning yet. Every weekend Andy got roaring drunk and raised a lot of laughing hell around the village. He was always threatening to hurt somebody but he never did. He was really a sort of timid type, for all his great size. And he seemed to take all his hostility out on the snakes.

"We're sure gonna get a sackful of them big vipers this morning, Roy," he said.

"I forgot to bring a sack," I said.

"I didn't forget. I got two gunny-sacks back there. You think they'll be a lot of them coming out today, Roy?"

"I can't say that I'm hopeful about it," I said.

"It's going to be warm. Lot of them'll be coming out up there on that ridge, Roy. Listen, I'm glad you changed your mind and came along. We're sure going to get a sackful of them old granddaddies. I brought the kit along for you, Roy. Hell, I don't need it. They ain't never bit me and they ain't going to."

I checked the kit. It had a couple of patent rubber ligatures in it, a cased scalpel, a hypodermic syringe, a pint bottle of whiskey, almost gone, and a bottle containing a chloride of lime solution.

"I got it from Old Man Hall over at the drug store," Andy

said. "Figured you'd have a little more fun if you had a kit in your pocket."

"Thanks," I said.

He had also brought along two oak bludgeons, forked sticks, leather gauntlets, and both of us wore hobnailed boots that laced to the knees.

We drove through the leafless forsythia about to break in sprays of yellow blossoms. It sure seemed to be spring early all right. Snowdrops were opening everywhere. Purple crocuses were out. We drove on up through spots of hemlock and pine and Andy parked under the sharp cliffs, gray and brown rock jutting out in split sections and below them a jumble of big glacial rocks.

Andy gave me one of the oaken clubs, took one for himself, and the forked sticks, and we started up toward the ridge.

"I ain't scared of snake bites," Andy said, and he threw his head back and laughed wildly. "Best remedy for snake bite anyway is good old corn whiskey. And since last night I got enough in me I could be bit by a damn sea serpent and not feel nothin'."

We worked back and forth through the rocks for several

hours without spotting a single snake. Andy would stop once in a while and take a long pull on the bottle. He got more careless as we worked up toward the ridge. He began blowing heavily. His face turned sweaty and beet red. He blundered crazily through the rocks, banging his oaken cudgel on the broken stone shelves, tearing at blotches of lichen, kicking savagely into the damp shades of moss and the low huckleberry bushes growing from drifts of old chestnut burrs and leaves. He pushed on fiercely.

"Ah, Roy," he finally said. "Reckon maybe they ain't coming out?"

"Could be," I said. "We can go on up toward the ridge. Sun's hotter up there."

"Maybe they ain't woke up yet, Roy."

"From what little I know about them," I said, "these warm spells sure fool those snakes. They think it's summer and they come out. That's what you said, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure, that's the way it is, Roy. Always has been that way. Warm spell fools 'em. They always come out too early, and that's when I like to start clobbering away at them. They're stiff and not warmed up. They can't move fast. Why, Roy, last March I

smashed the heads of thirty-six of 'em before I stopped."

I stopped when I saw the movement and then I pointed.

"There's a pit there," Andy said, "and a cave. Bats in that cave, and last year I figured there'd be snakes in it. Wasn't one solitary snake."

He pulled his way through brush and over the rocks, and then he let out a wild yell and jumped up and down like a kid. "Roy, Roy, there's a thousand of 'em in the pit here. They're comin' out of the cave."

It was an extraordinarily hot day for March. The rocks were very warm. And when I looked into the pit, I could see that the snakes were far from stiff with the winter's cold.

"They're spry, Roy. Look how spry they are."

I was looking. I could smell the musty reeking odor. I could see the swarming coiling mass of poisonous rattlers down there. There were all sizes, all intertwining and coiling and uncoiling and lying out in the sun, soaking up the warmth.

"They ain't got no sense," Andy yelled. "They always think it's spring."

In the back of the pit, entering into the cliff, I could see the black chilled recesses of the cave.

My stomach turned over as

Andy prepared to jump into the pit. I grabbed his arm. "Don't be a damn fool," I yelled.

"Yeah," he mumbled disgustedly. "There's too many of them all coiled up down there in one place. I could trample a lot of them and club a lot more, but there's too many."

Then he blundered up above the pit onto the ridge. He pulled out his cigarette lighter. He swung his cudgel around wildly and roared with laughter, finished the bottle and dropped it into the pit where it exploded in a shower of glass. The snakes raised their evil heads, rattles sounded a warning, and bright eyes looked at me, and at Andy. Andy had told me once that they can't see so well. They react to heat. But I felt their eyes boring into me.

He put the club on the ledge, unscrewed the cap on the lighter with a dime, and poured lighter fluid out onto a big bandanna handkerchief. He lit the handkerchief and dropped the blazing rag into the pile of dried brush and leaves below him. Immediately it flared up, leaves and brush sending up tongues of flame and streams of gray smoke. The fire and smoke blocked off the cave. The flames spread out through the rocks. The snakes hissed and quivered in the growing

heat, coiling, sliding away from the intense center of the flames.

"Burn, burn, you sons of Satan," Andy roared. He grabbed up the club and swung it around his head. "They'll wiggle up, right up out of the pit, Roy. Get ready. Get the sacks, Roy."

I could hear the wild agonized hissing and rattling in the pit, and see the reptiles writhing toward the cooler rock walls. They were scattering, sliding away frantic, some of them still stiff and slow with winter's cold, but all of them limbering up fast as the heat ate into them.

And then that rattler came out of the rocks up there, and I yelled at Andy and he got the snake all right, but then he was on his back down in that pit of hell, his legs paralyzed, and his voice rising to a terrible scream.

"My back," he shrieked. "Roy—something's wrong. My back—I can't—"

By then I had climbed to the bottom of the pit. Smoke burned into my eyes and throat. I was coughing, wiping at my eyes. The wind shifted and I could see Andy. I was kicking with my boots, beating desperately with the oaken bludgeon. A violent spasm sickness hit

me as I saw Andy, feebly writhing, his mouth gaping and slobbering with pain and terror.

I could hear the thudding impact as they struck Andy. I don't know how many of them there were crawling over him, coiled around him, hissing, striking with blurred speed too fast for the eye to follow. The blunt, arrow-shaped heads plunged in, back, in again. Fangs sank into his face, neck, into his arms, legs, torso. He flailed with one arm and to my horror I saw the fangs of two huge rattlers big around as my arm still clinging to his flesh.

I kicked and smashed with the club, working my way across the pit, knowing I was too late. Enough poison was in Andy's blood to kill ten men. I stomped, kicked, beating their bloated bodies and striking heads into the rocks.

I reached him, and he seemed to see me in the smoke. His body plunged up from the waist, pushed by a supreme effort of will. His head was back. The ropes of his neck stood out as though they would burst. And the most pitiable and terrible cry burst from his mouth I have ever heard. I never want to hear anything like it again.

I kicked and stomped with

my heavy hob-nails, and laid about with an insane kind of fury and fear. I got hold of his foot, dragged his body a few feet toward the cave mouth. His face was already a sickening red wattled mass of punctures and bloat, his eyes swollen shut, his lips parted in a horrible grin that I knew was the grin of a dead man. I could see the thick yellowish poison of countless bites flowing down his face, dripping onto his chest. His arms, neck, bared chest, face, were pin-cushioned with dark punctures flowing poison.

I felt the icy draft of stored winter air coming out of the cave. I dropped his boot and stumbled back. My heel caught and I fell backward. The snake was only two feet away. It was as big as the calf of my leg and over four feet long. It was not coiled. It had to pounce, instead of strike. And as it lunged, its mouth opened fantastically wide, unhinging, dripping white. I tried to roll and I felt the terrific impact of his bludgeon-like head in my arm. Pain and hate twisted me around. I got my right hand around its neck. Its coils whipped around my arm, and its rattles whirred in my face. I tore the head from its hold in my flesh, seeing the yellow

poisonous juice fly in the air. I caught the frothing body, twisted it belly up and snapped the spine backward.

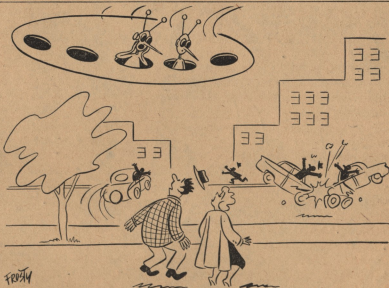
I slid backward into the cold darkness of the cave, and kept on going. I went back into the cave until I could barely see and what I saw were dozens of rattlers coiled together like mounds of monstrous worms. Only these were still lethargic, still in their winter's sleep. They stirred only slightly and didn't bother me. But if they felt my warmth they would respond to it. I crawled up on a ledge.

I took the syringe out. Then I opened my pocket knife. A

numbing wooden feeling was creeping up toward my eyes. An awful sickness spasmed in my belly and I felt the warm flow of vomit but I went on, slashing at the bite. I thrust the bloody wound into my mouth and sucked and spat and sucked and spat and vomited. Then I shot in several syringes of chloride and applied ligatures.

Then I passed out. They didn't find me until late that night. I was nearer dead than alive and they had to amputate the lower part of my arm.

Which is a thing Andy won't have to worry about come next spring. **THE END**



"Run for your lives. The Venusians are landing!"

By E. K. JARVIS

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

TWO BY TWO

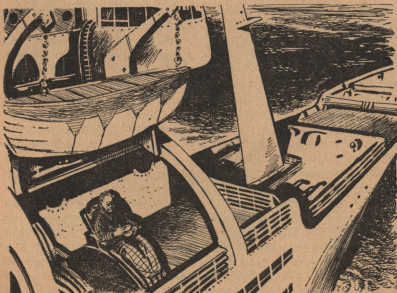
*Lambert offered two people
the priceless gift of salvation.
But who needed it?*

WHEN a man is as wealthy and important as Preston Lambert, you just don't walk right off the street into his private office.

But Mary and I did.

The moment we gave our names to the receptionist and said we had come in answer to the ad, she buzzed Lambert and sent us in.

"So you're the couple the



Lambert sat alone with his wealth—and his idea.

agency selected," he said, standing up behind his big desk and holding out his hand. "Well, well, good to see you. Yes, indeed."

Since he was frankly looking us over, I decided to do a little inspecting myself.

Preston Lambert was about six feet tall and perhaps fifty-five years old. On the other hand, he might have been closer to sixty-five or even seventy; it's hard to tell, because the rich don't seem to age the way we do. Good food, plenty of rest, regular massage, and the best of medical treatment keeps them young—that is, if they're not slave-drivers or the dissipating type. Lambert did not appear to be either; he was relaxed, amiable, and clear-eyed.

And I wondered what his game was.

"Sit down," he urged, ushering Mary over to a big armchair. "And you, sir—make yourself comfortable. I want you both to feel right at home here. Right at home."

The nicer he was, the uneasier I felt. Mary and I have applied for jobs together before, and to people of means. Usually, the more money they have, the more they push you around; it's a regular Inquisition bit. Of course, we'd gone

through *that* routine before we came to the office here—

Preston Lambert seemed aware of it, because he sat down again and began to shuffle through some papers very officially.

"Before we begin," he said, "I wonder if you realize just how many applicants there were for this particular opening?"

Mary and I looked at one another and then shrugged simultaneously.

"Well, no point in playing games. My staff in New York received over five hundred letters. And of those five hundred, more than two hundred couples went through preliminary examinations."

Mary couldn't conceal her surprise. "You mean to say that you gave the same tests we took to all those others? Why, that must have cost a fortune—"

"It did, I assure you. I had to take over the entire clinic at the hospital you visited. IQs and physical checkups took weeks to process. And of course, I had another group checking on the background and antecedents of all applicants."

"You put a private eye on us?" I was the surprised one, now.

"Er—well, as a matter of

fact, yes. I find it best to be thorough."

"Those tests you gave were thorough enough," I told him. "In fact, some of them were downright embarrassing."

Preston Lambert chuckled. "Well, it's all over now. The reports have been reviewed, and I concur with the findings of my staff. The job is yours."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Not so fast. Don't we get a chance to do any investigating?"

He chuckled again. "Of course, Mr. Dexter." He glanced at Mary. "I admire your husband's attitude. He's a realist. That's what I was hoping, to find—a realist."

Mary smiled, but did not answer. She was going to let me do the talking. That's the way we usually operated. I did the talking and she made the final decisions. At least I'm enough of a realist to admit it.

"About this position," I continued. "Your ad in the newspaper mentioned a handsome salary. And the employment agency gave us the same information—but no figure. Would you mind telling me just how much you propose to pay for our services?"

Lambert unwrapped an Upmann. He didn't offer one to me; I assume he'd studied the

reports and discovered I don't smoke.

"Ah, yes," he murmured. "The salary, eh? How about a thousand a month?" He lit the cigar. "Each?"

A thousand a month for each of us. Twenty-four thousand dollars a year. Plus, I assumed, room and board. It was fantastic—and I'm a realist.

"Just what are we expected to do for that kind of money?" I asked.

"Why, what my advertisement mentioned. I'm looking for a young couple to act as personal attendants on an extended pleasure-cruise. The woman must be able to cook and perform all the ordinary domestic duties; the man should have some mechanical ability, a knowledge of farming and animal husbandry, and a reasonable educational background. Added to this, I insist on perfect physical health, plus intellectual and emotional stability. The actual duties of employment will be light, and—"

"You don't have to quote the ad to me," I told him. "I read the come-on. But there's nothing about your requirements that justify a combined salary of twenty-four thousand a year."

"I disagree." Lambert sift-

ed the ash from his cigar. "And so would you, if you'd examined the reports as I have during the past weeks. Inevitably, there's a defect in one or both parties—out of all the couples examined, you alone seem to fill all the requirements. So—"

I stood up. "About this pleasure-cruise, now," I said. "I'm beginning to get an idea. You wouldn't by any chance be looking for a couple of guinea-pigs now, would you?"

"Guinea-pigs?"

I stared down at him. "You are a wealthy man, Mr. Lambert. A very wealthy man. Sometimes very wealthy men have very odd hobbies—and even odder ambitions. And it just occurs to me that possibly you have an idea of building some kind of space-rocket. Are we being selected as passengers for a trip to Mars?"

Lambert laughed and put down the cigar. "I thought you were a realist, Mr. Dexter! No, I assure you on my solemn oath, I've no intention of employing you as participants in any sort of space-flight. I'm a shipbuilder, sir, and when I plan a cruise it will be by water, right here on earth."

"Yachting party?" Mary asked.

"Not at all. An ocean liner is more to my fancy. Would

you care to see it? We can drive down to the yard if you like—the vessel is already on the way. We can be there when it arrives."

"This is a boat your firm built?"

"That is correct."

"Who owns it?"

"I do." Lambert smiled. "It's my retirement project."

Mary looked at me, her eyebrows raised slightly.

"Come on," I said. "Let's take a look."

She nodded, so that was settled.

Lambert drove us out himself, waving the chauffeur back to his seat in the outer office. Trailing smoke from a fresh Upmann, he led us through the busy dockside tangle of the huge boatyard which had built so many vessels—and so much of his fortune.

"Here she is," he said. "What do you think of her?"

"Why I had no idea—this must have cost a couple of million—"

"Eleven, to be exact," Lambert answered, casually. "I bet the wad."

"But it's immense," Mary exclaimed, eyeing the outlines of the ship. It was indeed an ocean-going liner, and undoubtedly completed, yet certain modifications in the

smokestacks seemed unusual, even to my landlubber's eye.

"Looks a bit odd, eh?" Lambert asked, noting my stare. "Well, it is, in a way. You see, we'll be using atomic power. And virtually everything on board is controlled by automation. One computer and a switchboard supervises the works, including navigation. That's why we'll be able to dispense with the usual crew."

"No crew? But who's going to serve the passengers, just Jim and myself?" Mary looked stricken.

"Passengers? I said nothing about passengers, did I? I will be your only concern."

"You're going on a pleasure-cruise in an atomic-powered ocean liner, all by yourself? Where are you heading for, anyway?"

Lambert shrugged. "Oh, no destination in particular. I thought we might float around for a bit."

"Mister, you're crazy!"

"Perhaps. Then again, maybe it's the world that's crazy. Did you ever stop to think about that for a moment, Dexter?" He inhaled slowly. "I managed to wangle atomic power for this vessel. Believe me, it wasn't easy. Not in an age where the miracle of nuclear fission is dedicated almost exclusively to weapons

of wholesale destruction. Not in an age trembling on the brink of war and shuddering past the brink of hysteria—an age where the air is literally filled with death, tiny radioactive particles of death, and the very soil is polluted with poison.

"Yes, the world is crazy, Dexter. Crazy to do what it's doing, crazy not to flee from the consequences of its actions. And that's what *I* intend to do. I intend to flee, before it's too late. Flee, and survive."

I nodded. It was out in the open, now. Preston Lambert was one of the screwballs; one of the calamity-howlers, the escapists. The only difference was that *he* happened to have eleven million dollars and he *could* escape. He'd stock the powered ship with provisions and take off for the sub-tropics.

Mary sighed. She didn't bother to look at me, this time.

"Sorry, Mr. Lambert," she said. "It's no deal. We can't take a job and go on a trip like that."

"What's the matter, don't you believe me?" His voice took on a querulous quality. "Haven't you read the reports? The amount of fallout in the atmosphere is dangerous even now. Think of what

the future will bring, even if war does not come. Why, even the rainfall is deadly—yes, the gentle rain from heaven. What safety is there in such a world for your children? And you do intend to have children some day, I'm sure. How can you face the prospect of bringing them into being in these lethal surroundings? There isn't much time left before the final reckoning—I have it on the highest authority—"

Mary shook her head.

"Please, Mr. Lambert, it's no use. We can't go with you."

"But it may be your only chance, your salvation!" He turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Look, you can understand, can't you? This is not merely an eccentric whim on my part. I know what I'm doing, believe me. And I chose you. I'm offering you an opportunity to escape. Do you really *like* the world the way it is, a world where even the rain is a rain of death? Do you—"

I sighed. "Thank you, Mr. Lambert. But if you don't mind, Mary and I will just take a rain-check on this trip of yours."

And that was that.

I was pretty satisfied with myself when Mary and I said good-bye to Mr. Lambert. He may have been a multi-mil-

lionaire and an elder in his church, but he was obviously a fanatic and probably paranoid as well. We want no part of him and his little pleasure-cruise in an ocean liner. Funny, how the human mind functions when it strips a gear. He'd been very logical about his methods of selecting a couple to accompany him on the voyage, but completely illogical when it came to planning the size of his vessel. No rhyme or reason whatsoever, even though he'd apparently managed to conceal his project from the press and public.

Of course, he couldn't conceal matters forever. Less than a week later we read an account of the launching of the vessel. There was even an interview with Preston Lambert, in which he declared his intention of sailing as soon as he got the animals assembled and aboard.

"The animals!" Mary gasped, as she read the news-story. "Of course, why didn't we see it right away? Lambert wasn't just building a ship—he was building an *ark*!"

"They'll lock him up," I said.

"Perhaps. They would if he were building a boat in his back yard. On the other hand, when a man spends eleven million dollars, they generally

don't touch him—at least, not as long as he has any money left."

Sometimes Mary is even more of a realist than I am.

Anyway, in the following weeks we read further accounts. Lambert was willing to talk freely about his unique arrangements for housing his specimens—he needed all the space, it seems, for stalls and for food storage, and there were cunningly-devised automatic-feeding systems. He was going to load the vessel and cast off as soon as possible.

"They'll stop him," I said. "Wait and see."

"Poor old man," Mary sighed. "In a way I'm sorry for him." Then she shuddered. "Then again, I'm not. Just think, he wanted *us* to be specimens, too."

"And I told him I'd take a rain-check," I muttered. "That is a hot one."

Yes, it was a hot one, all right.

And I kept watching the papers, waiting for news of just how and when the authorities would step in to stop him. Only the way it turned out, the authorities had other problems. Because there were a

few sudden and unexpected explosions during the next couple of days—turned out somebody was testing a new cobalt bomb—and they were a lot more "hot" than any news about a religious fanatic.

All of us had other things to think about after the bombs went off.

And now I can't help but wonder about Preston Lambert, who loaded his ship and sailed—apparently with another young couple—during all the excitement.

I can't help but wonder about his little statement there at the end. "There isn't much time left before the final reckoning—I have it on the highest authority—"

The highest authority.

Was he *told*?

The way Noah was told?

Should I have taken that "rain-check"?

I don't know the answers to those questions.

All I know is that it has been raining for a week, now. It has been raining for a week, steady, all over the world.

And it doesn't look as if the rain is ever going to stop. . . .

THE END

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Spawn Of The Dark One

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

Our juvenile delinquency problems have been attributed to everything from slums to momentary expectation of an all-out atomic war. Any one of these reasons is no doubt potent. But here's a new one out of the fertile mind of our Robert Bloch. Thank heaven it's fiction—or is it?

EVERYTHING was peaceful the night before the trouble came.

Ben Kerry perched on the porch rail outside his cottage, blinking like an owl in the twilight. He peered across the wide rolling expanse of the Kettle Moraine country and flapped his arms as if he were about to take off.

"There's gold in them thar hills," he muttered. "I never knew it, but I could have gotten in on the ground floor, too."

Ted Hibbard grinned at him. "You mean, when the glacier swept down and made them? You're not *that* old."

Kerry chuckled and lit his pipe. "That's right, son. And I wasn't here when the glacier rolled back and the Indians came, either. They used the

hills for signalling posts or for their ceremonial rituals. No money in that, I grant you."

"I know," Hibbard said. "I read your book about it."

Kerry chuckled again. "No money in *that*, either. If it wasn't for the university presses, we anthropologists would starve to death waiting for a publisher. Because we never see what's right under our noses." He stared out at the hills again, far into deepening dusk.

"Of course the farmers didn't see, either, when they arrived here. They preferred to settle on level land. And their sons and grandsons sought still better soil, down around the waterways. So all these rock-strewn hills with their boulder outcroppings,



The girl hurled the beer can with vicious intent.

stood deserted until maybe thirty years ago. Then the automobile brought the first hunters and fishermen from the cities. They put up cheap cabins on cheap land. And they didn't see the gold any more than I did, when I came here just before the War. All I wanted was a summer place where I could get away from people."

Ted Hibbard chuckled, now. "Strikes me as funny," he said. "An anthropologist who hates people."

"Don't hate 'em," Kerry insisted. "At least, not most of 'em. Even today, you know, the majority of the inhabitants of the Earth are still savages. I've always gotten along with *them* very well. It's the civilized who frighten me."

"Such as your students and former students?" Hibbard smiled up at him. "I thought I was welcome here."

"You are, believe me. But you're an exception. You aren't like the others. You don't move out here for a fast buck."

"Oh," Hibbard said. "So that's what you mean by the gold, is it?"

"Of course. What you see out there isn't hill country any more. It's real estate. De-

velopment property. Right after the War the city people came. Not the hunters and the fishermen now, but the ex-urbanites. The super de-luxe exurbanites, who could afford to move forty miles out of town instead of just fifteen. They've been pouring in ever since, putting up their ranch-houses and their double garages for the station wagons."

"Still looks like a pretty lonely region to me," Hibbard mused. "Too damned lonely, after dark."

The Indians were afraid of the hills at night," Kerry told him. "They used to huddle inside their tepees around the fire. Just like today's citizens huddle inside their ranch-houses around the TV set, safe and protected."

"I suppose you have a right to be resentful," Hibbard said. "All these property-values going up. If you'd anticipated the boom you might have picked up choice locations years ago and made a fortune."

Kerry shrugged. "Wouldn't need a fortune. Just enough to move on. By now I could have a little *cabana* down along the barren stretches of the Florida Keys. I'd call it the *Key Pout*."

A white face popped

around the corner of the porch.

"Hey, Dad! Mom says it's almost time for supper."

"Okay," Hibbard answered.

"Tell her I'll be along soon."

The face disappeared.

"Nice boy you have there,"

Kerry said.

"Hank? We think so. Crazy about math, all that sort of thing. Can't wait to start school in the fall. I guess he's a lot more serious about things than I was at his age. A lot more than most kids are, nowadays."

"That's why I like him."

Kerry tapped his pipe against the porch-rail. "You know, I'm not really such a misanthrope. This hermit pose of mine is mostly pretense. But some of it is defense, too. Defense against the mobs taking over our cities, our culture. I saw it coming, fifteen years ago. That's why I got out. It's bad enough having to stay in town during the school year, to teach. Once that's over, I come back to the cottage here. Now even this little bit of privacy is being invaded. The hot-dog stands are taking over Walden Pond, I guess."

Hibbard stood up. "I hope you don't resent my hanging around this way," he said.

"Good heavens, no! When you bought your place last

month I was mighty pleased to see you. I'm still a member of the human race, remember, even though I find the average rural resident as much of an alien as I do the city troglodyte or his suburbanite cousin. You're more than welcome here, at any time. I like your wife, and I like that boy of yours. They're real people."

"Meaning that the rest are not?"

"Don't bait me," Kerry said. "You understand very well what I'm talking about. That's why you moved out here yourself, isn't it?"

Hibbard moved to the edge of the porch. "Well, I guess so. Actually, we came out here because of Hank, mostly. Didn't like the city schools. Didn't like the kind of kids he ran around with back in town. They're—I don't know—different. All these juvenile delinquents. You know."

Kerry nodded. "Indeed I do. As a matter of fact, I've been spending most of the summer taking notes for a little monograph. Nothing pretentious, understand—sociology's out of my line—but it's an interesting study. And this happens to be an ideal spot for anthropological field-trips."

"You mean there's a lot of rural delinquents around here?" Hibbard looked distressed. "We were hoping to get away from that."

"Don't worry," Kerry reassured him. "From what I've seen, the farm areas are still pretty well untouched. Of course, we have the usual percentage of barnyard sadists, truants, maladjusted types. But Hank won't run into too many; at his age most of them have either gone off to the armed services or the Industrial Home For Boys. It's the city youngsters I've been investigating."

"You're talking about ex-urbanite kids like mine? Or is there some kind of boys' camp around here?"

"Neither. I'm speaking about our week end visitors. Don't tell me you haven't seen them in town during the summer."

"No, I haven't. Actually, I've been so busy getting our place straightened out that I don't get into town very often. About once a week I stock up on supplies, usually on a Wednesday. I heard it's pretty crowded, week ends."

"You heard correctly," Kerry told him. "But perhaps you might be interested in seeing just what I'm talking about. I plan to take a run in,

tomorrow morning, about nine or so. And you're welcome to ride along."

"Will do." Hibbard waved his hand in salute.

Kerry stood on the porch and watched his guest walk down the hillside path, his shoulders silhouetted against the sunset.

From the far horizon came a low, rumbling sound. It might have been the mutter of distant thunder—at least, that is what both men mistook it for at the time.

Neither of them knew that it heralded the arrival of the trouble.

They must have been coming in all through the night, and they were still gathering around ten the following morning when Ben Kerry drove Hibbard into town in his old Ford.

Their first encounter occurred on the highway just outside the town limits, between the *Welcome To Hilltop* sign and the notice which read *Speed Limit 25 m.p.h.*

It came in the form of a rumbling again, but this time there was no mistaking it for thunder. The motorcycle roared along the road behind them, then swerved past without slackening speed. As it zoomed by, Hibbard caught

a glimpse of a squat figure in a black leather jacket, with a monkey on his back. At least, it looked like a monkey in the dusty passing blur; not until a moment later did he realize that what he had seen was a girl with cropped hair who was clinging with arms entwined about the cyclist.

As they speeded ahead, Hibbard saw the girl raise her right hand as though in a gesture of greeting. Automatically he started to return her wave, then froze as Kerry gripped his shoulder.

"Look out!" he shouted, and ducked his head.

At that instant something struck the windshield of the car and bounced off with a clatter. It fell in a silvery arc to the side of the road, and Hibbard understood. The girl had not been waving. She had hurled an empty beer-can at them.

"Why, she could have broken the windshield!" he exclaimed.

Kerry nodded. "Happens all the time. By tonight you'll find the roadside paved with empties."

"But they aren't even supposed to *buy* beer, are they? Isn't there a state law?"

Kerry jerked his finger over his shoulder. "Sign says you cut down to twenty-five

miles an hour when you enter town, too," he muttered. "But they're doing close to fifty."

"You talk as if you expected such things."

"I do. It's like this every week end, all summer long. Everyone knows what to expect around here."

"And nobody tries to do anything about it?"

"Wait and see," Kerry told him.

They were entering town now, passing a row of motels. Although it was still mid-morning, a surprising number of cars were parked before the various units. Hibbard gazed at them curiously, noting a strange incongruity. Virtually none of the vehicles were recognizable as standard units. Painted junkers, restyled hot-rods, ancient sports cars predominated. And there were dozens of motorcycles everywhere they looked.

"I see you notice our week end visitors' choice of transportation," Kerry said. "I'm afraid it's apt to strike you as a bit unconventional. As a group they seem to dislike what I believe is called 'Detroit iron'—you might gather from that that they utilize the motor car as a symbol of protest. As I remark in my notes, there seems to be an

automotive in their madness."

He slowed to a snail's pace as they proceeded up the short thoroughfare known, inevitably, as Main Street. The sidewalks were jammed with the usual Saturday throng of farm-folk, but intermingling with them was the unusual throng of teenage visitants.

There was no difficulty in separating them from the local youngsters; not these swaggering, guffawing figures in their metal-studded jackets and skintight jeans. Their booted feet thudded along the pavement, their visored caps bobbed. Some of them were bareheaded, choosing to display shaven skulls, crewcuts, and the more outlandish coiffures known as "Mohawks" or—for polite abbreviation—the "d.a." An occasional older lad in the crowd was more apt to affect the other extreme; long, greasy locks and exaggerated sideburns. Several of the latter youths wore spade beards, which gave them an oddly goatish appearance. The resemblance to satyrs was perhaps increased by the presence, and the attitudes, of their female companions. Virtually all of them were indistinguishable from the girl

on the motorcycle; the cropped hair, overpainted face, and tight sweater and jodhpurs seemed to be standard equipment.

Their boisterous babble rose and echoed from the artificial amphitheatre created by the store-fronts lining either side of the narrow street; from the end of the block came the sound of a juke-box blaring away at full volume inside the root-beer stand and drive-in.

A large crowd of juveniles congregated before it, and several couples were dancing on the sidewalk, oblivious of those who had to step out into the street in order to pass by. The sun's rays reflected from a score of beer-cans held in a score of hands. An orgiastic aura prevailed.

Hibbard turned to his companion. "I think I get it now," he said. "I remember reading something about this a couple of years back. Wasn't there a motorcycle convention in some small town in California? A gang took over, almost started a riot?"

"There was," the older man confirmed. "And it happened again, last year, in another state. Then I read of another instance, this summer. If you wanted to check on such things, I imagine you'd find

the phenomenon has become commonplace all over."

"Is this what you wanted to show me?" Hibbard asked. "That cyclist gangs are coming in here and terrorizing the citizens?"

Kerry shook his head.

"Don't be melodramatic," he murmured. "In the first place, this isn't a 'cyclist gang,' any more than it's a 'hot-rod crowd' or a 'sports car mob' or a congregation of Elvis Presley fans. These youngsters come from all over; the big city, the outlying suburbs, the smaller industrial communities nearby. There's no outward indication that they belong to any formal group, club, or organization. They just congregate, apparently. And if you look closely, you'll see they're not terrorizing the citizens, as you put it. In fact most of the local merchants are delighted to have them here." He waved his arm in the direction of the beer-drinkers. "They're good customers. They leave a lot of money in town over a week end. The sky's the limit."

"But you said yourself that they break the laws. They must stir up trouble, get into fights, do damage."

"They pay for it, I guess."

"What about the local au-

thorities? What do they think?"

Kerry smiled. "You mean the mayor? He's a plumber here in town, gets a hundred dollars a year to hold the title as a part-time job. He doesn't worry much."

"But the police—"

"We have a local sheriff, that's all. The place isn't even big enough to have its own jail. That's over at the county seat."

"Don't the citizens who aren't merchants do any complaining? Are they willing to sit back and just let a bunch of strange young hoodlums run wild?"

"I guess they complain. But so far there hasn't been any action taken. For my selfish purposes, it's just as well. You'd be surprised what I've managed to observe during this summer alone. What I want to do now is get over and see one of their race meetings."

"Race meetings?"

"That's right. You don't think they come here just to walk up and down Main Street, do you? Saturday or Sunday afternoons you'll generally find them off in the hills, on one of those little side roads back behind the county trunk highways. They

rent a spot from a local farmer and hold drag races, hill-climbing contests, that sort of thing. This week there'll be a gathering in our neighborhood, I think. They were always west of town before this, but I guess something happened and they got run off from their usual spot. Now old Lautenshlager is going to let them use the big hill behind his property. We ought to be able to see the bonfire tonight."

"Bonfire?"

Kerry nodded. "They usually have them."

"What do they think they are, Indians?" Hibbard stared at a trio on the nearby corner; a skinny boy epileptically contorted over a guitar and a writhing couple who seemed to be executing an impromptu war-dance. He had to grin at the sight. "Maybe they are, at that," he admitted. "They sure sound like savages."

"Rock - and - roll," Kerry shrugged.

Suddenly Hibbard's grin faded. "Look at that," he snapped, pointing up the street ahead.

A beat-up convertible was screeching down the avenue towards them, loaded with youngsters whose voices com-

peted more than successfully with the mechanical din. As the car moved forward, a cat moved quickly out of its path. But not quickly enough, for the car swerved purposefully to the side. There was a jarring thump and a louder screech, followed by howls of laughter.

"Did you see what they did?" Hibbard demanded. "They deliberately went out of their way to run it down! Let me out of here! I'm going to—"

"Oh, no you're not." Kerry put his foot down on the accelerator and the Ford moved on. "The poor thing's dead. You can't help it now. No sense starting trouble."

"What's the matter with you?" Hibbard's voice was shrill. "You aren't going to let them get away with this, are you?" He stared as the convertible skidded to a halt and its inmates poured out across the sidewalk. "It's bad enough when small boys torture an animal out of childish curiosity, but these aren't children. They're old enough to know what they're doing."

"That's right," Kerry agreed. "Like you say, they're savages. Remember the riots. You can't win." Kerry drove in silence, turning off at the end of the street and cutting

back along a side-road which circled the edge of town and joined the highway once again. Even at a distance it was possible to hear the blare of music, the cough of exhaust pipes, the yammer of horns and the snarl of the cycles.

"They must have noise wherever they go," Kerry said, at last. "I suppose it's what the psychiatrists call oral aggression."

Hibbard didn't reply.

"Rock-and-roll is another manifestation. But then again, there was swing in your salad days and jazz in mine. In fact you can see a lot of parallels if you look for them. Eccentric dress and hair styles, the drinking—the whole pattern of rebellion against authority."

Hibbard stirred restlessly. "But not the senseless cruelty," he said. "Sure, I remember frat initiations and how wild we got after football games. But there was nothing like this. There were a few bullies or maladjusted kids with mean streaks—now they all behave like a pack of psychos."

"Your boy isn't like that," Kerry answered. "Lots of them are normal."

"Yes. But there seem to be so many of the other sort.

More and more each year. Don't tell me you haven't noticed. You told me you've been studying these kids. And just now, back in town, you were afraid."

Kerry sighed. "Yes, I've studied them. And I am afraid." He paused. "How about coming home for lunch with me? I think I ought to show you a few things."

Hibbard nodded. The noon-day countryside was silent, or almost silent. It was only by listening very closely that they could hear the faint rumbling, moving along the roads in the direction of the distant hills.

Kerry spread the scrapbooks on the table after lunch. "Started these myself some time ago," he said. "But recently I've signed up with a clipping service."

He riffled the pages of the topmost book. "Here's your motorcycle riots, and a section on gang fights. Rumbles, they call them. A report from the Police Commissioner of New York on the rise of delinquency. A list of weapons taken from a group of high school freshmen in Detroit—switchblade knives, straight razors, brass knuckles, two pistols, a hatchet. All of them used in a street battle. A sec-

tion on narcotics, one on armed robbery, quite a few stories of arson. I've tried to eliminate what seem to be run-of-the-mill occurrences, so the clippings involving sex-crimes mostly concern forcible rape, gang assaults, and sadistic perversion. Even so, you can see there's a frightening assortment. This second book is devoted exclusively to newsstories of torture and murder. I warn you, it's not pleasant reading."

It wasn't. Hibbard found his gorge rising. He'd noticed such items, of course, while skimming through his daily paper, but had never paid too much attention to their frequency. Here, for the first time, he encountered a mass accumulation, and it was an anthology of horror.

He read about the teenage kidnappers in Chicago who mutilated and then killed an infant; the youngster down South who butchered his sister; the boy who blew off the head of his mother with a shotgun. Case after case of parricide, fratricide, infanticide; instance after instance of apparently senseless slaughter.

Kerry glanced over his shoulder and sighed.

"Truth is stranger than

fiction, isn't it?" he muttered. "You'll look a long time before discovering any Penrods or Willie Baxters in those news-clippings. This isn't a Booth Tarkington world any more. For that matter, you'll search in vain for an Andy Hardy."

"I believe it," said Hibbard. "But I can't understand it. Of course, there were always juvenile delinquents, Dead End Kids, that sort of thing. Only they seemed to be the exceptions, the victims of the Depression. And the zoot-suiters during the War were supposed to be the result of lack of parental supervision. The youngsters in these cases seem to be the products of normal upbringing; I notice the stories make quite a point out of the fact that most of them come from nice homes, prosperous backgrounds. So what's happened to our kids?"

"You'll still find nice children around. Hank isn't that way, remember."

"But what's influencing the majority? Why has there been such a terrible change in the last few years?"

Kerry puffed on his pipe. "Lots of explanations, if you want them. Dr. Wertham, for example, blames a lot of it on the comic books. Some psychotherapists say television

is the villain. Others think the War left its mark; kids live in the shadow of military service, so they rebel. They've taken new heroes in their own image—James Dean, Marlon Brando, the torn-shirt totem rules their clan. Oh, there's already a most impressive literature on the subject."

"Well, it doesn't impress me," Hibbard declared. "Maybe it sounds good, but how does one of those fancy theories explain a thing like this? Listen." He jabbed his finger at one of the clippings pasted on the page opened before them. "Here's a case from just last month. A fourteen-year-old boy, down South. He got up out of bed in the middle of the night and killed his parents in cold blood, while they slept. No rhyme or reason for it, he admits he had no reason to hate them, and the psychiatrists' reports seem to show he's perfectly normal, had an ordinary home-life. His story is that he just woke up out of a sound sleep and felt a sudden 'urge to kill somebody.' So he did." Hibbard thumbed through the book. "Come to think of it, that's what a lot of them say. They just get an 'impulse,' or 'something comes over them,' or they 'want to see what it's

like.' And the next day the cops are beating the bushes for the bodies of missing babies, or digging up fragments of dismembered corpses in gravel-pits. I tell you, it doesn't make sense!"

He closed the scrap-book and stared at Kerry. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to collect these clippings," he said. "And you say you've been studying this juvenile delinquent problem all summer. You must have come to some conclusions."

Kerry shrugged. "Perhaps. But I'm not quite ready to commit myself. I need further data before presenting a hypothesis." He gave Hibbard a long look. "You were a pretty fair student, as I recall. Let's see what you make of it all."

"Well, there's a couple of things that occur to me. First, this insistence, in case after case, over and over again, that a youngster suddenly experiences an irresistible impulse to commit murder. Generally, in such examples, the child is alone and not part of any gang. Come to think of it, he's often an only child, isn't he, or lives an isolated life?"

Kerry's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

"That seems to take care of one group. But there's another—the gangs. The ones that go in for the uniforms, and the regalia. I notice there's quite a bit of reference to initiations and secret society mumbo-jumbo. They've got a jive-talk language of their own, and fancy names, that sort of thing. And they seem to be premeditated in their crimes." He hesitated. "On the face of it, we're dealing with two totally different types. "No, wait a minute—there's one thing all these kids seem to have in common."

Kerry leaned forward. "What's that?"

"They don't *feel* anything—no shame, no guilt, no remorse. There's no empathy towards their victims, none at all. Time after time the stories bring that point out. They kill for kicks, but it doesn't really touch them at all. In other words, they're psychopaths."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Kerry said. "You call them psychopaths. And just what *is* a psychopath?"

"Why, like I said—somebody who doesn't have normal feeling, who lacks responsibility. You've studied up on psychology, you ought to know."

Kerry gestured towards the row of bookshelves lining the sides of his fireplace. "That's right. I've got quite a collection of psychotherapy texts up there. But you can search through them in vain for a satisfactory definition of the so-called psychopathic personality. He isn't considered a psychotic. He doesn't respond to any form of treatment. No psychiatric theory presently offers a demonstrable explanation of how a psychopath evolves, and for lack of contrary evidence it's often assumed that he's born that way."

"Do you believe that?"

"Yes. But unlike orthodox therapists, I have a reason. I think I know what a psychopath is. And—"

"Dad!"

Both of them turned at the cry.

Hibbard's son stood in the doorway, the rays of the late afternoon sun reflecting redly from the bright blood streaming down the side of his face.

"Hank! What happened? Did you have an accident?" He moved towards the boy.

"No, I'm all right. Honest I am. I just didn't want to go home and scare Mom."

"Sit down." Kerry led him to a chair. "Let me get some

hot water, clean you off." He went over to the sink and returned with a cloth and a basin. Skilfully he sponged the blood away, revealing the lacerations on the scalp.

"Not too deep," he told Hibbard. "A little peroxide and a bandage, now."

The boy winced, then subsided as Kerry finished his ministrations.

"Better?"

"I'm all right," Hank insisted. "It's just that they hit me with the tire-chain—"

"Who hit you?"

"I don't know. Some guys. I went for a walk this afternoon, and I heard all this racket up on the hill behind old Lautenshlager's place, you know. And I saw all these guys, and some dames, too. They were riding motorcycles up and down, making a lot of noise. I wanted to see what was going on, that's all, I just wanted to see what was going on—"

His lower lip trembled and Hibbard patted his shoulder. "Sure, I understand. So you went up there, eh? And then what happened?"

"Well, I started to go up. But before I could get very close, these big guys jumped me. There must have been five or six of them, they just

came out from around some bushes and grabbed me. And one of them had a stick and another one had this tire-chain, and he swung it at me and hit me alongside of the head, here. The others let go of me to get out of the way, and that's how I got loose. I started to run, and they were chasing me, only I got across the fence and then I ducked down behind Lautenshlager's barn so they couldn't see me."

"Did you get a good look at the fellows?"

"Well, one of them had a beard. And they were all wearing these black leather jackets and some kind of boots."

"It's the gang, all right. Our friends, the psychopaths." Hibbard stood up. "You can walk, can't you? Then come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Home, of course. I'm going to see to it that you get to bed. You got quite a knock, there. And then I think I'll hop in the car and take a little run over to the county seat. Seems to me this is a matter for the state police."

Kerry put down his pipe. "Are you sure it's wise to stir up trouble?" he asked, quietly. "No telling what might happen."

"Something has happened

already," Hibbard answered. "When a bunch of hoodlums knock my son over the head with a tire-chain, that's trouble enough for me. Come on, Hank."

He led the boy out of the door and down the path, without a backward look.

Kerry grimaced, then shook his head. For a moment he opened his mouth to call after them, then closed it. After that he just stood there, his eyes intent on the far hills. No smoke rose from them in the waning horizon-light, but the sound of racing exhausts was plainly audible. Kerry stood there listening for a long time. Then, slowly, wearily, he walked into the front room. He kindled a fire in the fireplace and sat down before it, balancing a notebook on his lap. From time to time he scribbled a few words, sitting stiffly, head poised as though listening for an unexpected sound. His face bore the tight, strained look of a man who had been waiting for trouble—and found it. He concentrated deeply.

It must have been almost an hour before the sound came. Even though he'd been tensed and alert, Kerry jumped when he heard the footsteps. He rushed to the door,

reaching it just as Hibbard burst in.

"Oh, it's you!" His voice rose in relief. "So dark I didn't recognize who it was at first."

Hibbard didn't respond for a moment. He stood there, panting, waiting to regain his breath.

"Ran all the way," he wheezed.

"What's the matter? Is it Hank?"

"No. The kid's all right, I guess. We put him to bed when I got him home, and my wife doesn't think there's any concussion. She used to be a nurse, you know. So I decided to grab a sandwich before I drove in for the police. We had the door shut, so I guess that's why I didn't hear anything. They must have sneaked in and out of the yard again very quietly. My wife didn't hear them either."

"Who?"

"Our young friends. Guess they figured out where Hank lived and decided I might be going after them. Anyway, they weren't taking any chances. They slashed all my tires."

Hibbard's voice rose. "They could see there are no telephone wires around our place, and I suppose they thought if they fixed the car

I couldn't do anything. But I'll show them!"

"Take it easy, now."

"I am taking it easy. I'm just here to borrow your car, that's all."

"You still intend to get the police?"

"What do you mean, *still*? After what just happened, nothing could stop me. I made sure everything was locked good and tight when I left, but even that's no guarantee. For all I know, they'll be around to burn the house down before the night is over."

Kerry shook his head. "I don't think so. I think if you just go back home and stay there quietly there won't be any more trouble. All they want now is to be left alone."

"Well what they want and what they're going to get are two different things. I'm going to round up every police officer, every trooper in this part of the state. We're going to put an end to this sort of thing—"

"No. You won't end it. Not that way."

"Look, I'm not here to argue with you. Give me your car-keys."

"Not until you listen to me, first."

"I listened to you long enough. I should have got

tough the minute I saw those kids run over the cat." Hibbard wiped his forehead. "All right, what is it you wanted to say?"

Kerry walked over and stood next to the bookshelves.

"We were talking about psychopaths this afternoon. I told you that psychiatrists didn't understand them, but that I did. Sometimes it takes an anthropologist to know these things. In my time I've studied a great deal concerning the so-called 'gang-spirit' and the secret societies of many cultures. You find them in all regions, and there are certain similarities. For example, did you know that in some places, even the young women have their own groups? Lips says—"

"I'm not interested in a lecture."

"You will be. Lips says there are hundreds of such societies in Africa alone. The Bundu group, in Nigeria, wears special masks and costumes for their secret rituals. The male adventurer who dares to spy on them is disciplined, or even killed."

"Listen, a gang of crazy kids around a bonfire isn't any secret lodge!"

"You noted the similarity yourself, this afternoon."

"I said some kids ran in gangs, yes. But others don't. What about the 'loners,' the ones who just get the urge to kill?"

"They don't know what they are, that's all. They haven't recognized themselves. For that matter, I don't think the gangs do, not consciously. They think they are just out for thrills. And I only pray that they go on that way, that they don't realize what brings them together."

"We know what brings them together. They're all psycho."

"And what *is* a psychopath?" Kerry's voice was soft. "A psychotherapist couldn't tell you, but an anthropologist can. A psychopath is a fiend."

"What?"

"A fiend. A devil. A creature known in all religions, at all times, to all men. The spawn of a union between a demon and a mortal woman." Kerry forced a smile. "Yes, I know how it sounds. But think a moment. Think of when all this started—this wave of sudden, unnatural juvenile crime, of psychopathic cruelty. Only a few years ago, wasn't it? Just about the time when the babies born in

the early years of the War started to enter their teens. Because that's when it happened, during the War, when the men were away. And the women had nightmares—the kind of nightmares some women have had throughout the ages. The nightmare of the incubus, the carnal demon who visits them in sleep. It happened before in the history of our culture, during the Crusades. And then followed the rise of the witch-cults all over Europe—the witch-cults presided over and attended by the spawn of the night-fiends; the half-human offspring of a blasphemous union. Don't you see how it all fits into the pattern? The unholy love of cruelty for its own sake, the strange, sudden maniacal urge to torture and destroy which comes in sleep, the hideous inability to respond to normal sentiment and normal feelings, the seemingly irrational way in which certain youngsters are irresistibly drawn together into groups who thrive on violence? As I said, I don't think that even the gangs realize the truth about themselves yet—but if they ever do, you'll see a wave of Satanism and Black Magic which will put the Middle Ages to shame. Even now, they gather about

fires in the summer night, seeking the hilltop haunts—”

“You’re batty!” Hibbard grabbed Kerry by the shoulder and shook him roughly. “They’re just kids, that’s all. What they need is a damned good beating, the whole lot of them, and maybe a couple of years in reform school.”

Kerry shook him off. “Now you’re talking like the authorities—the truant officers and the police and the get-tough school of welfare workers. Don’t you see, that’s just the way they’ve tried to handle the problem, and it never works? Any more than psychotherapy can work? Because you’re dealing with something you’re no longer conditioned to believe in. You’re dealing with fiends. What we need is exorcism. I can’t let you go up there, tonight. The police will just start a riot, it will be murder—”

Hibbard hit him, then, and he went down. His head struck the edge of the fireplace and he lay silent, an ugly bruise rising along the side of his right temple. Hibbard stooped, felt his pulse, then gasped in relief. Quickly he explored the contents of Kerry’s jacket-pockets. His hands closed over the car-keys.

Then he rose, turned, and ran from the cottage.

Kerry came to with a start. There was a throbbing in his head. He grasped the mantel, pulled himself erect. The throbbing intensified. But it wasn’t all in his head; part of it pounded in rhythm from a distance. He recognized the sound, the roaring that came from the hills.

He rubbed his forehead, then walked slowly in the direction of the porch. The distant darkness was dissolved in a reddish glow, and he could see the flames rising now from the far hilltop.

Kerry felt in his pockets, then swore and started for the door. He hesitated in the doorway, then returned to the living room and stooped over his desk. His hand scrabbled in the right top drawer; closed over a small revolver. He slipped it into his jacket-pocket and headed for the door once again.

It was dark on the path, but the faint flicker of flames guided his descent. When he reached the bottom of the hill and made sure that his car was gone, he swore again, then squatted until he discerned the fresh tire-tracks and the direction in which they led. Hibbard had chosen

to take the back road, the nearest approach to the highway which led to the county seat. The road was rough and it skirted directly behind the big hill on the Lautenschlager property, but it would be the fastest route. Kerry wondered if he'd reach the highway in time to head off the police. He hadn't been able to convince Hibbard, but he was willing to try again. The police weren't going to solve the situation. There'd just be more violence. If he only had time to work on the problem *his* way, to talk to those who still retained faith in the age-old remedy of exorcism, the casting-out of demons—

Kerry lengthened his stride, smiling wryly to himself. He couldn't blame Hibbard for his reaction. Most men were of the same mind today. Most *civilized* men—that is to say, the small minority of our western culture who go their way blindly, ignoring the other billion and a half who still know, as they have always known, that the forces of darkness exist and are potent. Potent, and able to spawn.

Perhaps it was just as well they didn't believe. He'd told Hibbard the truth—the only immediate hope lay in the fact that the changelings

themselves weren't entirely aware of their own nature. The fiends didn't know they were fiends. Once they came to learn, and united—

He put the thought away as he worked around behind the hill where the fire flared. Kerry sought the shadows at the side of the road for concealment; the noise of racing motors and the sound of shouts muffled his passing.

Then he rounded a sharp turn and saw the car looming drunkenly in the ditch. Through narrowing eyes he recognized the vehicle as his own. Had there been an accident? He started forward, calling softly. "Hibbard—where are you?"

The figure emerged from the edge of darkness. "Kind of thought you'd be along."

Kerry had just time enough to wonder about the oddly altered voice; time enough for that and no more. Because then they were all around him, some of them holding and some of them striking, and he went down.

When he came to he was already on top of the hill; yes, he must be, because the big brush-fire was leaping and roaring right before him, and the figures were leaping and roaring around it.

Why it was like the old

woodcuts, the ones showing the Sabbath and the Adoration of the Master. Only there was no Master in the center of the fire—just this burned and blackening figure, a charred dummy of some sort, thrust upright against a post. And the youngsters were dancing and capering, somebody was plucking the guts of a guitar, it was rock-and-roll, just a gang of kids having a good time. Some of them were drinking beer and a few had even started up their motorcycles to race in a circle about the flames.

Sure, they'd panicked and hit him, but they were only teenagers, he told himself, it had to be that way. And he'd explain, he'd tell them. He had to thrust the other thought from his mind, had to. Now they were pulling him into the circle and the big kid, the one with the beaver-tails dangling from his cap, was grinning at him.

"We found the other one," he called. "Clobbered him before he got away."

"Man, he's all shook up."

"Must be hip. He was on his way to town."

"If he got there, we'd really have a gasser."

"Ungood."

"What'll it be?"

Kerry whirled, seeking the source of the voices. He stared at the circle of goatish, grinning faces in the firelight. A girl danced past, bop-fashion, her eyes wild.

"How about the sacrifice bit?"

And then they were all shouting. "The sacrifice bit, that's it! Yeah, Man!"

Sacrifice. Man. The *Black Man* of the Sabbath.

Kerry fought the association, he had to fight it, he couldn't believe that. And then they were pushing him closer to the fire, and he could see the blackened dummy.

When he recognized what was burning there he couldn't fight the knowledge any more, and it was too late to fight the hands which gripped him, held him, then thrust him forward into the flames.

A mighty shout went up and he made one last effort to retain his faculties. If only he could hear what they were screaming—at least then he'd learn the final truth. *Did they or did they not know what they really were?*

But he fell forward, fainting, as the motorcycles began to race around the fire.

Their roaring drowned out every other sound, so even at the end, Kerry never heard the chanting.

THE END

THE RIDDLE OF LEVITATION

By ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

ILLUSTRATOR LLEWELLYN

It is common knowledge that the top secret project of every major power in the world today is the search for a practical method of neutralizing gravity. When this secret is discovered, it will become a major milestone in the progress of Mankind. However, there is almost conclusive proof that certain individuals have possessed the ability to defy gravity so far as their physical bodies are concerned. You will find Eric Frank Russell's research into this phenomenon truly fascinating.

IF A FEW trained brains took time off to collect and study levitatory phenomena, and perhaps succeeded in relating it to sunspot activity, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, changes in this planet's magnetic field or something equally significant, they might end up holding the key to the stars. Rocket propulsion might no longer be the only known means of creating motion *in vacuo* and Man would have a new and most formidable power at his command.

A characteristic example is that of the afflicted cottage at Cape Cod. The story was told by Harlan Jacobs in *Harper's Magazine*, reprinted in *Reader's Digest*, March, 1940.

Jacobs and his wife took a cottage at Cape Cod. They were described as stolid, mid-

dle-aged people not given to delusions or random superstitions. Nevertheless, for several months they were bothered by loud, mysterious noises of all kinds.

The Jacobs had visitors in the shape of a hard-boiled materialistic lawyer and his family. They, too, heard the noises. Like their hosts, they searched and poked and nosed around completely without avail. The sounds were strong and happened so frequently that they were finally given pet names such as the "Universal Click" and the "Grand Piano Smash."

One seeks in vain for a levitational triumph in the form of an astonished elephant floating over tree-tops. It is like looking for a factual report on the cow jumping over



The scientists were unable to believe their own investigations.

the moon. But the *Daily Mirror*, August 17, 1939, gave space to the case of the soaring haystack.

Men loading hay at Eastwood, Tarrington, Hereford, were dumbfounded to see one haystack rise "slowly" into the air to a height of twenty feet or more. "It remained in the air steady and intact for several seconds, then dispersed." Note that what ascended was not a sheaf such as a child could carry, but a quantity of hay comparable with the weight of an elephant.

As hard-headed a customer as one could meet in a long day's march was the Rev. Samuel Wesley, father of the great John Wesley. In 1715, when the Rev. Samuel lived in the parsonage at Epworth, the place became afflicted with inexplicable noises and, a little later, with levitations. At first the annoyed clergyman believed that tricks were being played by irresponsible boy friends of his daughters. He changed his mind when pewter ornaments leaped off the mantelpiece, curtains floated into horizontal position and the family's shoes waltzed around without any feet in them.

Stones have been seen again and again rising into the air apparently of their own volition, or dropping from a gain-

ed position in mid-air. In 1880, in East Kent, Ontario, two astonished men watched stones soaring from a small area in the middle of a field. There was no earthquake, no jets of natural gas, no localized whirlwind, nothing to explain the phenomenon. The stones sprang upward, hung momentarily at peak, fell back, and that was that. The story was published in the *Scientific American*, July 10, 1880.

South African police had no better luck. According to the *Rand Daily Mail*, May 29, 1922, a Mr. D. Neaves of Roodeport, in South Africa, became fed up with bombardments of stones upon his house. The assault had been going on for several weeks; another report says several months. He complained to authority. Five policemen arrived, took up strategic positions after dark and were just in time to hear a sizable boulder crash through the roof. More stones followed. The police switched on powerful torches, watched several missiles drop vertically from an unknown height.

Returning to barracks, the police made official report to Inspector Cummings. That worthy marched them back to the Neaves home accompanied

by every available man on the force. Newspaper reporters also attended. Cops, journalists, ghost hunters, nosey-parkers and others scattered themselves all over the afflicted house, the outbuildings and surrounding fields. Stones rained down right and left. A hefty clinker nearly bopped a native servant-girl as she went to the well. The police ended up by blaming the girl. Somebody or something always has to be blamed. The alternative is to acknowledge the temporary abolition of a natural law.

Many other things besides stones have soared for no obvious reason and one wonders whether a bubble of null-gravity arose and encompassed Benjamin Bathurst, whisking him so high and so far that—if he ever got released and dropped—the body was never found, or if found, not identified.

Data on levitation may be classified as of three kinds. Firstly, there are spontaneous levitations of the type already described. Secondly, there are controlled levitations of people and objects by those who have or claim to have the ability to use the natural force involved. Lastly, there are self-levitations by adepts.

When confronted with examples of supernormal happenings classified as spiritualistic phenomena the average man's reaction swings towards blind faith or bigoted disbelief. That fraudulent mediums exist by the dozen cannot be denied; they are human vultures feeding on the sorrow and heartbreak of others.

But among the horde of mumbling, and table-tapping rogues there is—in this writer's opinion—a proportion of sincere though possibly badly mistaken people.

When we come to deal with our second class of levitations we find that about ninety per cent of the data has been confiscated by spiritualists. That means examples must be chosen with much circumspection, selecting those where names were named and where skeptics confirmed the evidence of the faithful.

A suitable case of such type is that of Henry Slade, in 1877. Slade was regarded as an eminent medium of his time. He thought of himself as a genuine medium probably because neither he nor anyone else could offer a better diagnosis of what was the matter with him.

In Slade's presence occurred numerous "apport," meaning

the supernormal transference of objects from one place to another, sometimes through solid walls. A big stone would fall from the ceiling or an invisible jug of real water would empty itself over a pious onlooker's pate. Such baptisms were mightily comforting to the faithful though what they proved about the after-life, if any, passes this writer's comprehension.

Professor Zollner of Leipzig and a bunch of scientific colleagues got their hooks into Slade and made him perform in their presence. A big lump of coal promptly fell from the ceiling. If its target was Zollner, it missed. At the next meeting Zollner's pocket-knife whizzed out of his hand and smacked Professor Scheibner on the brow with enough force to convince that worthy that something had happened.

A year later the dissatisfied Zollner and his men staged a return match with Slade. One of them, Herr Schmid, ducked a heavy stone that appeared in mid-air and fell to the floor with a loud thump. An indoor shower of rain saturated Slade and Zollner. The latter then wrote a book, *Transcendental Physics*, telling of these and other similar experiences and formulating a fourth-dimensional theory to explain them.

A so-called medium whose powers were subjected to repeated tests by scientists and several notable skeptics was Eusapia Palladino. In 1888, when Eusapia was thirty-four and had been levitating things for twenty years, she did it again for the benefit of Professor Chiaia of Naples. Chiaia had heard incredible stories about her, was willing to look, unwilling to be fooled. He came away convinced that something darn peculiar was going on, complained about it in a letter to the world-famous alienist Professor Lombroso. What Lombroso said in reply is not recorded, but possibly he offered an estimate that one is born every minute because Chiaia started chivvying Lombroso to have a look at Eusapia for himself.

Lombroso, it must be presumed, suggested that Eusapia go and jump in the lake. Chiaia persisted. Finally, in 1891, Lombroso granted Eusapia two interviews, hoping to get Chiaia off his neck. Eusapia made such good use of these opportunities, levitated so many things so inexplicably, that Lombroso had the grace and courage to write a paper affirming his conviction that such things can and do happen. However, he refused to attribute the phenomena to

intervention by the spirit world.

This eminent honesty plastered Eusapia with so much egoboo that others crowded her, eager to strip some away under various forms of scientific control. Flammarion, Ochorowicz, Richet, de Rochas, Oliver Lodge, Morselli, both the Curies, Bergson and several redoubtable figures poked and prodded her while she sat in all kinds of light, tied up or fastened down in all sorts of ways.

Nearly objects continued to waltz around. On one occasion, not satisfied with floating everything floatable, Eusapia herself soared upward, still bound to her chair, before the startled eyes of Professors Porro, Morselli and de Albertis, which trio succeeded in passing their hands under her feet and those of the chair before she descended to floor-level.

It may be useful to emphasize that although the most modern of such events have been more or less confiscated by the spiritualist movement, a good many more were recorded long before mediums were invented. Stories of levitational or telekinetic powers are as old as any other kind of legend.

Jesuit manuscripts sent from China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries repeat several old Chinese stories about privileged beings able to bring about the translation from one place to another of people and things. They also give descriptions of strange happenings, current at that time, of the kind now called poltergeist phenomena, the abnormal movements of domestic objects, throwing about of stones and so forth.

In Arabia levitational or telekinetic powers have been attributed to certain Muslim holy men ever since Mohammed went to the mountain. It is also a curious fact that in the same area occur natural phenomena of a puzzling kind also difficult to believe.

The stark wilderness of Arabia's Southern Desert, known to natives as the *Rubal-Khali* or Empty Quarter, contains moving rocks which are called "walking stones." These are spherical or ovoid lumps of veined quartz ranging in size from that of a hen's egg to a football. They crawl across the dunes and valleys of the desert leaving behind long, curling tracks with occasional loops. Sometimes the tracks may be broken for several yards, the gap representing—according to Arab stories—a

space which the stone has leaped in a long, low parabola pattern.

A classic levitational myth is that of the Indian Rope Trick. The most authoritative description says that a fakir appears bearing a basket, a rope, a sword. His assistant is usually a young boy of nine or ten. Dumping sword and basket on the ground, the fakir feeds the rope through his fist, whereupon it rises rigidly until it is pointing into the sky, like a flagstaff.

The boy swarms up the rope, reaches the top and disappears. Taking the sword in his teeth, the fakir also climbs the rope and vanishes. Horrifying screams are heard in the sky and the boy's body falls to the ground, hacked to pieces. The fakir reappears, slides down the rope, picks up the dismembered corpse and stuffs it into the basket. He then utters certain incantations at the end of which the rope collapses, the lid of the basket pops open and out steps the boy unharmed and smiling.

This stunt appears to be no more than a good example of how fantastic rumor can persist in spite of everything. India is full of people, Europeans included, who know someone who knows somebody

else whose brother or cousin once met a man who had actually witnessed the whole performance exactly as described. India is equally full of people, Europeans included, who never once in their lives have seen it themselves. A curious Britisher, when a colonel in the Indian Army, devoted most of his spare time for thirty years to seeking a fakir who could do the trick. He sought in vain. For more than twenty years the Magicians' Circle has had a large and most enticing reward offer to the first one who could perform the Indian Rope Trick in the open air. So far there has been not one claimant.

Charles Low tells of a somewhat similar performance given near Lucknow. The tale sounds more plausible but lacks dates and names; stories with such omissions must be treated with some skepticism. In this yarn, the fakir mesmerized his boy assistant, seated him on a small platform supported by a tripod of three sticks. He then stretched the boy's arms out sideways and placed the palms of his hands on two more sticks each about six feet high. Having got the boy positioned to his satisfaction, the fakir muttered some abracadabra then one by one slowly removed the

three sticks forming the tripod.

This left the boy seated cross-legged some four feet in the air supported by nothing but his outstretched hands resting on the side sticks. As an exhibition of muscular control and perfect balance the spectators thought it pretty good. But the fakir wasn't finished yet.

After some more rigmarole, the fakir took away one of the side-sticks and folded the boy's free arm across his chest, leaving him still seated with one hand on one stick. This spectacle was so startling that baffled onlookers asked to look closer. The fakir agreed provided that nobody touched the youth. They walked around within six inches of the boy; one amazed individual waggled a waling-stick to and fro, seeking invisible support where the tripod had been and failing to find any. There was nothing whatever to show how the mesmerized subject was being held up.

Showing some impatience, the fakir asked his audience to resume their seats and let the performance go on. He then took away the last stick, folded the boy's arm across his chest and let him sit there, completely without support, for about two minutes. A cur-

tain pulled across the scene brought the affair to an end.

According to Low, one of the onlookers was so annoyed by his inability to detect how the trick was done that he persuaded the fakir to repeat it at his home before a party of different witnesses. The fakir turned up and dutifully did it again. One spectator had brought a camera and secured a good, sharp picture of the boy seated four feet above ground, resting on nothing but air. Low later heard of a similar performance given by a Malay adept at a party held by a District Magistrate, also not named, at Samarang, Java.

Impressive and very convincing levitational stunts have been staged again and again by top-grade illusionists who have never pretended that their performances were other than ingenious deceptions.

Manchester Guardian, January 21, 1955, gives a slightly cynical account of an open-air performance given on Tower Hill, London, at 9:30 the previous morning, by Mr. Erik Bang, described as a Danish illusionist. Mr. Bang gave his performance on a public highway, using a brewery truck as a stand.

Above the cab of the truck he had fixed a plank supported

on two wooden legs and covered with a magician's cloth. Mrs. Bang climbed to the roof of the cab, shivering with cold and clinging grimly to her fur coat. Carefully she lay full length on the plank. Bang voiced some hocus-pocus, made appropriate gestures, then snatched away the cloth and the wooden supports. "The plank and its passenger," says the report, "seemed to remain airborne three feet above the lorry. Photographers dodged about, bulbs popping, and a small knot of fish-porters looked suitably impressed."

It must be pointed out that there are not two but three basic ways in which to deceive people, press reporters included. One may fool them when they don't know they're being fooled. Or one may fool them despite their knowledge that they are being fooled. Or, lastly but not leastly, one may not fool them at all when they are convinced that they are being fooled. Just which of these techniques Mr. Bang employed is known only to himself.

Many similar cases are on record but it is time we passed on to the third and last class of data: that telling of people able to levitate themselves.

A case, as well authenticated as anything in Holy Writ,

is that of the flying monk, St. Joseph of Copertino, 1603-1663. He had the ability to work himself into such a transport of religious ecstasy that he would make a dive for heaven without bothering to consider whether God was ready for him. He swooped and soared so many times that his superiors grounded him by keeping him away from certain ceremonies and processions that incited his displays of aerobatics. Even at the end he floated from under the hands of a surgeon, Francesco Pierpaoli, and came down only when reproved by a witness, Father Silvestro Evangelisto.

St. Teresa of Avila was another soaring saint or, equally likely, a soarer granted sainthood because of it. Her case is interesting because she gave descriptions of her thoughts and feelings when rising, also because she confessed herself somewhat scared whenever it happened and tried to resist it. "Afterwards I was worn out, like a person who has been contesting with a strong giant."

One who did not resist but rather cooperated with whatever was handling him was Father Dominic Dechaux who is said to have gone swimming around in mid-air above the heads of the entire Court of

Spain. He was so weightless that King Philip II boosted him from one end of the hall to the other with the prod of a finger. Some accounts say that he could be blown around like a bubble.

In more modern times ballet fans and critics often asserted that there was something levitational about the remarkable leaps of that great dancer Vasslav Nijinsky. His jumps took longer than it seemed they should have done. He would soar from the stage and appear to remain suspended at peak for a few moments before coming down. When asked how it was done he merely smiled and said, "I just go up and pause there a little."

Far and away the best established, most detailed and most inexplicable levitations were those of Daniel Douglas Home. Lords, prominent socialites and many others witnessed them, including Sir William Crookes, one of the great physicists of his time. Later on some of the world's most accomplished professional tricksters—David Devant, Jasper Maskelynn and Harry Houdini—studied Home's performances, sought means of duplicating them in similar conditions and failed.

The most comprehensive ac-

count of Home's life is given in Jean Burton's *Hey-Day of a Wizard*. The story has been written up many times with substantially the same details but with varying faith. In *That Other World*, for example, Stuart Cumberland views Home as a rascal but fails to explain his remarkable exhibitions and therefore contents himself with discrediting the many witnesses. Accounts don't all agree on Home's name, some calling him Hume, and some changing the Douglas to Dunglas or Dunglass.

A native-born Scot, D. D. Home was a pale, sensitive, ascetic-looking character who considered himself one of the great spiritualist mediums of his decade, an unavoidable diagnosis seeing that it had been thrust upon him from every side. At that time, 1833-1886, spiritualism was rearing along the tracks like a runaway locomotive, ouija-boards were as common as buckets, and anyone with faint traces of supernormal power or the ability to pretend to such power was therefore a medium as a matter of incontrovertible logic.

He hit the pages of the *Hartford Times* by floating at the home of Ward Cheney at Manchester, Connecticut. He went on hitting the pages by

levitating various objects as well as himself before a formidable list of eminent witnesses including William Cullen Bryant, Thackeray, Bulwer Lytton, Sardou, Dumas, Ruskin, Rossetti, Mark Twain, Princess Pauline Metternich, Prince Murat, Emperor Napoleon III, and a long, long line-up of aristocrats, literary figures, scientists, doctors, skeptics, debunkers and mere gapers.

Home's life story suggests that in many ways he was an unashamed rogue more than ready to batten upon the credulous and superstitious. There is little doubt that an unknown proportion of witnesses were well and truly fooled or persuaded to fool themselves and that the resulting record of Home's performances is therefore part faked.

However, if one ruthlessly eliminates all data faintly smelling of trickery there still remains an imposing residue affirming that Home really did have strange and extraordinary powers.

William Crookes, then a brilliant physicist and chemist, later to become President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, decided to make scientific tests of Home's telekinetic capabil-

ities. Crookes published his results in the *Quarterly Journal of Science*, July 1, 1871, and again in a pamphlet entitled *Researches into the Phenomena of Modern Spiritualism*:

"The phenomena I am prepared to attest are so extraordinary, and so directly oppose the most firmly-rooted articles of scientific belief—amongst others, the ubiquity and invariable action of the force of gravitation—that, even now, on recalling the details of what I witnessed, there is an antagonism in my mind between reason, which pronounces it to be scientifically impossible, and the consciousness that my senses, both of touch and sight . . . are not lying witnesses."

One unimpressed expert was Harry Houdini, who thought of Home as a "hypocrite of the deepest dye." In his book, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, he opines that a trickster of Home's impudence could have swung from one window to the other with the aid of a wire already fixed for that purpose.

Houdini's theory is supported to a small extent by certain aspects of the almost identical accounts of Lindsay and

Adare. They examined the exit-window, expressed wonder at how Home could have shot himself through so narrow a gap, but neither showed any investigatory spirit by opening it wider, climbing outside and searching for a hidden wire or any other evidence of deception. In this respect, they took the whole affair at face value.

Considerably in Home's favor is the fact that having performed his trick he willingly repeated it under the very noses of his audience, almost as though defying them to trap him. If his performance was a clever fake he was accepting an awful risk of discovery and exposure, but if it was genuine he had no reason to fear a dozen repetitions. Home took such risks again and again, with remarkable confidence, and was never caught out. Each time those who watched were awed.

Data concerning natural events suggests that there exists a counter-gravitational force which Charles Fort called "teleportation." This invisible influence transports surpluses to areas of shortage, even across great oceans or for halfway around the Earth. See *The Books of Charles Fort* for many accounts of things

whisked from one locale to another.

Fort offered the notion that teleportation might represent the last haphazard functioning of an ancient force that once was essential to ensure the survival of living things, that its occasional manifestations in modern times are dying attempts at usefulness long after the need has passed.

There may have been a time way back in this planet's dawn, suggested Fort, when scrubby bushes, striving to retain a hold on harsh and arid terrain, sent out silent pleas for water—and water was teleported from elsewhere. A time when new-born marsh hungered for frogs—and frogs were brought from somewhere overstocked with them. The teleportative force lay dormant until triggered into action by a desperate want, a dire need. Today, what is left of it still gets triggered now and again, perhaps by an accidental set-up of conditions, and the result creates yet another datum of the kind known as Fortiana.

One is tempted to wonder if the remnants of that force are still being manipulated by certain primitive peoples with better memories of the planetary chaos from which humankind once crawled.

This was suggested by a report from South Africa in the 1950s. Planes tried to break a long-standing drought by seeding the upper atmosphere with iodized salt. Nothing happened. They took off again, showered chemicals over a wide front. Not a spit, not a drop. Poor, benighted natives decided they could wait no longer for the white man's promised water. They put on a rain-making ceremony that lasted four days, an intense tribal cry strong enough to trigger something lying dormant. Feet stamped, tom-toms boomed while The Helper stirred in its sleep, slowly came awake. The resulting flood swept away two bridges and a Christian chapel.

It may well be that the price of civilization is to surrender contact with primitive forces. The more we learn, the more we forget. But if primitive powers still remain familiar to this world's decreasing number of primitive peoples, then civilized persons with so-called supernormal powers may be thought of as throw-backs, freakish reversions to a distant past when such powers were commonplace and used twenty times per day. D. D. Home levitated not because he was favored by the spirit

world but because his ancestors were saved from the saber-toothed tiger by their ability to soar to the tree-tops. A modern man who could follow a scent for a hundred miles would be equally a throw-back but much less of an object for wonderment—even a dog can do that!

There is an equal possibility that Fort's basic idea is correct but aimed in the wrong direction. Powers levitational may not be remnants of a force needed in the far past, but the first stirrings of one needed in the far future. Not something dying, but something developing.

At present date we have organized our world affairs so superbly that no man can guess what the future holds five million years hence, five days hence, or even whether we have any future at all. But it is easily conceivable that—if we live long enough—we shall have wangled ourselves into some other predicament where we can continue to live only by the expert employment of what are not viewed as supernormal powers.

Indeed, this writer could have made thankful use of them not so long ago when scientific blessings were falling upon us like manna from the sky.

THE END

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THE INVISIBLE MAN MURDER CASE

(Continued from page 25)

stand. But now you've gotten into fantasy—"

"But what if I could *prove* the story? What if I prove this sulfaborgonium stuff exists?"

"Can you?"

"I wanted to bring you a sample. That's one of the first things I asked Dr. Evander, but he said it was all gone. The last drop went on his cat. But it's my theory that either Kirk Evander or an accomplice swiped some.

"Then you can't really *show* me this sulfawhatever-you-call it? You only have his word for it?"

"But there's the *cat*," I said anxiously. "The cat itself is proof that things can be made invisible. Animals. People!"

"And you seriously think that an invisible man is walking around this minute, bumping off people?"

"I do!"

He screwed up his face and rapped his desk.

"All right. You bring me the cat. Then I'll follow through."

"Right. I'll see Dr. Evander again tomorrow morning, and I'll produce Socrates. Then I'll leave it up to you to find this invisible murderer. I don't envy you the job."

I saw Eileen that evening,

and despite the fact that I wanted to keep my discovery quiet, I couldn't help shooting off my mouth. That's a problem of mine.

She listened to me in evident amazement, and then she said something that had us both unnerved.

"But Jeff! If this killer's invisible, then he could be any place. He could be right in this room!"

We both looked around, wide-eyed. Then I took an umbrella from the rack and started to parry it around the room. Eileen did the same, with a rolled-up magazine. It became a kind of crazy game after a while, and we both started to giggle. Pretty soon we were laughing hysterically, poking into the closets and under the chairs and out the window, and we finally collapsed in helpless mirth, hugging each other like a couple of nutty kids. It wasn't the most romantic moment of our lives, but for some reason it seemed right. We got pretty silly and tender for a few minutes, and when we got up off the floor, we were engaged to be married. Funny how a thing like that happens, but that's the way it was with us.

We didn't discuss the invis-

ble murderer much after that. We had too much else to talk about.

In the morning, I took the subway out to Queens and whistled merrily all the way. The world seemed like a pretty nice place, even underground.

But when I rang the front doorbell of Dr. Borg Evander's house, the little panel in the door didn't slide back, and the television lens didn't pop out to examine me. There was no response at all.

I rattled the knob, but the door was locked.

After five minutes of useless pounding, I went around to the other side of the house and tried to find another method of entry. There wasn't any. The back door was bolted, and all the windows were tightly shut.

I didn't have any reason to get panicky. I hadn't told the doctor of my intentions to return. He could have been out. And it was only natural for someone to lock up their house when they left it.

Still, I didn't like it.

There was a luncheon counter at the northwest corner. I went there in the hope of finding a telephone booth; I found one. But the call I placed to the doctor's home wasn't answered. I came out

and spoke to the counterman. He said:

"Old Doc Evander? Why, he must be home. Never known the Doc to leave that nutty house of his. Has everything delivered. Regular hermit."

That settled it. I went back to the Evander house and began to pound on the front door. I almost busted my shoulder doing it, but I finally snapped whatever screwy kind of electronic lock held it closed. When it swung open, a bell began clanging a warning throughout the house, but I didn't pay it any attention. I took the elevator platform down to the basement.

Of course, my suspicions had been right. The old man was spread-eagled on the stone floor, and the man who had wanted him dead didn't care about being neat. His head had been struck several times with something blunt and hard, and the result was sickening.

I called the police, and then roamed the house, calling out:

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty. Here, Socrates. Here kitty, kitty . . ."

But I knew it was useless. The invisible killer had been thorough, and now every speck of evidence was gone.

I won't say that Captain Spencer completely disbelieved my story. After the murder of Borg Evander, it almost seemed like corroboration. But he was a practical man, too, and he knew that my fantastic explanation for the murders—without tangible evidence—would only produce raised eyebrows and embarrassed coughs if he proposed the theory himself. It was all right for me to suggest the explanation — I was a fiction writer. But he was a detective of homicide, and his stock-in-trade was fact.

So the theory remained private, among Captain Bill Spencer and myself and the girl I wanted to marry.

It might have stayed that way forever, if Douglas Wharton, president of the publishing company, hadn't gone loony.

Now Douglas Wharton is kind of legendary figure in publishing. As a young man, running a hand-press in the back of a stationery shop, he had established a distinguished reputation for integrity and daring. His company was one of the first to recognize the growing American hunger for mystery stories, and he also published one of the first regular series of

science fiction novels. He established the Wharton Fellowships for new authors in both fields, the first of their kind. He was one of the first truly cooperative publishers in the history of the various author's leagues.

He was in his sixties when I joined the list of the Wharton Publishing Company, but you'll rarely see a better-looking or more vigorous man of forty. He was a tall, slim guy, with movie-actor distinction in his handsome features and graying temples. He looked like a retired British major, but he could talk like a retired U. S. Army First Sergeant.

I liked Douglas Wharton. So I wasn't happy to hear the rumors about him shifting his trolley.

I asked Aaron Snow about it one day.

"Seems to be some truth in it," he said gravely. "The old man's been acting pretty jumpy lately, and saying a lot of queer things. His friends have been trying to get him to take a vacation, but he won't hear of it."

"What's the matter with him?"

Aaron shrugged. "I'm no psychiatrist. But from what I hear, he's seeing things. Things nobody else sees. Hear-

ing them, too. He gets mad as hell when the people around him deny it. Like last week . . ."

"What happened?"

"The way I get the story, there was a board meeting of the editors. Company policy, stuff like that. The Mystery Book Editor was making a report, when Wharton suddenly starts to curse—and if you've ever heard Doug Wharton curse, you know how fluent he can be. Everybody looks at him, and he accuses the man next to him of tickling his ankle."

"What?"

"That's right," Aaron said sadly. "Raised hell about it. Swore up and down that his ankle was being tickled. The man next to him was Bosley Morse, Senior Editor of the Classical Department. White hair and whiskers, you know the guy, looks like Walt Whitman. Last guy in the world you'd accuse of tickling your ankle. But that's what Wharton claimed."

I whistled.

"Gee, that's tough. Fine man like that."

"Yeah, it's a shame, all right. Of course, he absolutely refuses to get medical attention. Some of his friends tried sneaking a headshrinker in to see him, pretending it was a

social call. But Doug was too smart for 'em. Ticked off the doctor immediately, and threw him out of his house."

Maybe you can guess what I was thinking.

"Listen, Aaron," I said. "Can you get me an appointment to see Wharton?"

"What?"

"I'd like to see him. I only met him once, when we were signing the contracts. Maybe you could fix up a lunch date or something."

"What for?"

"I've got an idea. It's a nutty idea, but then most of my ideas are. I'd just like to see the man before I do anything about it."

"Well, if that's what you really want. I suppose I can arrange it through the mystery editor." He narrowed his eyes shrewdly. "You got something up your sleeve, Jeff?"

"Who, me?" I said innocently.

But when I left Aaron, I knew I did have something up my sleeve. I had an invisible man, who had killed three people and a cat, and who just might be after a fifth victim—in a slightly different manner.

Aaron went to work quickly to make the arrangements.

There was only one snag. Since his "trouble" had started, Douglas Wharton had stopped dining out at lunch time, and confined his noon-time meal to a sandwich in the office. However, he didn't mind my joining him.

I kept the appointment promptly at twelve, walking through the impressive oak-rimmed doorway of the presidential office. Wharton was at his desk, looking older and more tired than I remembered him, but his smile was wide and cordial when he greeted me.

"Sit down, Jeff," he invited. "My secretary will bring the lunch in a few minutes. Ordered you a steak sandwich. Okay?"

"Suits me fine," I said.

"How's everything going? You must be working on novel number four now, eh?"

"That's right. It's called *The Moose Hangs High*."

"Well, if it's as successful as the others, we both won't have any cause for complaint. That's quite a character you've got there, that Rufe Armlock."

"Yes, sir. Sometimes I wish he really existed."

He looked up at me sharply. "Why?"

"Oh, I dunno. He just never seems to have any trouble. If

there's a case to be solved, he just moves right in and solves it. You always know things'll come out all right in the end."

"Yes," Wharton sighed. "I see what you mean."

The lunch arrived, and we ate in silence for a few minutes. I kept watching Wharton's face, anxious to see if I could detect any signs of the looniness I'd been hearing about. He looked okay to me.

Then it happened.

We were sipping our coffee, and I was giving the president a rough outline of the plot of *The Moose Hangs High* when he seemed to stiffen and look past me towards the closed door. My blood went icy when I saw the change in him.

"What's wrong, Mr. Wharton?"

He continued to stare past me, and his lips were moving soundlessly.

"The knife..." he said hoarsely.

I whirled around, but there was nothing there. When I looked back at the publisher, his hands were covering his eyes.

"Mr. Wharton..."

"I'll be okay, Jeff. I'm sort of—tired."

"Mr. Wharton, you said something about a knife."

"It was nothing."

"Did you *see* a knife?"

"No, no . . ."

Then suddenly, shockingly, he was laughing, laughing wildly, uncontrollably, dancing and gyrating in the swivel chair.

"Mr. Wharton!" I shouted, standing up.

"Stop it, stop it!" He was shrieking in anguish, even as he laughed, and there were tears running down his cheeks.

"Mr. Wharton, are you all right?"

He stopped as quickly as he had started, and slumped exhausted over the desk blotter. I went to him, and he pointed feebly towards the pitcher of water. I poured him a glass and he drank it quickly, coughing.

"What is it?" I said. "What happened to you?"

He couldn't answer for a moment. Then the door of the office slammed shut violently, and he said:

"I was being tickled. So help me God, I was being tickled. It was horrible . . ."

It sounded funny. Tickling is a funny word. But I didn't feel funny. Only horrified.

"Has this happened before?"

"Yes, often. I don't know what's the matter with me.

Maybe I'm afraid to find out. But first I *see* things . . . like a knife, floating in midair. Or something else. And then I know it's going to happen, then I know the tickling will start, that awful tickling . . ."

He broke down and sobbed. Like I said, he was a man in his sixties, but he sounded like a heartbroken child, sobbing on the impressive desk in front of me.

"This is terrible," I said. "Don't you think you should get help, Mr. Wharton? A doctor?"

He looked up at me, trying to compose himself.

"I'll tell you the truth. I've seen a doctor, my own doctor. He knows of nothing organically wrong. I have a slight heart condition, but nothing major. His only suggestion was that my trouble was mental. His face hardened. "And I know that's not true. I *know* it. No matter what insane symptoms I have, I know that my mind is sound. I'm sure most people wouldn't believe that . . ."

"I believe it, Mr. Wharton."

"What?"

"I believe it. Because I think I know what's happening to you."

He stared at me, not sure what I meant.

"Mr. Wharton, will you let

me tell you a story?" I said. "Not fiction, Mr. Wharton. What I believe is a true story."

He didn't reply, but I took his silence for an affirmative.

I told him the story of Zora Brewster, and the two Evans. I told him about the missing cat, and the mysterious chemical called sulfaborgonium. I told him my theory about the invisible killer.

"I don't understand," he said, when I was through. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Just this, Mr. Wharton. I think this invisible madman's decided upon *you* as his next victim. Only now he's getting fancy. He must be bored with his old hit-and-run tactics. He wants something more—delicious. That's why he's doing what he's doing. Making you *see* things. Making knives appear out of nowhere. Tickling you. Tickling you to death."

"It's madness," Wharton said hoarsely. "The worst madness I ever heard of."

"There's a Captain of Homicide that believes it, too. His name is Bill Spencer, and you can check with him about it if you like."

"But what can we do against such a man? How can we fight him?"

"I don't know yet. It's a terrible power he's got, a pow-

er that's hard to stop. He can be anywhere, any time, and we'd never know it. The way he was here a few minutes ago. The way he may *still* be here."

"The door —" Wharton stood up.

"Yes, the door slammed. But he could have stayed on this side, couldn't he? And heard all we said."

"Then he must realize you know about him. He must realize how dangerous you are to him—"

I swallowed, and tried to look placid.

"He must know a lot of things. He hasn't hurt me yet."

"What do you think I should do?"

"I'm not sure. Try and stop him. Carry a gun. The next time he tries his tricks—shoot. Don't be afraid of appearing ridiculous, Mr. Wharton. Grapple with air if you have to, but try and hold on to your man. Meanwhile, I'll talk to Spencer, about this and try to develop some more positive action."

I left the office, without knowing whether Douglas Wharton had been convinced by my strange theory. But at least he was warned.

I was just about to leave the

building when Greta, Mr. Wharton's secretary, called to me.

"Oh, Mr. Oswald," she said. "Did you want to pick up your mail, while you're here?"

I nodded. Usually, I average about two dozen fan letters a week, addressed to the publishers. A lot of them are crank letters, mostly from women. Sometimes, I'd get proposals of marriage.

Greta was looking through her files, and her face was puzzled.

"That's funny. I could swear there was nine letters, but I can only find eight. That smelly one is missing—"

"Smelly one?" I grinned. "You mean a perfumed letter?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it perfume," she said. "It arrived last Friday, and we practically had to fumigate the office. It smelled like rotten eggs to me."

"Must be somebody who doesn't like Rufe Armlock," I said. Then I thought it over and exclaimed: "Did you say rotten eggs?"

"Yes. I put it in the bottom drawer of my desk, and forgot all about it. I would have forwarded it to you, but I thought it would be best to deliver it in person. I was afraid I'd get arrested if I

sent that awful thing through the mails." She chuckled.

Rotten eggs. Sulphur. The words were stirring a memory in my brain. That was the smell which had pervaded Dr. Borg Evander's house!

"And you say it's missing?"

"Yes. I'll keep looking for it; maybe it went to the mail room by mistake. Do you think it might be something important?"

"Could be," I said. "Could be *very* important. Keep searching for it, huh?"

"I will, Mr. Oswald."

I returned to my apartment, my head aching with the thoughts that were crowding my brain. The letter must have been written by Dr. Evander, and it must have concerned our discussion. It might afford me the proof that I was looking for, the proof that was destroyed by Dr. Evander's murder.

I sat on the sofa, feeling suddenly exhausted. I wanted to forget the whole business, forget about murder and madness and invisible killers and locked rooms. I wanted a little peace and quiet. I wanted to marry Eileen, and head off to some corny honeymoon spot like Niagara Falls, and settle down to the simple life, have a couple of kids, take a trip to

Europe now and then. Let somebody else chase around catching insane murderers. I wasn't Rufe Armlock; I was only Jeff Oswald, and I was tired of the whole affair.

Then all Hell broke loose.

First it was Eileen, and her hysterical voice on my telephone sent shivers from one end of my spine to the other. It was some time before I got her to give me a coherent story.

"It's awful, awful," she sobbed. "I can't stand it another minute, Jeff, not another minute . . ."

"But what's happening, Eileen?"

"It must be *him*. He's been following me, doing awful things. Tearing my clothes, touching me . . ." She went off into a wave of tearful gasps. "I just can't stand it, Jeff! You've got to help me!"

"I'll be right over!"

I got to Greenwich Village in less than twenty minutes, and found Eileen lying on her bed. She was more than just dissheveled. Her dress had been ripped and torn in a dozen places, and her hair was wildly disordered. She was still crying uncontrollably, and I had to hold her in my arms like a child before she could talk sensibly.

"He—he must have followed me home," she said, her voice muffled against my chest. "I suddenly felt this—touch on my leg. I jumped, and then something tore my dress. I started to scream and he stopped. I thought of calling the police, and then I realized what they would think. For a while, nothing happened, and then it started all over again. Out of nowhere, I'd feel this *hand* on me. And then he'd tear at my clothes again—"

"Easy, baby," I said, my heart pounding so hard I thought it would crack inside me.

"Then it stopped again. For almost an hour. I heard the door open and shut, and I thought he was gone. I tried telephoning you at home, but you weren't there. Then I called Aaron Snow, and he told me you were at Wharton. I called there, too. Then it started again—" She began to sob again quietly.

"He's a madman," I said tensely. "No question of that. He's pulling the same kind of stuff on Douglas Wharton. And he must realize that you know about him, too." I grasped her arms. "Listen, Eileen, you've got to get away from here . . ."

"But where could I go?"

How can you stop someone like that from finding you?"

"We'll figure something out. But you've got to get out of town before he—God knows *what* he'll do!"

"I—I've got an aunt who lives out in Sauter Beach. I could go there for a few weeks."

"Good idea. Meanwhile, I want to call Bill Spencer and tell him what's been happening. I think we've got to stop playing it so safe. I think we've got to get some official help—even if the whole damn world thinks we're crazy!"

I called Police Headquarters on Eileen's phone, but Captain Spencer was off-duty. I talked the desk sergeant into giving me his home telephone number, and dialed it.

From the moment I heard Spencer's voice, I knew that he wasn't alone.

"What is it, Captain?" I said. "Is anything wrong?"

"No," he said tensely. "Nothing's wrong. Everything's just fine. Just remember this, Jeff. If I don't report in tomorrow at the station, and they find the doors locked and bolted—he'll still be in the room. That's how they can trap him. Remember that!"

"What are you saying?"

"I think he's with me, right now. He hasn't done anything yet, but I *feel* his presence. But I'm ready for him. One noise, one movement, and I'll have him. . . ."

Even though Spencer's voice was calm, I couldn't help detecting the undercurrent of hysteria. The Captain wasn't a guy that scared easily, but there was something unearthly and horrible about an opponent you couldn't see. . . .

"Look," I said, "suppose we get some help? Suppose I call the police—"

"No! I'll take care of this myself. If he wants a fight, I'm—"

He stopped talking.

"Captain!" I said. "Bill!"

There was no answer.

"What is it?" Eileen said.

"Bill, are you okay?"

Eileen must have realized what was happening on the other end of the phone, because she began to sob again, fearfully.

I slammed the receiver down and said:

"I've got to get over there!"

"Jeff, don't leave me—"

"I've got to! That *thing* is in Bill's apartment. I've got to help him!"

I burst out of the house and into the street, and almost went frantic at my failure to hail a taxi. When I finally got

one, I sat in the back seat and knew that my attempt would come too late.

I was right, of course. The door of his apartment wasn't locked or bolted; it was flung open. But Bill Spencer was dead, a dagger wound between his wide shoulders.

The next afternoon, I saw Eileen off at LaGuardia Airport. I hated to see her go, but I was glad, too. The plane would take her three hundred miles from New York, and three hundred miles from the invisible lunatic that was tormenting her.

As far as I knew, now there were only two people left in the city that the killer was interested in. Douglas Wharton, and me.

Back in the city, I called Wharton's office and suggested a council of war. He agreed, and I went to his penthouse apartment that evening to talk things over.

"What I can't understand is this," I told the publisher, as we sat in his plushly-decorated living room. "This fiend has killed or tormented everybody but me. He hasn't laid a finger on me, or made any attempts against my life. Yet if anybody can do him harm, it's me."

"There was that guillotine

stuff you told me about," Wharton said. "How about that?"

"That's true. It must have been the killer that was hovering over my bed. But if he wanted to kill me with that meat-chopper, he could have done it. Yet he didn't."

"Obviously, he wants you alive. He must have his reasons."

"But why? The only people I know who *really* care if I'm alive or dead are (1) Me, (2) Eileen, and (3) Aaron Snow. Why should this nut care?"

Wharton chewed his lip thoughtfully.

"Aaron Snow," he repeated. "Wasn't Snow Kirk Evander's agent, at one time?"

"Yes, come to think of it. It was back a few years. They had a violent disagreement over money, and Evander asked for them to cancel the arrangement."

"That was quite a loss for Snow, wasn't it? At that time, Evander was a hot-selling author. Ten percent of his income was a lot of dough."

"Well, Aaron's doing okay now. Thanks mostly to Rufe Armlock, to tell the truth."

"That's right," Wharton said musingly. "And that in itself would be a good reason to want you alive—"

I stared at him.

"Now, look. You're not suggesting—"

"I'm not suggesting anything."

He got up and mixed us a drink. I watched him, trying to digest the new thought he had planted in my mind. Then I saw him snap his fingers, as if in recollection.

"Just thought of something. Greta gave me a letter for you. Said something about it smelling bad—"

"What?" I shot out of the chair.

Wharton looked surprised at my reaction. "What's wrong? Something important?"

"Maybe very important! Let me see it!"

He put down his drink and went out of the room. When he returned, he was holding a long, rumpled envelope. He put it to his nose and sniffed distastefully.

"I see what she meant," he said. "Damn thing smells like rotten eggs."

I grabbed it from his hands and ripped it open.

There were two scrawled sheets inside. The handwriting was almost indecipherable, but I finally made it out.

Dear Mr. Oswald:

I have been thinking over what you told me this morn-

ing, and have decided to reveal the entire truth. I must admit that the evil potentialities of my chemical had never occurred to me before this. But now that I realize them, I think it is better for you to know the facts.

As I told you, I have not seen my brother Kirk for many years, despite the fact that we resided in the same city. A few months ago, he suddenly decided to renew his family ties, and called upon me. I was delighted, of course, since I have always admired my talented younger brother.

However, I begin to suspect that his interest in me was only the result of his interest in my work. On several occasions, I have provided Kirk with scientific information which he has utilized in his novels, and some years ago, I informed him of my experiments with sulfaborgonium. It was this particular chemical which held his interest now.

Two weeks ago, Kirk came to me and told me a very sad story. It seemed that there was a great deal of public apathy towards the kind of detective fiction which he wrote, and that apathy was costing him his livelihood. He seemed truly broken-hearted about it, and even though I know

nothing of literary matters, I was deeply moved by his plight.

Then he told me that he had an unusual plan, a plan which he believed would restore the lost interest in the classic detective novel. It was actually a hoax, he informed me, an amusing prank which he would play on the public in order to increase interest in his work. As a scientist, of course, I have little interest in practical jokery, but Kirk seemed genuinely convinced that this "joke" would have very practical effect upon his career.

Reluctantly, I agreed to cooperate.

Kirk's plan was this. Quite recently, there had been two highly improbable murders, and he wished to create the semblance of a third—the murder of himself. He was quite delighted with the details of this hoax, for he intended to spread the sulfaborgonium over his head, giving his body the appearance of being decapitated. Then I was to supply him with a chemical means for him to appear truly dead, a method which is used for the performance of heart surgery.

He planned to be discovered this way, and for the world to believe that he had been mur-

dered by some impossible means, just as the victims in his novels have been killed. Then I was to claim his body for burial in the family vault, His "body" of course, would be perfectly alive and well.

We went through the plan as outlined. There were some difficult moments (the county coroner, as you probably know, wanted to perform an autopsy; fortunately, I was able to stop it in time) but in general, everything went smoothly. When I brought Kirk's "body" home, I promptly counteracted the heart-stoppage and he was completely restored to health and vitality. He swore me to secrecy, and told me that he planned to conceal himself in another part of the country until the proper time came to reveal the hoax.

I have not heard from Kirk since.

While I cannot believe the terrible idea that Kirk himself is behind the murders, I now feel that I must tell you the true circumstances of his disappearance.

If there is anything further I can do to help, please feel free to call upon me.

Sincerely,

Dr. Borg Evander

I read the letter with the

growing conviction that the answer to our problem was in our hands. I read the letter aloud to Douglas Wharton, whose face showed a confused mixture of bewilderment and surprise.

"But what does it mean?" he said. "Is it really Kirk that's playing these invisible tricks?"

"Of course! Only Kirk would be interested in the death and torture of these victims. He killed Winston Kale as an example. He didn't have any great grievance against Kale, but he didn't like him much, either—especially after Wharton Publishing refused his ultimatum. Then, to keep interest alive in these puzzle murders, he killed Zora Brewster—the one person who saw Kale alive before the locked-room murder. Then, he plotted his own "murder," when the police got on his trail. Now he's killing everyone who knows the story of the chemical — his own brother, Captain Spencer. In order to complete his insane plan, he has three more to go. You, because he associates his failures with your company. Eileen, because she knows of his existence. And me."

"But why didn't he kill you first? You're the one he hates most."

"That's exactly why. Because he hates me so much, he wants me to squirm. He wants me to know that there *are* such things as impossible murders. When he's knocked off everybody in some improbable manner—then he'll be ready to take care of me. But first, he has to demonstrate that I was wrong and he was right."

Wharton folded his arms and shivered.

"All right. So we know it's Kirk Evander. But that doesn't bring us any closer to a solution."

"Sure it does," I said. "Because now that we know it's Kirk, we can act accordingly. We can try and *think* the way Kirk Evander thinks."

"How will that help?"

"I don't know yet," I said miserably. "But we've got to find a way."

That night, I sat and stared at my Remington, and I never thought so hard in my life. It was like trying to work Rufe Armlock out of an escapade, only it was much worse. At least I had control of the characters in a Rufe Armlock novel; if I wanted them to do something, I *made* them do it. If only it was that easy!

My only consolation was that Eileen was presumably out of danger.

Then even that was destroyed. Around ten o'clock, the telephone rang and the long-distance operator told me that there was a call from Sauter Beach. Eileen didn't have to say very much before I realized that her invisible masher was still on the trail. My hands went cold on the phone.

"Maybe I'm wrong," she said, her voice trembling. "But yesterday, on the beach, I thought I saw something glinting in the sun . . . I looked up and could have sworn I saw a gun, just hanging in the air . . ."

"Good God," I said, shutting my eyes.

"Jeff, I don't know what to do. If he's followed me here . . ."

"Hang on, sweetie, just hang on. We're working this out. We've learned something we didn't know before. We're going to lick this."

"I don't know what to do! Should I come back to the city? Then you'll all be in danger—"

"Never mind about that. Come back as soon as you can. We've got a plan—"

"What kind of plan?"

"Never mind now. But we won't be so helpless any more."

I hung up, hoping she

wouldn't realize that I was bluffing.

But an hour later, slumped over the still typewriter, I *did* have a plan. I got so excited about it that I woke Douglas Wharton out of a sound sleep, not realizing that it was already four in the morning.

The item that appeared in every New York newspaper read something like this:

POSTHUMOUS AWARD TO KIRK EVANDER

BANQUET TO BE HELD IN DEAD
MYSTERY NOVELIST'S HONOR

July 2, New York. The Wharton Publishing Company announced today that a new Fellowship was to be added to the company's roster, to be named the Kirk Evander Fellowship. It will provide special awards and scholarships to promising authors of the "classic" detective novel. The official innovation of the Kirk Evander Fellowship will take place at a banquet in honor of the deceased novelist on July 8. Among the speakers will be . . .

Eileen's brow was ruffled when she studied the item.

"But what good will it do? Honoring that fiend?"

I chuckled. "Think about it, and you'll see. Can you think of anything that would appeal more to an egomaniac like Evander? How can he resist attending a banquet that's held in his own honor?"

"Then it's a trap?"

"Of course it is. And even if Evander realizes that it's a trap, I don't think he'll be able to resist showing up. He's too convinced of his invincible powers to believe that we could capture him. Besides, the Fellowship idea is genuine. Evander *was* a heck of a good writer, and Wharton does intend to create the award. The speakers will all be real, and the entire event will be authentic. But there'll be some added features . . ."

"What kind of features?"

"Some preparations. Just in case we have an uninvited guest that night. A special welcome for him."

Eileen's eyes shone.

"Can I come, Jeff?"

"No!"

"Please! After all, he's after me, too. It can't be any more dangerous—"

I scowled like Rufe Armlock and pulled her towards me.

"I said no, baby. And don't give me any argument, or I'll shoot you in your soft, white . . ."

She didn't argue with me.

It was impressive, no doubt about it. The banquet hall, a ninety-foot chamber in the Hotel Colbert, was splendidly decorated for the occasion, with luxurious drapery and burgundy-red carpets and glittering chandeliers. The speaker's table was raised on a dais, and two long guest tables flanked each other on both sides of the hall. The guests began milling around early in the evening, all of them dress-suited and distinguished-looking and seemingly pleased at the prospects of the occasion. The full list of speakers hadn't been announced, but Douglas Wharton, was to make the main presentation.

After several rounds of drinks, the time for the formal opening of events arrived.

The guests seated themselves, the doors were closed, and Douglas Wharton rapped a gavel.

"Gentlemen, before we satisfy our appetite, I thought it would be appropriate to have a few words concerning the purpose of this occasion. So it gives me great pleasure to present a young man whose rise to fame is best described in that worn but ac-

curate word, 'meteoric'. More important, this young man, perhaps more than any one present this evening, has good reason to know the qualities of the man we have gathered to honor. Gentlemen, Mr. Jeffrey Oswald."

There was a scattering of applause, and I tugged at the collar of my formal shirt and stepped forward to the speaker's rostrum.

I cleared my throat and said:

"Kirk Evander was and is a great man."

I paused to let that sink in.

"I say was, because at the time of his passing, he had left the world a heritage of some thirty-five mystery novels, the like of which may never be seen again. I say is, because Kirk Evander will remain alive as long as someone, somewhere, thrills to the magic words he put on paper."

There was some more applause.

"Kirk Evander was more than merely a great man. The world has had its share of those. But Kirk Evander was also an *unusual* man. A man of courage and of daring, a man willing to face an unpopular trend and do it battle. Kirk Evander made that battle, and the effort was nothing short of magnificent. It was

through him that we owe the present upcurve in the popularity of the classic detective story—and all of us want nothing more than to see that popularity maintained."

Again, they applauded.

"As we all know, Kirk Evander's last novel, *Death of a Publisher* was released to the reviewers yesterday. I can't think of any more fitting tribute than this review, which will be published in tonight's edition of *The New York Blade*."

I lifted a sheaf of papers from the table and waved it at the crowd. But I didn't read it. Instead, I placed it carefully in front of me, and went on talking. I talked for another five minutes, and never once took my eyes from the papers.

I was almost ready to sit down, when I saw them move.

"*He's here!*" I shouted.

Everyone went into action as planned. At the doorway, the two dress-suited men who were standing by reached up and pulled the light switches that plunged the hall into immediate darkness. Throughout the room, I heard the swift movements of the guests as they reached beneath the covered tables and removed the masks that had been

placed there in readiness. I found my own beneath the speaker's podium, and slipped it quickly over my face. Somewhere below, a lieutenant of police named Davis was preparing to pull the release on the gas bomb which would spread the thick, deadly stuff in violent clouds throughout the room.

"The door! The door!" I heard Wharton cry, and he leaped from the dais to help form the barrier of bodies that would block the invisible killer from making his escape. By this time, the heavy clouds of gas were filling the room, and I could still smell its sickening - sweet odor through the mask, or imagine that I did.

In the midst of the crowd there was a sudden wave of violent motion, as if Kirk Evander was struggling wildly to make his way to an exit. Hands reached out everywhere to try and pin him down, but he was too clever. At the doorway, Douglas Wharton suddenly cried out and grappled with the air, and then his assailant was gone.

"Don't try and hold him!" I shouted to them. "Let the gas stop him—"

There were frenzied sounds and movements in the dark-

ness, sudden shouts of surprise and fear, unexpected gasps and outbursts. But it was only for the moment; soon there was only stillness.

"The lights!" I said. "Turn on the lights."

They flickered on overhead.

"All right," Douglas Wharton said commandingly. "He's here someplace. Find him."

They backed off against the walls, and started to close in the ring slowly.

From the rear of the hall, Lt. Davis of the police department suddenly shouted:

"Here he is!"

I looked. Davis was lifting something from the floor, something that appeared to be a dead weight.

He carried his burden towards one of the banquet tables, pulling aside the cloth to place it down.

Then he threw the cloth over it, and we saw the outline of a small, plump body. The outline of the unconscious body of Kirk Evander.

Davis bent over it.

"We didn't mean for the gas to kill him," he frowned. "But I'm afraid his heart couldn't take it. Evander's dead."

Eileen and I did go to Niagara on our honeymoon. But as far as we were concerned, the Falls could have been invisible, too. **THE END**

ACCORDING TO YOU....

The first three letters in this month's "According To You..." are the winners of the three "Best Letters Of The Month" contest in that order. We hope that you agree with us on our selections and we also hope you too will be a winner in the future.

Dear Editor:

I am rising at the chance to write to you about the "new" *Fantastic*. One thing stands out very well, and that is that the magazine has moved in a new direction. But I don't think that you have made the best move you could have.

Fantastic is still aimed chiefly at the science fiction fan. According to Sam Moskowitz's survey the average age of the science fiction fan is around 22 years old. This means that there are a lot of teenage fans. I don't think that they are going to like the new format. Seeing how there are so many science fiction magazines on the market at present, you have to publish a good magazine to stay in circulation. One or two bad issues can knock out a magazine. If you don't publish what the people want you are not going to sell. And I don't think they are going to like the new *Fantastic*.

The present issue is going to sell well for three reasons: reputation, good looking interior due chiefly to the Finlay illos and the improved look on the cover due chiefly to Summers.

The "new" *Fantastic* does not have the science fiction or fantasy theme strong enough to appeal to the science fiction genre. "Feud Woman" was not s-f or fantasy. It was a story that might have appeared in *McCalls* if it had been better. I still don't know why you printed this story. Emily was no "fantastic" heroine. If you intend to print a general magazine, why don't you just say so? The teen-age fan mentioned above isn't going to like this at all. Matter of fact, I don't know anyone who will like this type of story with the exception of Mrs. Typical Housewife, maybe.

The story entitled "The Genie Takes a Wife" somehow reminded me of the now defunct *Dream World*, which probably went defunct because of lack of readership. Nevertheless, it was the best story to appear in the issue, mainly because of the length. The rest of the issue follows the same line, with the exception of "The Girl in the Mirror" which I enjoyed, probably because of the Finlay.

I like *Fantastic* and don't want to see it fold because of a lack of reader support. Once again I will say that it isn't going to succeed if you keep publishing this type of fiction. All of the magazines that

folded first during the slump a few years back were fantasy magazines.

Art work is one of the most important selling points of a magazine. Many people, no matter what you say, will look at a mag. that has a Finlay and buy the magazine because of it. Keep Finlay and work him to the bone if need be, but get rid of those other hacks you have. And most of all get rid of that darn Valigursky. I am so sick and tired of seeing his lousy covers on every issue of your magazine that the first thing I did was to look and see if you gave him credit for Summers' cover.

When I heard that *Fantastic* was going to change policy, you know what I expected it to change to? I expected you to start printing stories like Browne printed in and around '52. I'll give you two examples of this type of story. The two all-time classics "Dark Benediction" by Miller and my personal favorite, "Rest in Agony" by Jorgenson. These are two very good examples of what I expected to find in this issue. Sure they had a strong fantasy element, but they sold. Browne said at the time that the magazine had around 200,000 readers. I don't think you come anywhere near this mark. You could make *Fantastic* into a terrific magazine if you leave this present stuff alone and publish stories in the vein mentioned above.

Jack Jones

6115 6th Ave., No.

St. Petersburg, Florida

● *I owe the readers of Fantastic a sincere debt of gratitude. They've made the editing of this magazine a joy and a pleasure. I doubt whether any editor in the business is having as much fun as I am. This springs mainly from the enthusiastic interest that you have shown in my problems. When the "move in new directions" announcement was made, the flood of interest was indeed a pleasant surprise. And I have the happy feeling it was but an indication of things to come.*

We're going to have a lot of arguments as time goes on, and I think not the least of these will be who gets the prizes each month and who should have gotten them. In fact there have been plenty of arguments staffwise and the majority vote has prevailed. I didn't completely agree myself, but I was overruled.

This letter won first prize because it seemed to have a shade more in it than the others; it indicated Mr. Jones as a long-time reader who expresses his convictions well. Congratulations, Mr. Jones.

Dear Ed:

I see that with the March issue of *Fantastic* you have dropped the sub-title "science fiction" and have gone over completely to the

fantasy magazine business. This now makes *Fantastic* the only true fantasy magazine on the current market. As one might say "One in a field of one."

That Summers cover on the March issue was certainly eye catching but somehow it looked more like a Valigursky cover. In fact I would have bet money on it when I first saw it. Well, anyway, I certainly thought that the cover was in the "Fantastic" vein.

You finally started giving art credits to the artists. I like this idea in fact. I've been suggesting this to you for quite some time. I guess others have too.

Like you say "The Genie Takes A Wife" is a humorous type of story. I'd like to see more stories like that in the new *Fantastic*.

For instance, the story "Feud Woman" wasn't true fantasy in that it could easily have been true. "Feud Woman" was good enough to put into a book of short stories. It was much better than many of the stories that I've read in my English composition book from the college that I attend.

It would be nice to continue the cartoons. You almost crowded them out in this March issue of *Fantastic*.

Note that I don't think that your letter contest is such a good idea. That cash prize won't attract the true fan who enjoys reading fantasy, but the semi-professional letter hack who would write an eloquent letter just for the money. It would be much better to offer subscriptions to *Fantastic* and *Amazing* to the winners of the contest. In order to enter a contest like this, one would almost certainly be interested in *Fantastic's* policies. Perhaps for the top winner of the month the cover painting could be used for the prize. An original cover painting of a pro zine cover would be an object vastly treasured by any true fan.

Well, whatever you do, I hope that you will be able to continue *Fantastic* as a fantasy magazine. We fantasy fen are a patient lot in that we at times don't even have fantasy magazines on the stands to read.

Peter Francis Skeberdis
606 Crapo Street
Flint 3, Michigan

● *Mr. Skeberdis wins second prize because of his suggestions relative to the prize letter contest. What he says about subscriptions and a cover original being more appropriate prizes is certainly worth thinking about, although I don't necessarily go along with the "letter hack" bit. The letters we have received are far, far beyond that classification. And by the way, Mr. Skeberdis, I'm sure you'll use your prize money to buy fifteen \$'s worth of *Fantastic* and *Amazing* subscriptions. The form is on page 5.*

Dear Editor:

There's an old axiom—"Let sleeping dogs lie." What is the March issue, "Saturday Eve Fantastic Post" or "101 recipes using corn"?

What was wrong with the old magazine? Not a thing, that's what!

Exception: "The Genie Takes A Wife" was first class fantasy. Thanks for that, at least.

Prizes for letters yet—send one box top with 25 words or less and—— Phooey!

Jim Gilliland
611 N E
Stockton, Calif.

● *We felt Mr. Gilliland was entitled to third prize because he's "agin" our operation in general and not afraid to say so. Thanks for your letter, sir.*

Dear Editor:

You have a good magazine but here are a few ideas from one G.I. that may help it to become even more popular than it is among the Armed Forces. Cut down on the size of it. I can't stuff it in a hip pocket or a pocket on a fatigue jacket. Go a long way back and look up some stories by H. Rider Haggard or perhaps some of A. Merrit's stuff.

Sgt. C. C. Sampson
Company A
58th Engineers Battalion
Ft. Belvoir, Va.

● *Wonder if we couldn't talk the army into making your pockets bigger, Sergeant, on the grounds that they've got more money than we have? As to H. Rider Haggard and A. Merrit—you're speaking of the fiction I love. If we ever decide to go in for reprints, they'll be the first to appear.*

Dear Editor:

After reading the March issue of *Fantastic* I find that I am very disappointed. *Amazing* and *Fantastic* have been my first choice since I started reading science fiction 13 years ago.

Your new trend doesn't seem like good science fiction at all. The only story that I thought was even fair was "The Genie Takes A Wife." The others I didn't care for at all.

You asked for ideas on what we would like and not like. The thing that started me on science fiction was the Shaver Mystery. I believe if you were to publish one of Shaver's old stories in your magazine, it would go over big.

It's true that quite a few of us may have read the story if you do publish it, but I for one, like to read good stories over again a year or so later. Maybe some of your other fans do too. Also, there must be quite a few readers you have picked up in the last few years who never read a Shaver story. You would also get quite a few new readers with stories like this.

I would also be interested in more stories concerning invasion from space like "The Puppet Masters," and ones about telepathy like "Wild Talent" and "The Power," although these would be too long for your use.

Sumner E. Parker
53 Fellsway West
Medford, Mass.

● Here's some advance dope on how the special Shaver Mystery issue (July *Fantastic* as mentioned in this month's editorial) is shaping up. It will contain a book-length novel—"The Dream Makers," by Richard S. Shaver, which in my honest opinion, is the best thing Shaver ever wrote. There will be "A Defense of the Mystery"—non-fiction—also by Shaver, and an article "The Shaver Mystery—Dangerous Nonsense," as slashing an indictment as I have ever read. This has been authored by one A. J. Steichert, one of the Mystery's most implacable foes. Raymond A. Palmer, who was, in a sense, the "father" of the Shaver Mystery, has written for us a history and background of the Shaver Mystery from the first day, years ago, that it came to his attention. The Shaver Alphabet is also scheduled for the book. So, if you're a Shaver fan—and even if you're not—don't miss the July *Fantastic*. It's bound to become an authoritative handbook on the Shaver Mystery.

Dear Editor:

I had to write. I never thought *Fantastic* would put out such an issue. Although I haven't read it, I really like the art work. Don't let this Summers guy get away. Or, for that matter, Finlay.

The March cover struck me as being reminiscent of ancient s-f. Do more like it, but pad the inside with fixtures like Oliver, Sheckley. Whatever happened to Brackett? Bombard Sturgeon and Bradbury with letters. I'll personally guarantee 100% sale. It wouldn't hurt *Fantastic* to go all the way. It's got the makings.

Kenneth Smith
1604 San Jacinto
Austin 1, Texas

Dear Editor:

Just got my grasping hands on March *Fantastic*. Almost missed

it, being the last on the rack. So in the very near future you are going to get a subscription to same, once March the month of taxes and other heavy expenses is over.

You are asking for reader's comments on stories. They are all good. "Feud Woman" was extra good. True to life. Years ago I knew a family so much like them the story could have been written about them. "The Girl in the Mirror" was good too and not on the *Fantastic* side at all.

"The Genie Takes A Wife" was rather unusual and amusing. "Murphy's Bride" and "Let's Repeal Love" were good. "Lavender Talent" is hardly bedtime reading, but I liked it.

Now for my beefs: the print in "According To You" is too small and the type used in your answers is hard to read. Couldn't the same type be used as in the stories? Maybe the younger reader has no trouble but our old eyes aren't what they used to be.

I also get *Amazing* every month, another favorite magazine. Keep giving us the same good stories that we had in the March issue.

Mrs. G. Draper

Box 387

Port Dalhousie

Ontario, Canada

● *The reaction to "Feud Woman" has been of special interest to me. So far, it appears that those who liked the story outnumber, somewhat, those who felt it didn't belong in the book. I was aware that it came outside the realm of pure fantasy and I used it as a "cautious experiment" to discover whether you readers would demand the letter of the law so far as fantasy boundaries are concerned, or whether an occasional off-trail story of individual excellence may be included in editorial thinking. I haven't found out yet. Maybe "The Cheat" in this issue, will help clarify the point. Thanks for your nice letter, Mrs. Draper.*

Dear Editor:

Just finished reading *Fantastic* for March, and it was tops. I read every story in it, and with the exception of "Lavender Talent" I would have to draw lots to decide which was best.

I have been a science fiction fan for more years than I like to mention, in fact since the *Argosy* was called *The Golden Argosy* and I read all of the s-f books on the market. I believe this issue of *Fantastic* is the best one yet.

"The Genie Takes A Wife" and "The Search for Murphy's Bride" are my idea of good fiction and that is why I buy this kind of magazine.

I have been reading *The Saturday Evening Post* for over 50 years and notice a science fiction story every once in a while, so I was pleased to find a story like "Feud Woman" in *Fantastic*. In fact you may gain a new reader with it. I told my wife about it. She read it and liked it so much that she has decided to read some more of the stories and believe me this is a first, as she has been razzing me for years about my goofy magazines.

I read "The Lavender Talent," it was a well-written story, but I like my fiction in a lighter type. I only bought one copy of *Weird Tales* and one of *Fate*, but I have friends who buy this type all the time, so I guess you have to print all kinds of stories to satisfy all kinds of people. I would still buy *Fantastic* if it only had one story in it as good as "The Genie Takes A Wife" and "Feud Woman."

Carl R. Wilson
1112 Danforth Rd.
Akron 12, Ohio

• *Bob Bloch is doing us some yarns after the old weird tradition. Watch for them.*



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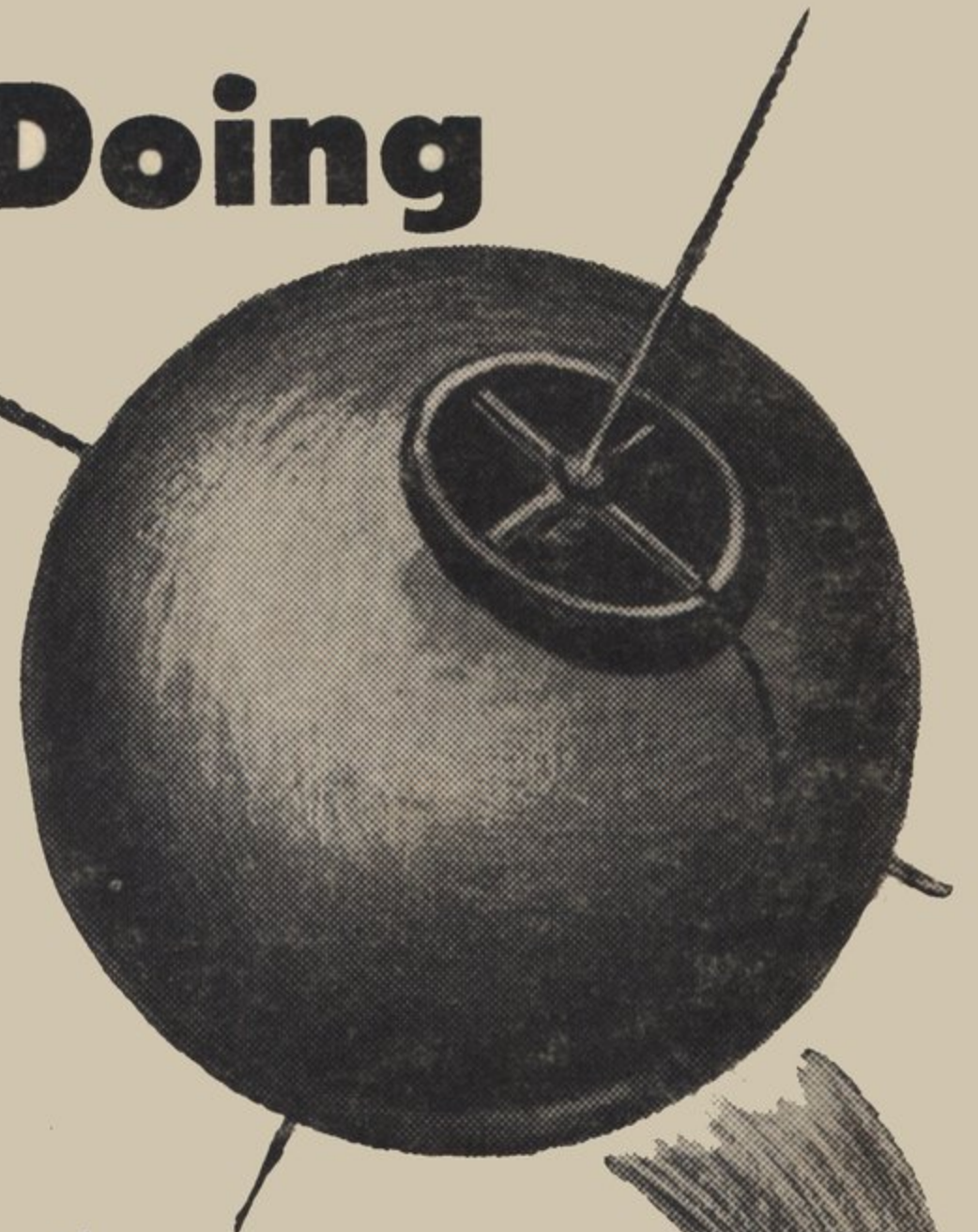
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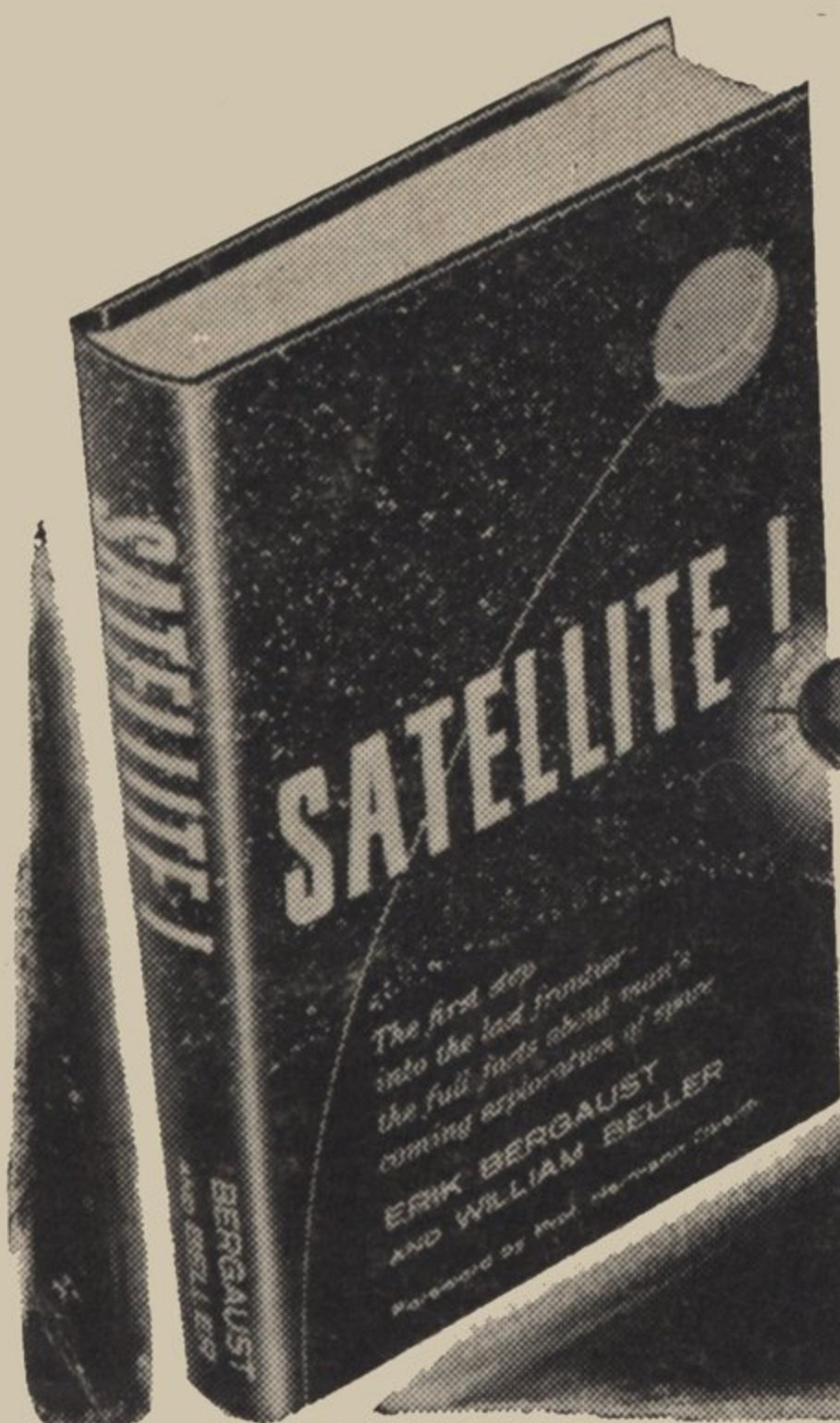
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