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MARCH

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by Jack Sharkey

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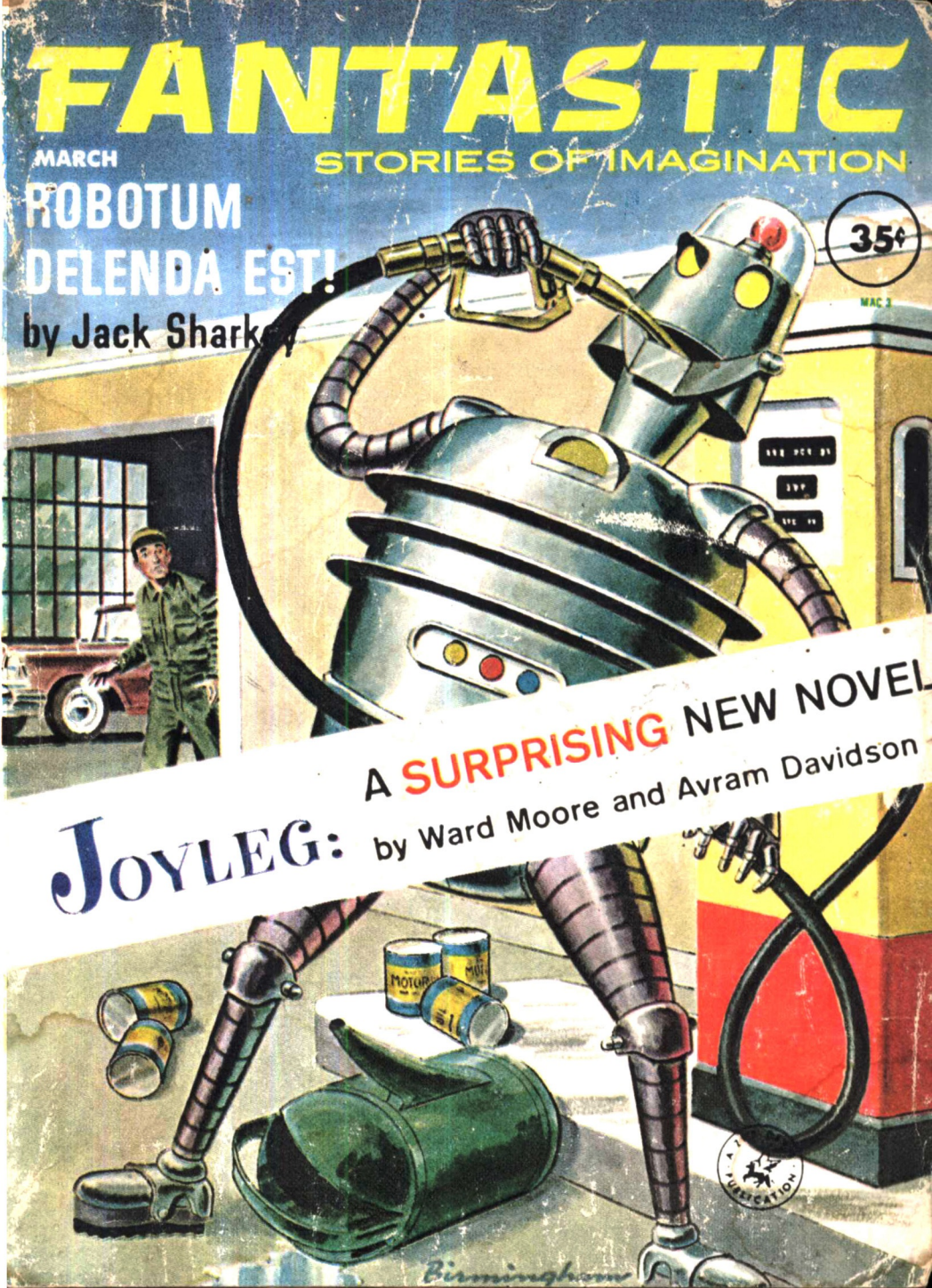

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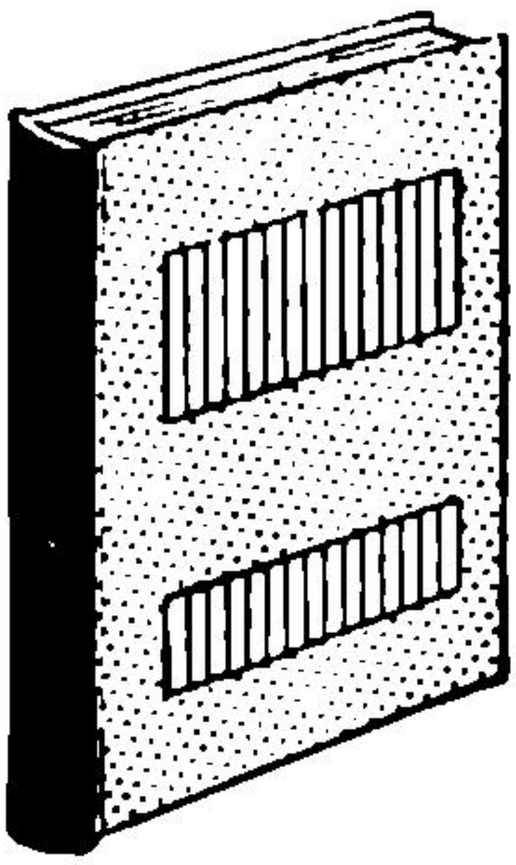

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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

MARCH 1962
Volume 11 Number 3

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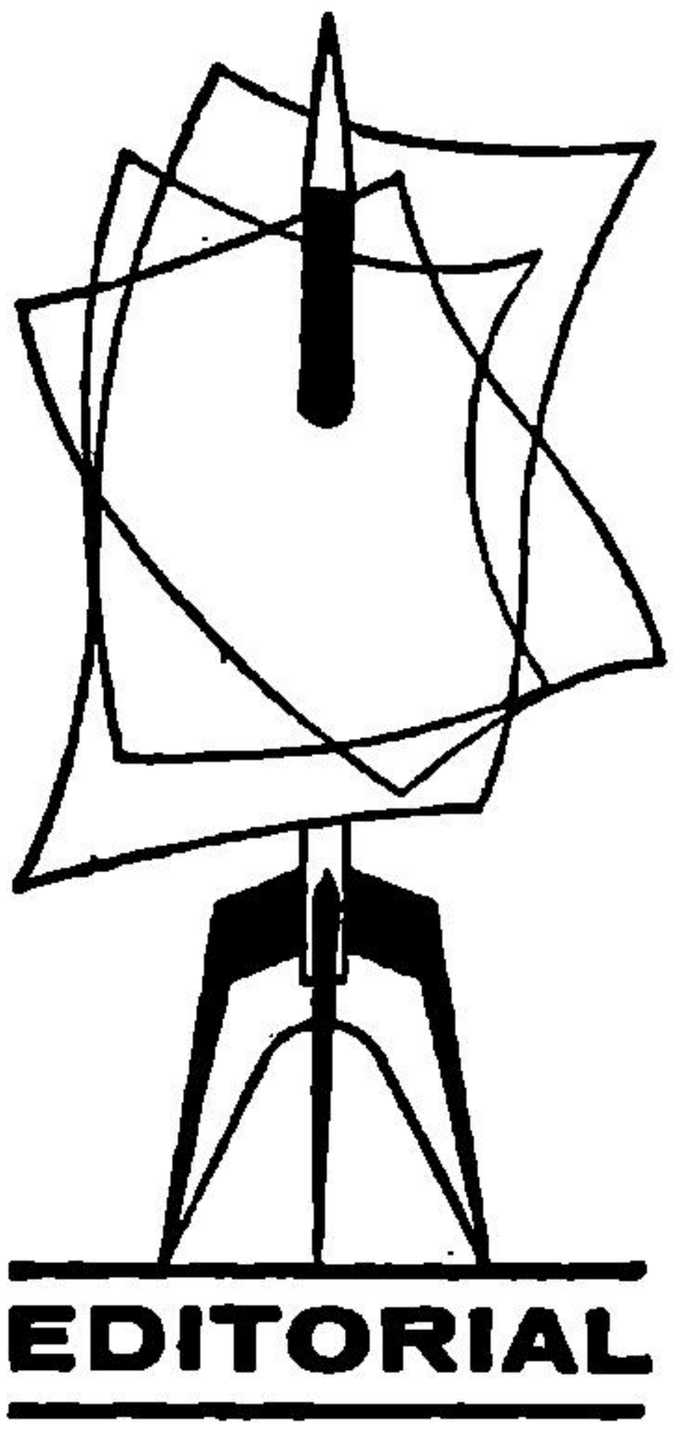

WE ARE considered something of an oddity in the offices of the magazine empire where we work. All the other Ziff-Davis magazines are sober-sided publications, filled with important and interesting news about cars and boats and cameras and brides and such-like, and their covers are forthright and simple. When color proofs of *their* covers are pinned up for inspection, no eyebrows are raised.

When *our* proofs are up for analysis, however, people come from all over the floor to see what kind of kookie cover those screwballs in FANTASTIC have come up with now. We thought our current cover was rather conservative, actually, but comments from our confreres for a time convinced us that robots were not yet ready to go about with blinking midriffs quaffing premium gasoline.

Revenge, however, is sweet. It pleases us mightily to be able to send out an inter-office memo to the effect that our robot is, indeed, even a little behind the times. For the American Rocket Society recently announced the construction of a working model of a moon robot that puts our cover-boy to shame.

Moon Robot would be five feet tall, weigh in at 110 pounds, see with stereoscopic television, communicate by radio, move at two miles an hour on six legs, and explore with one sensitive claw. Instead of gasoline, Moon Robot will be powered by sunlight falling on a square yard of solar cells. During that part of the lunar cycle in which the moon is in darkness, the robot would hibernate.

OK, fellow-editors at Ziff-Davis? Satisfied? Now will you guys quit picking on us and our covers? Before we sic a robot on you?

* * *

EXPERTS in psi effects—such as clairvoyance and procognition—can have a magnificently eerie time accounting for this event, which happened a few weeks ago: Walter Smits, 61, died suddenly at 11:05 a.m. in Jersey City, N.J. Never been sick before. In Tacoma, Wash., his son, Ross, 19, never sick in his life, suddenly complained of a "pressure" in his head, and died—at 11:05 a.m. But there is just one little problem for the over-eager psionicist. That is this: 11:05 a.m. in Tacoma is 2:05 p.m. in Jersey. Spoils things a bit, doesn't it?

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The indestructible robot turned Americans into the one thing they cannot bear to be—laughingstocks of the Solar System! But Yankee ingenuity will out—especially when there's a tax-free reward for it. Don't be a laughingstock; instead start stocking up on your laughing with this riotous farce.

ROBOTUM DELENDA EST!

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SUMMERS

WHEN the robot first appeared, there was much conjecture as to its origins. Luckily, the first person known to have seen the robot was a tourist, Miss Virginia Haswell, of Butte City, Idaho, while she was snapping pictures at Grand Canyon on a weekend trip to Arizona. Miss Haswell, unversed in the environmental lore of the West, took the robot to be just another of the scenic wonders in the place, and snapped its picture. Back in Butte City, where she was having her films developed later at the corner drugstore, the alert pharmacist, George Stacy, recognized the metal manthing for the discrepancy it was on the rocky serpentine of Bright Angel Trail, and—by the simple expedient of re-checking that morning's headlines—he was able to convince himself that it was the selfsame robot figuring so prominently in the news. He called the local F.B.I. office, told them of his find, and turned the picture over to them. Till that date, they'd been classing most of the reports filtering in from the southwest along with the usual yearly complement of flying-saucer stories; the picture changed all that. There *was* a

robot; it *was* on the loose in the southwest; and it was *not* of American origin. Conjecture about its origins was based upon its curious design (Miss Haswell had taken a good clear picture, with the sun behind her, and the robot in the shade of that natural rock archway a few tiers down the trail, so that its polished frame did not scintillate into the lens and fog the picture). Its form gave possible clues.

Everyone's first guess was Venus, for two reasons. First, it had a V-shape metal jaw (this theory was later quashed when someone remembered that Venus did not use the English Alphabet), and second, Earth and Venus had—only a month before the robot's appearance—just severed all interplanetary diplomatic relations (because of Ambassador Linsay's terrible *faux pas**), and no one had had any idea since the time of the severance what Venus might be up to. (At the severance, Venus had assured us of her eternal good will toward us, although she felt that it would be easier on both planets if we simply severed relations until Linsay apologized. Linsay was willing, of course, but our Interplanetary Policy forbade us, at the time, making this gesture of self-abasement, lest we lose face in the Asteroid Belt with the Whirlies (the vacuum-dwelling race, you will recall, from whose spinning city-states (one to each asteroid) we were lately procuring all our Uranium). So the apology was withheld, and that was the last we heard from Venus at the time.) But the jaw-shape and that interplanetary split were hardly grounds enough for accusing Venus. There were just as many clues to consider regarding the other planets in the Solar Alliance.

THE three rings about the robot's middle suggested Saturnian origin, though the erudite members of the State Department point out that Saturn's rings are concentric, and that these three were tiered.

The flashing red bulb under the robot's transparent carapace

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* *April 19, 1994: At the ill-fated tea party in Washington, D.C., Ambassador Linsay had been in charge of the entertainment. (His only comment after the debacle was, "I guess I just wasn't thinking!") The party was a modest celebration of the first successful year of interplanetary relations; Venus and Earth were friendly, and quite genuinely so, albeit Earth had constantly to remind itself that Venus was a few centuries ahead of it in Science and Technology. Linsay had selected the music to be played at the party, and quite overlooked the salient fact that Venusians are a tri-sexual race. The numbers he selected were* "Just We Two", "Yours Is My Heart Alone", "It Takes Two to Tango", *and others of their genre. Yet, the friendly Venusians might have overlooked these inadvertent insults; however, Linsay's final selection pushed even Venusian stamina beyond its limit of endurance. The song was:* "Let It Snow", *and the Venusians, being pneumonia-prone creatures (quite natural, since their home planet is totally tropical) could only accept this song as a pretty careless attitude toward their well-being. They left the party, severed all diplomatic ties, and went home.*

suggested Martian skullduggery, but no more so than it did a plot of nation-wide police-car manufacturers, who seemed as red-bulb prone as anyone.

The green chest-crescent could have purported a plot by a Lunar Race, though no such race had been discovered.

And the rather stubby torso suggested Jovian construction.

However, the basic fact under consideration was that whoever had set the robot down on Earth would certainly not have designed it as a giveaway, would they? Hence, any constructional clues could be pretty well disgarded as being red herrings. And there were no races at all on Mercury, Uranus, Neptune, or Pluto.

The precise point of the robot's origin, however, was the most minor of the problems its appearance had occasioned. (One seldom wastes much time investigating the pedigree and breed of an attacking mad dog; one grabs, instead, for the nearest club.) This, at least, was the point of view taken by the newspapers and telecasters. "Destroy Now; Ponder Later!" seemed to be the consensus.

Not that the robot was a menace, in the worst sense of the word. The simple fact that it *was* was the prod urging its destruction. Since its first discovery, on Bright Angel Trail, it had wandered rather haphazardly eastward across the continent, almost purposeless in its meanderings, and virtually ignoring any people it chanced upon. The annoying thing about it was that it was a freeloader.

When its wanderings took it into the vicinity of high-tension wires, it thought nothing of shinnying up the girders to the power lines, and extending three sets of cables from an elongated silver plate in its abdominal region, two to suck power from the cables, the third to ground itself to the girders, apparently so it wouldn't blow a tube or something when its batteries were recharged fully.

And a long string of gas-station attendants along its divergent itinerary complained that it thought nothing of helping it self to five-gallon swigs from the pumps, ignoring their shouts (usually from a distance) to "Cut it out!" or "Get away from there!"

IT HAD a playful side, too. When traveling at night, it seemed to enjoy pausing in the blackness of an unlighted crossroads, and imitating a signal light. It would glow red with its occipital bulb, until traffic was piling up for blocks, then let one amber eye glow brightly, before it switched to the green light on its chest. It would stay green

long enough to let maybe one car get through, then suddenly go red again, and jam traffic something awful. When it tired of the game, it would suddenly light up all bulbs at once, raise its tentacular metal arms overhead in an aspect of monstrous menace, and start a spine-chilling Frankenstein-plod toward the packed cars, emitting a loud, bass, echo-chamber sort of laugh, guaranteed to make even the bravest of the drivers leap from their cars and start a frantic cross-country race in all directions.

The game over, the robot would plod onward, in a generally eastern direction (it sometimes wandered north or south, but never once moved westerly), helping itself to electricity and fuel as it felt the urge.

Naturally, from the moment its existence had been found to be a proven fact, the National Guard in the various southwestern states had not been idle. Tanks, halftracks, and large bodies of terrified infantrymen had been mobilized to capture this metallic invader. All would converge upon the spot where the robot had been last reported, cannon leveled, rifles to shoulders, machine-guns aimed—and the robot would put its hands on its hips, look the group over, nod in satisfaction, and escape.

Its escape was simplicity itself. It laid its arms along its sides, splayed the fingers like rudimentary fins, and then, its hideous laughter ringing from hill and tree and road, it would rotate its chest-rings, flame would jet from the soles of its silvery shoes, and it would zoom off into the air, and hover.

There is nothing more maddening than a robot with a warped sense of humor. Its hover would hold it at a level of about a thousand feet over the ground, and it would just stand there, on its glowing jets, and wait.

SHOOTING at it was out of the question. To get that high, a cannon would have to be used. And to aim that high, the shell would have to be fired in a high-arcing trajectory from a great distance away. And if such a shell should *miss*. . . . It seemed that the robot always wandered where the population was thick. And taxpayers don't like expended cannon-shells dropping into their back yards.

Of course, the Air National Guard was not idle at this time, either. Special helicopters (the kind with machine-guns; an optional extra) rode their air-columns up to the lazing robot. And the robot rose a few feet higher, just enough to be above the whirling blades. If they fired, they'd fall like stones. So

they'd rise higher, and so would the robot, always keeping that near - and - yet - so far distance away. When the height began to necessitate the use of oxygen masks, the crews gave up and returned to their bases. And the robot went down to a thousand feet again, and waited.

After three or four days, the men on the ground usually were recalled to their bases, too. The robot could apparently outwait the men forever, and they all felt pretty silly, staying day and night in a circle about an unoccupied patch of ground, getting stiff necks from looking skyward.

Once they'd disbanded, the robot would descend, make for the nearest gas station for fuel (he would also, were no high-tension wires available, make use of the battery-recharging facilities to get his quota of high-voltage vitamins), then proceed on his way eastward.

About this time, a report was sent to Washington by Lieutenant Farley Briggs, of the Amarillo Air Force Base. He reported that when he and his two-man crew had gone up to try their hand (futilely, as usual) in pot-shotting the creature from a helicopter, the sun had been low in the west, and he was able to discern something about the robot that had as yet not been espied by anyone (an easy fact to account for; most people who saw the robot did not stay around long enough to study it). It seemed that Lieutenant Briggs had seen (and pointed out to his crewmen, who corroborated his story) a strange marking upon the backside of the robot.

That is, the marking itself was common enough, but its presence upon a robot was at that time unaccountable. Neatly engraved into the metal on the silvery backside was an artistically-etched caduceus (one of those serpent-twined winged staffs, symbol of the practice of medicine) overlaid with a large ℞.

"The damn thing," said the Lieutenant (off the record, of course), "is a walking prescription!"

But a prescription for what, nobody had any idea.

BY THE time the robot was strolling through the streets of Tulsa (after having a wonderful binge at the oil refinery), the entire planet was getting quite annoyed. Earth was in the uncomfortable position of a homeowner with an unwelcome guest, one who ignored hints that he should go away, one who even ignored open threats. And, as a man loves to call his home his own, and have some say-so in the matter of who shall dwell there with him, so Earth resented the

presence of this freeloading metal monster that was making itself comfortable without permission. True, it wasn't doing any real harm anywhere (those deprived of gas or electricity by its self-service attitude found to their delight that such losses were deductible from their income-tax statements, and not a few people secretly *wished* that the robot would come by, figuring they could claim at least five gallons for every one he actually drank, and who'd be the wiser?), but its insouciant try-and-stop-me travels were getting under everyone's skin. And what if it suddenly decided to turn *nasty?* How would we stop it? *Would* we stop it?

News sources had switched from their earlier scare-stories to that parelleling the latest trend in the attitude of the man-on-the-street: "Who does he think he is!?" (Save for the *New York Times*, which, after coming to the decision that a robot was sexless, rendered the growing public antagonism as "Who does *it* think *it* is!?," backing up this contention with a learned article by a sub-technician at UINVAC, entitled, "*Can* a robot think at *all?*," which won much critical acclaim at the time, but didn't alleviate the situation one bit.)

At the end of its second week of wandering, the robot turned playful again, this time with really devilish ingenuity. Entering a Post Office in St. Louis (just vacated by every customer and postal employee moments before), it sat down and wrote a letter to the Bureau of Internal Revenue, in which it stated, to the drop and ampere, just how much organic and electronic fuel it had siphoned, and where it had siphoned the fuel, blasting all hopes of those people thus depleted of making any false claims at all for losses. (Oddly enough, the Bureau was willing to take the robot's word against the mass of taxpayers who tried to claim it lied; the same learned man wrote "Can a robot lie?" for the *Times*, and won the lasting animosity of every gas-station attendant in the nation, and Standard Oil revoked the writer's credit card.)

AT THIS point, the public mood began to change. What had started as a scare, then waned into apathetic annoyance, now became the first hot ember of anger. Headlines carried nothing anymore but details of the robot's progress eastward, with pungent editorial comments on the laxness of the government in dealing with this insouciant wanderer, which, if let wander unimpeded, would reach the eastern seaboard in a matter of weeks. "What if it's a walking

bomb?" shock-theorized one journal. "What if it's headed for the capital?"

What with Washington, D.C. being the capital of not only the United States, but capital of the International Federation of Foreign Lands of Earth ("IFFLE"), such a possible menace shortly became the topic of conversation in all the state departments of the world. "The robot must be destroyed!" became the international slogan. Or, as the *New York Times* put it (basing the phrase on their faith in the growing level of public education, plus the enormous sales of the 1960 best-seller, "*Winnie Ille Pu*"), "*Robotum Delenda Est!*"

By the time the robot was sighted strolling up the highway toward Nashville, the entire country was ready for him. Or, at least, ready to assume it was ready for him. The government, rather than send troops or armaments out after the robot, decided that this might be its plan (to get protective forces away from the capital), so kept its military forces—plus a few divisions imported specially for the job—at Washington, ready to blast the thing if it got that far. As for the citizenry, they were urged to do anything they could to halt the inexorable itinerary of the monster (A noted scientist explained that only a deviation from a norm can be classed as a monster, and that therefore, since there is, nor can be, no norm for robots, the term "monster" was incorrect; he was summarily ignored, since, as one witness put it, "Well, it sure *looks* like a monster!").

Plans were laid in every bar of every town that seemed to be on its route, most of them of the I-know - what - *I'd* - do - if - that - thing - came - near - *me* variety, usually followed by cheers, back patting, and another round for the boys. There were, however, not a few enterprising people who attempted more than just talking about the robot. These were:

1) WILLARD Borden, a service station attendant in Cairo, Illinois (the robot's next appearance after St. Louis). Willard got the bright idea of putting sugar in his gasoline pumps when he saw the robot coming up the road toward the station, thus hoping to jam its pistons with crusted caramel. The robot, however, had already tanked up at a station a mile away, and so just strode past Willard's place, leaving him with five thousand gallons of the sweetest gasoline this side of heaven.

2) MISS Sally Lou Watkins, of Nashville. Hearing over the radio of the unfortunate

incident of Borden's in Cairo, she decided that a direct approach would be better. Garbing herself in a rented Arabian houri costume, she met the robot on the road to town, with a five-piece band of trembling flautists, and did the "Dance of Allurement" (Nelly Castor's Dance studio for Young Ladies of Refinement, Lesson Six) for the robot, bearing in her hands a golden bowl of high-octane gasoline spiked with ten pounds of sugar. At the climax of her dance, she offered him the bowl (from her exhausted sprawl at his feet; it was quite a dance), and he drank it in one extended gulp. Ten seconds later, the robot opened a metal plate in its chest, removed four dozen caramels, handed them over to Sally Lou, and took up his journey again.

3) HIRAM Hicks, of Middlesboro, Kentucky. His plan was quite simple. Using reverse psychology, he put a sign on the front of his house, "Robots Keep Out!," then proceeded to weaken the support-beams of the floor just inside the front door, and a large plastic wading-pool (filled) under that. "It'll fall," he explained to friends, "and the water'll wet its jets so's it can't fly up and out again, and we can attack it with sledgehammers!" However, his mother came home, was saved from a nasty fall when her umbrella handle caught on the front door knob, and proceeded to thrash him within an inch of his life. By the time the robot was marching down the street before the house, Kiram's father (an astute man) had removed the kid's sign.

4) MIRANDA Paisley, of Charleston, West Virginia. Working with heavy-duty aluminum foil and an anatomy chart, Miranda contrived to disguise herself as a female robot (though some observers stated she looked merely like a gift-wrapped spinster). Her plan was to divert the robot from its journeying long enough for the townspeople to come at it with nets, ropes and monkeywrenches. On her way to the crossroads where she hoped to encounter the robot, she was espied by Herbert Allan and his family, vacationing Chicagoans. They tried running her down with their car, and when this failed (despite her sixty-seven years, Miranda had a nifty sprint), they surrounded her, tied her up, and sent her (collect) to Washington via the postal service, where she was unwrapped and arrested for mail fraud.

5) HALSEY Bernado, of Alexandria, Virginia. Here, at this city almost within

sight of the capital (just beyond the river, in Maryland), Halsey and a group of his fellow veterans of WWI, took their stand in the road, armed with rifles, grenades, two ancient cannon, and three jugs of cider (to while away the wait). By the time the cider was gone, Halsey and his cackling cronies were firing at anything at all that moved toward them, so it wasn't until they'd exhausted all their ammunition that anyone could get near enough to tell them that the robot's route didn't even lie near their city.

THE robot, instead, had dipped south to Richmond, and at city hall, had collared a shrieking civil service worker and handed her a message. The message read, "I am ready to negotiate with the President of the Confederation."

Word of this got to Washington in five minutes.

"That does it!" said the president, slamming down the phone. "If there's one thing we don't want to go through again, it's the unspoken north-south division in the minds of the southern states. This robot's demand might well get them in the mood to start seceding again!"

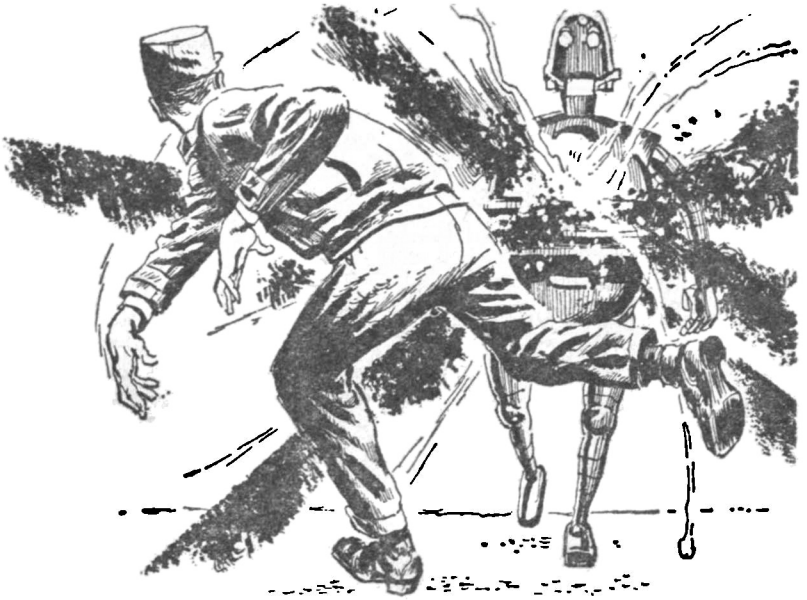
"I take it," said the Secretary of Defense, "that you are about to order Operation R to commence?"

"As of this instant!" said the president. "Get with it, quick!"

When the robot clanked out of city hall, it was to find itself on a deserted street (the civil service worker had leaped from a ground floor window, and was still running—of all directions—north). Not a person, not an animal, not even an automobile was to be seen. The robot stood in an oddly human stance of wariness, sizing up the situation. Then, with measured tread, it started walking up the street, its metal feet clicking softly on the pavement, its innards whirring gently.

At the corner, the robot jerked to a standstill, and its heavy metal head swiveled suddenly to one side. The flicker of a shadow on the sunlit street, and a peripheral glimpse of a vanishing khaki uniform, had caught its attention. Then its gaze was held by the object hurtling through the air at it, from the edge of the building behind which the soldier had hidden. It had only an instant to see the object before it crashed directly into its metal face and splashed and shattered down over its body. (The soldier had been chosen for the task on the basis of his being the All-Army Champion Baseball Pitcher of the Year.)

Needle-sharp spicules of glass and torn fragments of dull grey-



brown wax fell to the ground. The bivalvous container which had struck the robot was filled with two liquids, one in a glass container, one in a wax. Hydrofluoric acid in the wax, since it could eat through glass; Aqua Regia in the glass, since it could eat through anything else but glass.

Where the liquids struck the ground, asphalt smoked blackly, cement seethed and boiled, dust and dirt charred and burst into flame. Where the liquids struck the robot, they ran down the metal surface like trickles of perspiration and left not so much as a trace of their passage.

The robot brushed a few glittering bits of gravelly glass from its joints and other catch-all surfaces, then proceeded stolidly on its way out of town, unharmed, unmarked, and apparently unperturbed.

AT THE very next corner, fleeting figures dipped in and out of its sight, from both sides of the street, and it was suddenly and simultaneously the focal point of the shattering explosive power of hand grenades; fragmentation and concussion both. Even as it was lifting its feet in careful stride over the ruptured surface of the street, three teams of anti-tank men sprang out into the sunlight,

not half a block before it, and each twosome of men was loading and firing rockets from bazookas at the tall metal figure before them. The shells struck the robot in the face, chest, and abdomen. Each rocket—designed to force a white-hot center of superheated metal through the walls of an armored tank—split open, flew to bits, and the raging metal centers spattered off the robot like so much foam rubber. Again it proceeded forward, looking not even slightly groggy.

Before it had taken two steps, men appeared at windows above and around it, and from their weapons came a hail of steel-jacketed machine-gun bullets, and leaping clouds of flaming fuel. For a moment, there was nothing to be seen in the street save on orange-tongued caricature of the robot, its outlines etched in bright flame that trickled oily strings of whirling smoke skyward.

And then the robot, unharmed, stepped forward and left the flames behind it, not so much as a drop of fuel clinging to its gleaming carcass, and not even a dent in its metal shell nor so much as a hint of craze in its transparent carapace from the power of the bullets.

The military had, however, far from exhausted its means of attack. Abruptly, powerful trucks were roaring backward toward it where it stood in the center of an intersection, four trucks in all. The tailgates of the trucks had been removed, and the thick iron centers of enormous copper-wound electromagnets converged upon the robot, powered by the thundering engines of the trucks. Nothing with ordinary electric circuits would be able to withstand such a field of force; induced currents in the wiring would overload and melt the conducting metals. Even the slightest magnetic susceptibility in the metal of which the robot was constructed would lock its gears, pistons, cams and joints into unbreakable paralysis . . .

The robot stood quite still, walled in by the edge-to-edge truckbacks, caught in an invisible maelstrom of incredible force. Then, apparently tiring of its immobility, it ignited its jets, rose maybe ten feet higher than the tops of the trucks, glided forward through the air, and came down walking, once again headed stolidly out of town.

It hadn't reached the end of the block before a rain of shining metal was blanketing its form, as woven nets of inch-thick steel cable sought to entangle it. Lumbering tanks appeared, suddenly, towhooks looped with the ends of the "drawstring" cables that would en-sphere the robot in the nets. Tanks moved in all direc-

tions from the robot until the cables quivered, taut to the breaking point, in the air between captive and towhook. Where the robot had just been seen was now a conglomeration of metal mesh, interlaced, interlooped, overlapped, and locked. For ten seconds, it seemed as though the migrant metal man was caught.

THEN, with a wrench that yanked two of the tanks skidding backward on rigid treads, the victim rose with his coiled shackles into the air, spun about in a cable-shredding whirl combined with an eye-dazzling glow of raw power—and then steel nets, torn ragged and semi-molten, were hissing and clattering back onto the street, leaving the hovering robot unmarked and still unimpeded.

The robot once again soared forward, until it was beyond the foremost tank, then it landed and started on its way again.

A group of men, stripped to khaki shorts and canvas track shoes for swift unimpeded movement, suddenly raced at the robot from all directions, carrying strange devices that seemed to be combination bear-traps and radio-controlled rockets. The men raced heroically near to the robot, slapping the devices at it in passing, until the metal man was all at once clamped—by arm and leg—by steel teeth that bore intensely powerful rockets on their backs. As the last man was racing away from the momentarily motionless robot, a skilled technician in a room overlooking the street was yanking home the levers that would ignite the rockets.

The next instant, the robot was rising like a metal blur in the grip of these fire-spouting cylinders, reaching the height of a mile in fifteen seconds, at which moment the technician spun a bank of dials, and every rocket jetted a side-blast that turned them and their burden completely end-over-end and dived at granite-melting speed toward the earth.

Robot and rockets struck upside down, with a crash that shattered windows and rocked lamp posts and the facades of smaller buildings. A cloud of dust and debris rose fifty feet into the air over the center of the impact, and began to powder and clatter and clink down to the ground again. And even before the last hurtling pebble had reached the earth, more trucks were backing to the jagged crater and vomiting thick grey waves of wet cement in on top of the robot, still held by the downthrust of the surviving rockets. Flame, smoke, gouts of cement splashed, danced and bubbled for a minute. Then silence.

ONE by one, footsoldiers appeared, and stepped with caution toward the wet mound that marked the robot's fall. They stood and waited, futile bayonets in readiness, useless rifles loaded and cocked to make any necessary onslaught against the invulnerable creature. But the cement surface remained unmoving, unbroken.

"Do you think we *did* it, sir?" asked a man of his superior.

"If that thing doesn't come crawling out of there by the time the cement sets, we have," replied the man.

They stood there for five minutes, anxiously watching the cement for signs of mechanical life below it, and then a despairing shout from up the block turned them all to see the source of the cry. Thirty yards from the crash, the street was heaving, buckling, and erupting clods of dirt, rock, and cement. Then, from the center of the haphazard cone of the sundered street, the robot climbed out, not even a smear of cement to attest to its former ordeal, nor so much as a wobble in its motions after its supragravitational plunge to and into the earth.

The general in charge of Operation R was observed to turn quite pale at the sight. But, with fatalistic determination, he gave the order for the last step in the plan of attack.

"If this doesn't work," he said to his aide, after voicing the order, "we're in one hell of a fix."

"Better get to shelter, sir," said the man, taking the general's arm. "This last one is damned dangerous."

As the general, his aide, and the footsoldiers rushed for shelter, the final stage of attack was put into operation. Another twinkling blanket of steel nets descended upon the robot as it got clear of the exit it had made in the street, and a swift-moving arm of steel came clanking forward on an enormous crane, with a foot-thick metal sphere open and ready to grip. The sphere (pre-measured from reports of the robot on its itinerary) snapped closed about the robot (already entangled in steel nets) like the two halves of a clamshell, and then the crane was swinging the many-tonned sphere into a waiting cylinder on the back of a powerful field-rocket truck.

The cylinder closed, sealed, and was then elevated to a vertical position, its pointed nose and broad fins shining in the sunlight. And even as it reached the perpendicular to the wheelbase of the truck, its rockets were igniting, and sending it needling upward with a speed so rapid that one could barely tilt the head back fast enough to witness its upward progress be-

fore it had dwindled to a pin-point, then vanished, in the azure blue of the almost cloudless sky.

The general looked at his watch, then shut his eyes and whispered, "Five seconds . . ."

Five seconds passed. And then—had there been anyone watching (all concerned had been cautioned to remain under cover until the all-clear)—there could be seen a sphere of blinding energy swelling and blazing to a brightness exceeding that of the sun itself. Up beyond the atmosphere, the rocket had exploded, exploded with the irresistible force of the hydrogen bomb in its nose, its atomic components vanishing in a chaos of freed subatomic particles.

A full minute the sphere of energy burned up above the sky, its radiations turning the atmospheric fringe below it into a glorious and deadly purple-red, like an iris of a single glowing eye. Then there was nothing but calm blue sky again.

The all-clear was given. The men came out slowly into the sunlight, straining their eyes skyward. Nothing but smooth blue sky met their eyes for many minutes. Then a bright red spark appeared, grew until it was two distinct points of fire, and then they could all see the robot, its body intact, not a mark of the atomic devastation upon it, descending placidly back to the streets of Richmond.

It landed, glanced about at the staring soldiers, then proceeded northeast, out of town, and toward the distant capital of Washington. This time, no one tried to stop it.

THE president, his forehead beaded with cold sweat, sat clutching the microphone before him at the gleaming switchboard. Beside him, a man threw a switch, looked at his watch, then said, "You can go ahead, sir."

"President of the United States calling Venus!" said our chief executive. "Come in, Venus." He repeated it a few times, then sat out the approximate two-minute lag for his message to reach our nearest neighboring planet, and the two minutes required for them to reply. Interplanetary protocol (save for the opening signal) dispensed with the formalities (which could get maddening during the lags), and generally got right to the point. Venus replied almost immediately, and briefly.

"Ambassador Linsay is ready to apologize, we assume?" said a voice, distorted by etheric passage.

"Of course not!" fumed the president. "If you people weren't so pig-headed—" He cut himself short, there, not wishing to waste

time in an exchange of unpleasantries. "What I've called about," he went on, his voice grim, "is a robot which has appeared on our planet, origin unknown. Nothing we possess can stop it; it is not yet to be considered a menace, but the fact that it could not be halted should it so prove is rather irksome. We had hoped that you, as a friend to Earth despite our diplomatic differences, could hint at some way in which it might be overcome."

He waited, and after four minutes, the reply came.

"We can, but custom prevents us from doing so. If, however, Ambassador Linsay apologizes, our technical knowledge of robot-destruction is at your disposal. If not—well, you must discover the means yourself."

"We refuse to beg!" blurted the president. "If you were truly our friend, you would give us the necessary information!"

And, four minutes later: "If we were *not* truly your friend, we would never have *sent* the robot!" said Venus.

"*What?!*" the president choked out. "*You* sent it? *Why?* What sort of joke *is* this?"

Four minutes later: Silence.

Half an hour later, the president threw down the microphone in disgust. "How dare they!" he yelled. "Of all the rotten tricks!" He was, he realized, angrier at their suddenly refusing to reply than at the information that they were behind the robot. "Very well, then!" he said, slamming a fist into his opposing palm. "We shall have the last laugh. We'll *ignore* the robot!"

THE door burst open, and a harried cabinet member popped into the room. "Mr. President—!" he gasped, "the robot is at the Capitol!"

"Forget it," said the president. "It is a trick of Venus, to force us into an apology from Ambassador Linsay. It will do us no harm. If we ignore it, it may give up and go away. We can always underwrite the expenses incurred by those from whom it stole fuel or energy."

"But sir—" said the man, "I don't think we ought to let it continue in its present course of action . . ."

The president, suddenly wary, looked the man in the eye. "What is it *doing*, over at the Capitol?"

The man was terrified. "It's dismantling the building!"

The president staggered back to the interplanetary radio. "Get Venus again," he croaked to the operator.

The man, as shaken as the other two with the latest robot-report, fumbled with his equipment, then sat back and tried to appear calm. "Four minutes," he whispered, unnecessarily.

Four minutes later, surpris-

ingly, Venus was on the speaker again. "We have something to say," crackled the distant voice, "and after we have said it, we will cut all communications with Earth until a formal apology has been made, on our planet, by Ambassador Linsay. Here, then, is the explanation of the robot. Venusian temperament does not permit of offering help and information to estranged associates, such as your planet. But, on the other hand, it does not permit allowing a friend, estranged or not, to fall victim to an impending peril. It was hard for us, after the rift of our two planets, to find a way to compromise these two principles. It was necessary, as a friend, to give you a warning, yet impossible, as an insulted party, to tell you the necessary information. The robot, therefore, is our compromise. Think of it as you would think of smallpox vaccine, or perhaps a polio shot. With that, we must leave you. Farewell."

Transmission was suddenly severed. Not even the crackle of the interplanetary ether came over the speaker.

"Vaecine? Compromise?" said the president. "I don't get it."

"Perhaps," said the cabinet member, "Venus is using the robot to flaunt her technological superiority in our faces, since she has made that which we cannot destroy. I believe what she means is that if we can wipe out this robot, then we will be on a technological plane equivalent to her own, and therefore have no need to apologize."

"Hmmm," said the president. "I don't know about that. It seems to me there's more behind that last statement from Venus than just the desire of the injured party to prove its point. There's something—"

"Please, Mr. President," said the man, clutching his arm. "The Capitol, remember?"

"Good heavens, yes!" said the president, shaking himself out of his bemusement. "Come on, let's get on over there!"

WHEN they arrived, the robot, surrounded by a milling mob of armed security guards, was placidly prying out the third slab of stone making up the lowest step of the building. There was a silvery haze, roughly hemispherical in structure, surrounding the robot and his work to a distance of about ten yards, outside the perimeter of which the security guards circumnavigated in wild frustration.

"Some kind of force-field!" one of them said to the president as he approached. "We can't stop him. We can't even get near the slabs he's already removed!"

"Well," said the president, thoughtfully, "if it's any consolation at all, his rate of progress

should preclude his dismantling of the building itself for about twenty-four hours. Each slab takes him two or three minutes to move from its place, I see."

"Yes, sir," said the agitated cabinet member. "But by the time he reaches the third tier, we'll be an interplanetary laughingstock!"

"I think not!" said the president. "Here and now, I am initiating a crash program, the object of which will be the destruction of this monster! Reward for successfully encompassing its destruction will be the sum of one million dollars—" The president paused, shut his eyes, took a deep breath, and added, wrenching the words from his chest as though their utterance pained him, "—*tax free*!"

AS onlookers cheered his statement, and rushed off to think up schemes of robot-destruction, the cabinet member drew him to one side. "Sir, *you* don't have a million dollars," he said uneasily. "How are you going to manage to pay off?"

The president flicked a thumb at the robot, busily dismantling stairs. "The Capitol's insured," he said. "I'll collect that much from the insurance company."

"Is there a clause in the policy about robot-damage?"

The president shrugged. "There's a damage-from-enemy-action clause. That's good enough."

The cabinet member was no longer listening, however. His eyes wide and apprehensive, he was tugging franticly at the president's sleeve, and pointing at the robot, too shaken to formulate his worries into words.

The president turned, and matched the other man's fright, pallor for pallor. "What's he doing . . ." he said in a hushed voice. The question was purely rhetorical. It was obvious what the robot was doing. It was making another robot.

From somewhere inside its hollow torso it had removed a delicate-looking metal scale, which it now set down on the earth. Hefting the heavy stone slabs it had removed from the stairs, it balanced them atop one arm of the scale, then stood upon the other. It had to chip a bit off the corner of one slab with its fist, then the scales balanced.

Immediately, the robot uncoiled a fine wire from inside its chest, a wire as fine as spider silk dusted with platinum, and whipped and whirled it about the slabs. The wires began to glow as they touched the stone, and suddenly, with creaks of protest, stone collapsed in upon itself, smoothed, shifted, hollowed, fused, glittered, flexed— And became another robot, identical to the first.

IMPOSSIBLE," said the president. "The basic material was all wrong. You can't make metal from stone . . ."

"Are you sure, sir?" said the cabinet member. "Once his weight matched that of the slabs, he could be sure that the atomic elements involved had the same proton-electron total, for all practical purposes, right?"

"How the hell should *I* know?" groused the president. "But I know someone who does." In less than half an hour, he had called together the chief scientists of the Capitol, and asked them about it. They hemmed and hawed, and they sputtered theory and probability, and they tried denying with their current information on atoms the very facts that their eyes had told them out before the building: that there were now two robots, each engaged in building another, to bring the total to four. And four would become eight, eight sixteen, sixteen thirty-two — And on up the scale of geometric progression until the world was up to its hatbands in robots.

"It is possible," one scientist finally admitted. "If you consider Nickel, for an instance. Atomic number is twenty-eight, which means it has twenty-eight proton-electron combinations. Now Calcium, whose oxides are of the mineral—or if you will, stone—family, has an atomic number of twenty. Add oxygen, when you form the oxide, with its atomic number of eight, and— Well, you have the same *total* of atomic building blocks . . .

"And the weight," he went on wearily, "falls into the same realm of possibility. Oxygen's atomic weight is sixteen, Calcium's is just over forty, Nickel's is about fifty-eight—"

"That doesn't add up exactly," said the President.

The scientist shrugged. "So it's an isotope of Nickel, then. It's still a metal, made from stone."

"What you're telling me," the president said grimly, "is that so long as the working material weighs just what the robot does, it can re-form the atoms into any elements it needs?"

"That's what we're telling you," nodded the scientist. "And—" He stopped speaking, suddenly, and looked crafty. "That offer—the million— Does it apply to government employees and/or their families?"

The president narrowed his eyes. "I take it you mean does it apply to *you*, your*self*, Doctor Nitzen?"

The man blushed, but held his ground. "Yes."

"Certainly," said the president, a little irked. "An offer is an offer. But what've you figured out about the robot? Do you think you know how to destroy it?"

"Certainly," said the man. "Now that I know how it remains apparently indestructible."

"—apparently?" said the president. "You mean it's not?"

"The robot," said Doctor Nitzen, "has undoubtedly been destroyed by each method used against it. Its secret of apparent longevity is that it keeps reforming itself from the materials used against it. An easy task, one based on Newton's action-reaction law. It's as though the robot were a stack of billiard balls, and we were trying to knock it off by throwing other billiard balls at it. The instant the ball hits, part of the robot flies away, with the energy absorbed from the one we threw. But our ball, having given up its energy, remains as the part of the robot it displaced."

"Good heavens," said the president, his already pale face growing paler. "Whatever we use against it is going to simply become part of it, transmuted on contact into the material it knocked away. I can see no possible weapon that will halt it."

Doctor Nitzen smiled. "What about organic material?"

The president stared. "What about it?"

ORGANIC materials are based on a more complex unit than raw elements. Elements are built of molecules; organic materials are built of cells. Cells which are able to resist transmutation, due to their propensity for sudden physical changes within themselves. At the instant of extreme stress in organic material, the material undergoes a change of its own. The robot cannot transmute elements if the elements are parts of cells that are busy undergoing physical changes of their own. Science is helpless when it comes to reversing organic change."

"It is?"

Doctor Nitzen nodded, sadly. "Here we are, with the solar system within our grasp, and the stars to come soon, and there isn't a scientist in creation who can, for instance, un-fry an egg. Nothing can turn the hard white albumen back into soft slithery viscosity."

"And you're suggesting we attack the robot with—?"

"Fresh fruit, eggs, clubs of wood, peach-pits . . . Like that.

"But the *force*," said the president, still unconvinced. "Perhaps it *cannot* transmute a hurled tomato, but can a tomato be hurled *hard* enough to damage a metal man?"

"We will, of course, have to build special weapons, with special thin-shelled projectiles to be loaded with the necessary materials," said Doctor Nitzen. "But the building of such weapons should take not more than a week or so."

The president strode to the window, and looked out at the front steps of the Capitol, seven tiers gone, with sixty-four robots busily constructing counterparts.

"I want those weapons within six hours!" he said. "The nation must be alerted. All industry must fall to the task of building these anti-robot weapons. We'll have to skip over patenting the device; there's not time for such formalities. Quickly, get on the air, break into all programming at once, and tell the world what is required of it, Doctor. And—"

"And?" said Nitzen, mentally spending his million already.

"Say a prayer these self-propagating robots slow down for a coffee-break."

THE nation leaped to the task. Everywhere across the country, high-powered rockets were disemboweled of data-collecting equipment, explosive warheads, and other relics of the early space age, these components being replaced with butter, celery, mulch, apple cores, and anything else that hadn't gone down the country's Disposalls.

Meantime, though, the robots had not been idle. When their numbers surpassed five hundred, and most of the steps of the Capitol were transmuted beyond recall, they all suddenly stopped building one another, and—jets hissing and sparkling with power—went roaring off in five hundred and twelve different directions.

Within two hours, every country in the world had its complement of robots, vanishing capital buildings, and hastily-organized anti-robot weapon centers. The capital buildings varied considerably in degree of stone-density in their construction (wooden ones were left alone, of course), but the robots tore them up anyhow, although any stone from any other building would have done as well.

"They're deliberately trying to get on our nerves!" said the president, when he heard the news. "It's damned embarrassing when nations can't stop the dismantling of their own capital buildings! Hurry, we must not delay any longer!"

At just about the time the president's six-hour limit was arrived at, and every country in the world bristled with racks of high-powered missiles, loaded with the debris and detritus and garbage of the world, the robots all ceased building, flopped onto their backs, and crumbled away into harmless bits of metal and glass, some of them even halfway returning to the form of element from which they'd been transmuted. There was suddenly a robotless world left with a lot of primed rockets loaded with junk.

And then —

"Men of Earth!" boomed an eerily alien voice over all the loudspeakers on the planet. "Surrender! Surrender or be destroyed!"

The outer fringes of atmosphere of Earth were suddenly flooded with elongated metal teardrops, swinging in silent orbital formation about our planet. No one had seen them approaching. They could only have materialized from hyperspace. And hyperspace-ships were too-expensive to be used in simple interplanetary travel . . .

"WE ARE," the strange voice went on, "from the star-system you know as Alpha Centauri. We have watched you many long ages, Men of Earth. We know that you possess no means that can overcome us. So surrender now, or be destroyed. Waste no time with your puny atomic weapons. Our ships are invulnerable."

The world sat in stunned silence for a minute, unable to grasp this sudden state of affairs. And then the president, his eyes glowing, snapped his fingers.

"The caduceus!" he said to Doctor Nitzen. "And that R_1! I get it, now! Doctor, our whole planet has been vaccinated!"

"Easy, now," said the Doctor, pressing the president back into his chair. "I'll get out a nice sedative, and you just close those tired big blue eyes, and—"

"Idiot!" said the president. "Venus *is* our friend, after all! That's what she meant by smallpox and polio shots. To immunize a person against a certain germ, you innoculate the person with a harmless organism that will nevertheless get the body to create antibodies to wipe it out. Then the body is armed and ready when the real germ shows up."

"You mean that the robot—?" gasped Nitzen.

"—is the vaccine! It was harmless. But it got us so damned mad at it that we armed. We're armed right this minute. And those ships up there—" With a laugh of undignified glee, the president leaped to the microphone of the powerful broadcast beam with which he could, when the occasion demanded, speak to all the peoples of Earth.

"Pay no attention to the boasting of these stellar windbags!" he cried. "We are armed, are we not? Everybody, then, aim your rockets and blow these petty annoyances from the skies! When I give the signal, *fire!*"

"The Alpha Centaurians—!" squealed Nitzen, grabbing his arm, trying to take the microphone from him.

The president shook free, scornfully. "They will not try and stop us. They're too proud of their invulnerability. They want

to demonstrate our helplessness to us. So they'll sit up there and wait for our hydrogen warheads."

"Little dreaming," realized Nitzen, "that we're throwing away about a million tons of garbage!"

The president lifted the microphone. "*Fire!*" he shouted.

And from every occupied bit of land, and from rocket-equipped submarines and cruising ships on the high seas, swift metal containers hissed up through the air on tails of fire, at a ratio of five-to-one against the enemy spaceships.

THREE out of five rockets found their marks. And within a quarter-hour of the president's command, not even a spark remained in the sky to attest to the erstwhile presence of the Alpha Centaurians. Ship-walls, frantically trying to reform themselves of clotted coffee-grounds, spoiled meat, or worse, were rent even wider apart as the interior pressures of the ships, and exploding hyperspace generators, sundered them, rivet by rivet, plate by plate. From the ground, it was a glorious sight, better than a fireworks exposition.

And then there was nothing but lumpy sky and cheering throngs in the streets and the soft, muted hiss of falling metal and melon, glass and grass, rubber and blubber, ships and garbage alike burning up smokily in the upper atmosphere, until not a trace of the quickest interstellar war in history was left. Well . . . Hardly a trace.

AND so," the Venusian Ambassador was saying, "by the time we detected the approach of the fleet through hyperspace—we'll gladly rent you the use of such detectors in exchange for the borrowing of your marvelous mechanical calculators—as I was saying, by the time the fleet was detected, we'd already severed diplomatic relations with you. But we had to do something. The robot-vaccine tactic seemed the simplest way."

"Oh it was," agreed the president. "And we appreciated it greatly. However, what we really need from you at the moment is some means of dealing with an enemy already in our midst, an enemy that multiplies infinitely faster than your robots did."

The Venusian Ambassador stared at him, politely blank. "What did you wish us to tell you?"

The president, hands clasped behind his back, stared from the window of the Embassy at the world outside, the world that had been dusted lightly but widely with the warm, semi-destroyed fragments of banana peels,

noldy bread, wet teabags, and ther bits of semi-decayed junk.

"You can tell us how to get rid f all those damned *flies!*"

"Hmm," said the Venusian. There is a way, of course. Our lanet—a bit overpopulated since eratrics came into its own—has ny number of willing fly-catch-rs who would not only help you id yourselves of this plague free f charge, but would also pay heir own passage here."

"What—?" said the president, turning to face him. "What sort of fly-catchers can pay their own passage?"

The Ambassador, his unearthly smile as warmly friendly as ever, paused before replying, while he grabbed a buzzing green insect out of the air, and crunched it delightedly in his strong jaws. "You'd be surprised," he said.

THE END

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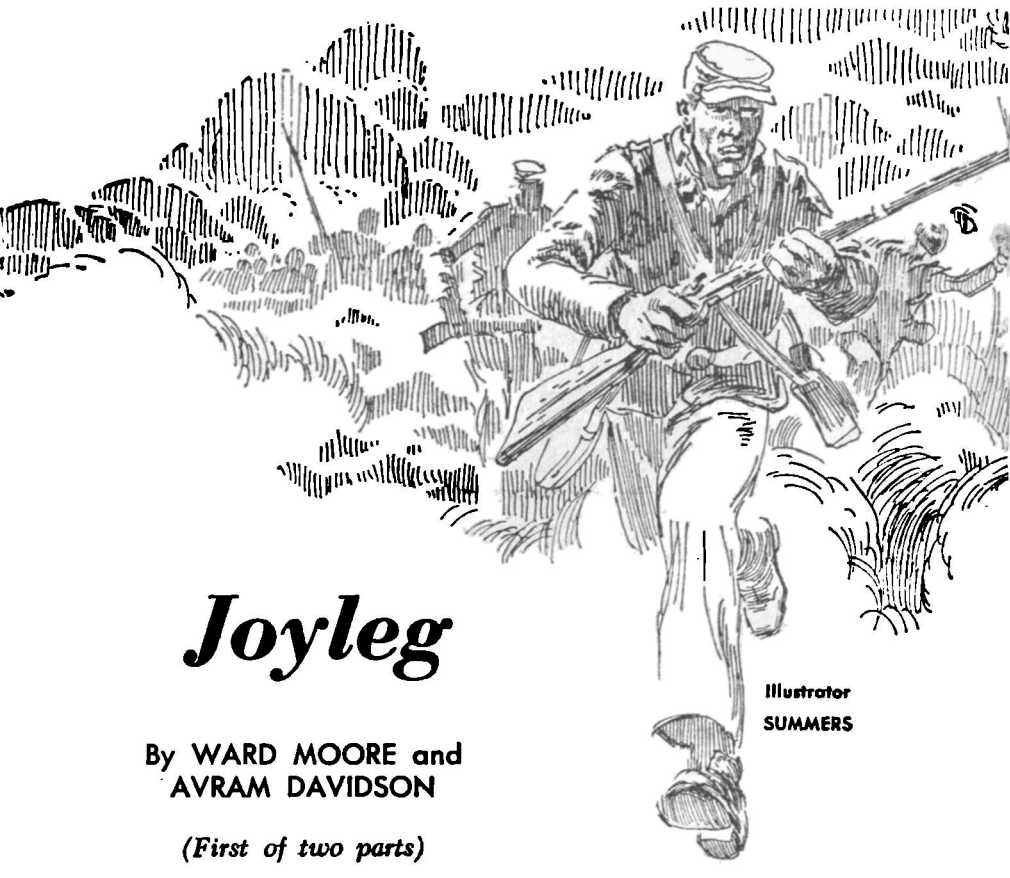


Joyleg

Illustrator
SUMMERS

By WARD MOORE and
AVRAM DAVIDSON

(First of two parts)

A veteran's pension of $11.00 per month might seem like a paltry expression of gratitude on the part of the U.S. government to one of its defending heroes. But when there is no trace of the recipient as far back as the Civil War, it sounds more like somebody's getting something for nothing. A fact the honorable Congresswoman from Tennessee is not going to accept without a fight.

I: The Discovery of Joyleg

THE CHAIRMAN muttered, "File from the Veteran's Administration, sort of list, just picked at random, from the letter J . . ." He pondered, head down. "Uh, anybody want to look at it?"

None of the subcommittee, including Lucinda, did. Lucinda—the Honorable Lucinda Rose Habersham (R., Tennessee)—thought fleetingly lovely spring days were better spent among the willows in Rock Creek Park than in the House office building. She suppressed the unworthy reflection.

The chairman started to put the stapled pages to one side, glanced at them again, smiled. "Odd name. Joyleg. Unusual." He frowned; clearly unusual suggested controversial. He put the file down firmly. "Eleven dollars a month."

"What!"

Lucinda glanced at the subcommittee's visitor, the Honorable Tully Weathernox (D., Tennessee—from the district adjoining her own, as a matter of irritating fact). The Congressman was on his feet, a look of utter outrage on his face. He pointed a condemning finger at the folder.

"You mean this veteran—this hero—is drawing a miserable eleven dollars a month pension? That a grateful Republic, in the excess of its generosity is flinging such a contemptuous pittance to one of its venerated defenders?"

"What it says here," confirmed the chairman. "Isachar Z. Joyleg, Rabbit Notch (care of Sevier Post Office), Tennessee—"

"May I see the file, please?" Lucinda's voice was brisk. As a member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, veterans were her business. As a Congresswoman from Tennessee, Tennessee veterans were doubly her business. As the daughter of one and the widow of another, they were triply so. The chairman handed the wad of papers over. "Now about those teeth braces," he began.

Lucinda closed her ears to the dental discussion and read the pages with a disciplined eye. Finished, she started to hand them back. Weathernox intercepted them apologetically. "May I—?"

"Of course," she answered, not sure he properly had any business reading them.

HE SKIMMED through them quickly. "Forgive me, Mr. Chairman—I'm sure I'm out of order—"

"Right ahead," mumbled the chairman; "informal procedure."

"Thank you, Sir. Sir, I'm shocked beyond belief that one who has worn the uniform of the United States, who has answered his country's call to offer his life

on the field of battle, who has willingly risked his existence for the common good should be treated with such contumely, such arrogance, such hearltessness. Eleven dollars a month—"

"Maybe it's a mistake, a clerical error," suggested a member. "One-one instead of One-one-oh? Hundred and eleven'd be more like it?"

"It's eleven dollars a month," said the chairman. "'s repeated five, six, seven times."

"Incredible!" said Weathernox. "Beyond belief. Why, Sir—"

Lucinda spoke crisply. "I noted no mention of any service-connected disability. And no war period is specified. I see no reason why this Joyleg should receive any pension at all."

Tully Weathernox looked at her across the table. Lucinda gave her head—a very fine head it was, too, with a mass of heavy hair that just missed being reddish, lovely eyes with little laughter lines, a straight (perhaps a trifle long) nose, and a wide mouth—the slightest toss. She was perfectly willing to pain anyone set on raiding the treasury, including Captain Tully Weathernox, (USA, Res.).

"Rabbit Notch, Rabbit Notch," singsonged a committee member. "'*Lost Mule Gulch*'—. No doubt reached by way of Bug Scuffle and Possum Trot. Would that be in your district, Ma'm?"

"Certainly not. I've heard—vaguely—of Rabbit Notch. Sevier is at the point of a very sharp salient between Willie (she pronounced it, correctly, Wye-lie) Jones County in Captain Weathernox's district, and Chinquapin County, in mine. I presume Rabbit Notch is in Willie Jones."

"No," stated Weathernox firmly. "I think investigation will disclose it's in Chinquapin and yours. Must be pleasant to represent a one-party district where you can mislay a section and never miss it."

The chairman murmured hopelessly, "Prosthetic dental work . . ."

"Eleven dollars a month," interrupted Weathernox measuredly, "is not a pension. It's an insult. Who can live on eleven dollars a month?"

"Pensions—except for total disability, obviously not the case here—are not meant to be lived on. They merely make up the difference to full earning power lost by reason of service. If this pensioner cannot live on eleven dollars a month—others have done it without whining—let him apply to local charity."

REALLY," gasped Weathernox. "Really . . . I know that the Gentlewoman merely states the brutal philosophy of her political party, but I never thought to hear it so harshly from the

lips of a lady. A lady from Tennessee."

"I'm sorry to upset the *Gentleman* from Tennessee," retorted Lucinda tartly. "The fact remains that this Joyleg appears to be feeding from the public trough. I agree that eleven dollars a month is an outrage—I see no reason for any payment at all."

"You certainly go in for straight backbones and straightened pocketbooks," Weathernox said angrily. "Nothing serves a veteran so well, I'm sure, as a little judicious starvation. Why not end pensions altogether, and put our legless, armless men—yes, our basket cases—on the sidewalk with tin cups?"

Lucinda clenched her fists. "Whenever I hear speeches like that," she said, stiffening herself against the angry tremble she knew was coming, "I think of a veteran of World War One who lived in Chinquapin County. On the basis of a minor flesh wound he received a pension of twenty dollars a month. That was money back home in the Twenties and Thirties—it would have gone a long way to help support his family. But because he didn't have to work for it it seemed like a windfall. He spent it all on sugar moon liquor, never holding a job, and his family went hungry."

Weathernox was stern. "Is this hearsay? Did you know him?"

The tremble had begun, but Lucinda rode it down. "Oh, I knew him—personally. He was my father."

Three subcommittee members coughed. Weathernox turned red. The chairman said, "Uh—let's take a coffee-break."

THE OTHERS stood up, walked out; Lucinda slumped over the table. The tremble was gone, she was no longer the younger daughter of Sugar Moon Harve Smith (she couldn't remember the time he was Sergeant Harvey Smith, AEF, with medal) the bootleggers' friend. She was the candidate who had beaten her opponent in a vicious contest and gone triumphantly to Washington. She had come a long way from her bitter girlhood.

And, Damn!, she thought—an unusual emphasis for Lucinda—I've got to go to that Press Club cocktail party after this. Why, of all afternoons . . .

The subcommittee (and Weathernox) filed back in.

"Now," began the chairman with relish, "about those dental braces—"

"Sir," said Weathernox, "are you really going to ignore this poor man, Joyleg, with his eleven dollars a month?"

Lucinda spoke up spiritedly. "Indeed, we are not. It's our duty to expose any irregularity in the payment of pensions."

Weathernox's indignation was apparent. "Irregularity! There is indeed an irregularity when a veteran—"

The chairman rapped for order. "I'm sure there can be no objection to the Gentlewoman from Tennessee exposing any irregularity. Now let's get back to the question . . ."

THE COCKTAIL party later that day was just as she had expected. Jill Brittin, girl reporter, was devouring politicians like canapes, perhaps with more relish, because the tiny sandwiches were stale. She was drinking a martini so dry it could have been sold as straight gin without violating federal law; Lucinda nursed a Tom Collins that was merely a lemonade with a dash of sophistication.

"So good to see you face-to-face," the columnist murmured huskily fluttering blue-green lids upward. "I feel as though I'd known you a million years. I always have so much more material on a subject than I use."

Lucinda shuddered. She had a momentary certainty that this woman knew all about the hand-me-downs and the underwear made from flour sacks. "I suppose," she said.

Jill Brittin trilled as though Lucinda had been witty. "You were a Smith before you married, weren't you? Those hills of yours must be full of Smiths. Intermarriage, inbreeding, incest, and all those quaint old customs, ay?"

"I—I don't think I ever came across any," answered Lucinda weakly.

"Oh you widows," lilted the columnist. "Snatching the men right out of us spinsters' jaws. Tell me—on or off the record—have you picked the lucky victim yet?"

"Honestly, Miss Brittin," said Lucinda, reminding herself that congressmen didn't offend powerful journalists if they could help it, "I'm not—I'm not—"

"Well if you aren't—nonsense. Oh, here's just the man for you." She waved her hand and shouted across the room, "Tully! Tully, you great, handsome knight of the Old South you-all come over here and meet your fate."

"I already know Captain Weathernox," said Lucinda steadily.

"Aha, I might have guessed it. Of course you know most of the Weathernox money is gone; still Tully isn't entirely dependent on his salary and mileage."

"Really . . ." began Lucinda helplessly. Weathernox reached them through the press of the crowd and bowed toward her, ignoring the columnist. His bow showed his blond hair was thinning. "Mrs. Habersham—how lucky I am." Then he turned to

Jill Brittin, "Go along with you, Jilly, and leave your betters to themselves."

Jill Brittin giggled with pleasure and showed no resentment at his airiness.

YOU MUSTN'T mind Jill's exuberance, Mrs. Habersham. She's not nearly as silly as she sounds. As a matter of fact she's done some remarkable things, unofficially, where the State Department couldn't take an official hand."

"Yes," said Lucinda. "No doubt the government can't be choosy about its instruments."

"No," he returned; "it takes them where it finds them, in time of need. When the need is over it sometimes forgets them entirely—or almost forgets them which is worse."

"You're back on the subject of the man who's drawing eleven dollars a month."

"Joyleg. Yes I am, and I intend to pursue it."

"So do I, Mr. Weathernox. If everyone who had ever served in the armed forces drew eleven dollars a month the country would soon be bankrupt. I expect to do some pursuing myself."

II: The Incomplete History of a Pension

SPREAD OUT on the desk before Lucinda, the large-scale map was an impressive piece of cartography. Looking from east to west, it showed the five counties—ending in Chinquapin—who had sent her to Congress. At the extreme left side was Willie Jones County; nosing up partway from the southern edge was the terra obscura of another district and county, with Blountsburg bisected by the lower border and Sevier shown as a tiny circle. It was a fine map, showing every Gap, Fork, Hollow, Bald, Lick, Run, Branch, Bottom, Cove, Ridge, Bluff, Valley, or Notch, including Rabbit Notch.

The county lines were clearly marked: dot-dash-dot-dash, winding sinuously from mountain peak to mountain peak, following the hogbacks, dipping down to skirt the edge of valleys, climbing again to crawl precariously along the side of a caterpillar which was the symbol of rugged terrain. And there, yes, there was Rabbit Notch, a few miles north of Sevier, and definitely not in the same county. As to whose district it was in . . . mmmm . . . mmm . . . Was that dot Rabbit Notch or part of the boundary between her district and Weathernox's?

It couldn't be in her district. She would have known—she would have visited it at least once, to explain why its voters should cast their ballots for the party of Lincoln and Eisenhower. A false deceiver like Joyleg who

would cheat a trusting government out of eleven dollars every month, simply could not be in her district. The self-respecting Republicans of Chinquapin County—and none are more rock-ribbed than East Tennessee Republicans; the Vermont breed, in comparison, are mere converted Federlists—would never stoop to dissimulation. Not so the decadent Democrats of Willie Jones County. By this time Lucinda's intuition told her Joyleg simply must be defrauding the treasury. Possibly for years. Similar cases—she smiled bleakly—had been known.

In all fairness, the voters in Weathernox's district weren't responsible. Very likely they too would welcome the exposure and perhaps show their feelings by turning the rascals out at the next election, sending a good Republican to Congress. Then see if that odious Brittin woman would find Tully Weathernox so charming.

"NINETEEN thirty-nine!" Lucinda cried as the first of the reports came in. "Nineteen Thirty-nine! He wasn't in Korea or World War Two."

Nineteen-nineteen. Lucinda winced, thinking of Harvey Smith. Suppose he and Joyleg had been comrades in the Argonne—nonsense! He was a fraud. She knew he was a fraud. Besides the next slip dispelled the thought. "As of Jan. 1912. Will check 1911."

1899. Nothing could be more unlikely, but Lucinda was fair. If he were really a veteran of *that* brief war he would be drawing a sizable pension—good money after bad, in her opinion—but it would do no harm to check. A phone call to the Washington office of the United Spanish-American War veterans, a prolonged wait, then: No Ma'm, no Joyleg in the Spanish-American War.

"Eighteen Sixty-eight. Mmmm." East Tennessee's own loyal and dreadfully misunderstood—but equivocal, there was no getting around it, a Democrat elected on a Republican ticket—Andrew Johnson was in the White House (still the Executive Mansion), by the grace of one Grimes, Senator from Iowa, or was it Kansas? It would make the "Veteran" over a hundred years old. Not a doubt in the world left. Fraud. Sheer, wanton fraud. Not only did the dead vote in the Honorable Mr. Weathernox's district, they also drew pensions.

TULLY Weathernox began with the concept, "poor Joyleg." By the time he saw the name traced through the vouchers for 1928, '27, '26, it became "poor old Joyleg." Poor old Joyleg, quietly uncomplaining about

his beggarly eleven dollars, probably walking around Rabbit Notch a bit stiffly by now but with never a bitter word against the bureaucrats keeping him in grinding poverty. Much good it had done him to serve along with Tennessee's own Sergeant York in 1918. The American Legion would leap to his side as soon as he made this scandal public.

Poor old Joyleg must have served in the Philippine Rebellion. Poor old Joyleg had fought for the oppressed people of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, and . . . mmmm . . . Hawaii? Samoa? No—Guam. Poor old Joyleg had been called out to keep order in the Pullman strike—ay? Let's hope not.

1880 . . . Mr. Speaker, I rise on behalf of an honored veteran of our march from sea to shining sea. Today we can see the justice of the Indian position, still—destiny . . . Regardless . . . This man, Mr. Speaker, offered his life against a merciless foe—of course, I do not condone . . .

Eighteen hundred and sixty-eight. There it was. 1868. Unbelievable, yet Weathernox believed. With a slight tremor in his fingers and voice he called the Veterans Administration Archives. What would it have been then? There was no VA . . . "Hello? This is Representative Weathernox. I . . ."

"Yes sir, as I told your secretary, but maybe I didn't give the whole picture. You see, when . . ."

"What battles did Joyleg fight in? Campaigns? Decorations? Wounds? Was he—"

"Yes sir, as I told your secretary and the other one, you see, they wanted disbursement-of-pensions records. Now, ours only go back to '68, the others are in dead storage. Battles? Well, Congressman, *those* records are Adjutant-General's files."

Unthinkingly Tully shouted, "Do you realize there's evidence a veteran of the Union Army is still alive?"

There was no response. The clerk had already clicked off.

Captain Weathernox's heart beat faster at the thought of a Stillness at Appomatox. Incredible as it sounded, there was yet a survivor of the Irrepressible Conflict, one who had rallied round the flag, tented on the old camp ground, marched with John Brown's soul, and seen the glory of the Lord. In Rabbit Notch, ignored by history, forgotten by the descendants of blue and gray alike, there lived a man who had read Lincoln's call for volunteers while the ink was still wet, heard the cry, On to Richmond! as a fresh and startling summons, seen the shot-torn battle flags carried against the fury of parrott guns and leveled musketry. By Heaven, the man may

have looked on Father Abraham plain, seen the ghastly carnage at Mayre's Heights or Antietam Creek, presented arms to the vanquished Lee. Mr. Speaker, I ask only simple justice for this living memento of unfading valor, justice for Joyleg . . . There would be utter silence in the House, broken only by sobs; then mad, thundering applause.

THE RECORDS exhausted of their information there remained one source—the obvious. How did one get to Rabbit Notch? The map showed no road, and of course no railroad. No use calling the Post Office Department since—aha! Perhaps it was just another trick, this business of Joyleg getting his mail at Sevier. "Call them, Martha," said Representative Habersham to her secretary.

No, there was no post office at Rabbit Notch, Tennessee.

"'Mail routed from Blountsburg,'" repeated Lucinda. But even this was not simple. Blountsburg to the Post Office was Union Junction to the Eastern Tennessee, Western Virginia & Appalachian RR. In the best American tradition of Sharpsburg-Antietam, Pittsburgh Landing-Shiloh, Bull Run-Manasses. And in that same tradition the ETWV-&A was belligerently reluctant to recognize the rival nomenclature. The semantic barrier overcome and a protocol established, they supplied the information that there was one passenger train daily from Knoxville to Union Junction.

III: A Journey to the Past

THEY MET in Washington's Union Station.

Martha Forsh, Lucinda's secretary, peered nearsightedly at the crowds and the train, and gave a startled hiss of recognition as Representative Tully Weathernox appeared. Lucinda was excited enough by anticipation of the trip and all it promised (Dewey and, uh, Kefauver had made national reputation by exposing crooks) to look upon Congressman Weathernox, if not with favor, then without disfavor. After all, it was hardly to be thought he was one of the Ring. She smiled at him.

He took off his stetson and bowed. "What a delightful chance. A short respite from this blustery clime? Off to sunny Florida or Louisiana?"

Lucinds said softly, "We're on government business, but not at government expense—" this last having been an issue in both their campaigns, "—back home."

"You're bound for Tennessee?"

"We are. We certainly are. And you?"

"Me? Oh, I too. That is, I'm making a flying visit. Heading for, ah, Blountsburg. Lovely lit-

tle town. Uh—something wrong?"

"Oh no," said Lucinda, wondering just how much Weathernox would hamper her investigation.

BOARD—aw aaaaaaBOARD!" "Oh dear! We'll miss it! Where on earth is car eleven?"

Weathernox did not pause to speculate. With a firm, masculine grip, he guided them swiftly into the nearest pullman (named *Monomotapa*), deftly scooping up their unattached luggage on the way. Lucinda, her initial shock subsiding, found it not unpleasant to be taken care of so competently.

Weathernox's chair was in car ten (*Lillian Gish*); it was easy enough to switch to car eleven (*Gondwanaland*), and get the seat next to Lucinda's. His masterful manner had not quite faded. "I assume you are headed for Rabbit Notch too?"

"Yes," said Lucinda. "Someone there is using the name of a veteran—a genuine name, unless there's a gigantic plot to falsify the federal archives—to cheat the government of eleven dollars every month—"

"Cheat the government! My dear lady—that's preposterous. Poor old Joyleg—think of it: the last, the very last of the boys in blue, the lone survivor of the Union armies—poor old Joyleg is the one who has been heartlessly cheated, despoiled, swindled. Why were the innumerable raises in pensions never passed on to him? Why has no attempt been made to compensate—as if there could be compensation—the man whose shoeless feet bled at the Siege of Chattanooga . . . or on some other scene of carnage and bravery."

"Nonsense," said Lucinda. "The man's an impostor—if it is one man and not a gang. Last of the boys in blue indeed! When I expose him he'll be just one of the boys in stripes. Why common sense alone shows the baldness of the crime. No veteran of any war was ever satisfied with the size of his pension, and the very fact that this alleged Joyleg hasn't badgered you to get his check raised, proves . . . Oh!" She looked at Weathernox with sudden suspicion. "Perhaps he has, and that's why—"

"Rabbit Notch is in your district—why should he consult me?"

"Nonsense. The map shows where Rabbit Notch is—right in Willie Jones."

Weathernox looked at her searchingly. "I don't know what map you saw. The one I have shows Rabbit Notch almost on the county line—but inside Chiquapin."

"Well, we'll soon settle that."

"Of course. Assuming I'm

right, no doubt you'll be ready to help the poor old man."

KNOXVILLE was the real start of the journey to Rabbit Notch. They drove to the ETWV&A depot on the other side of town. The minor discomforts of the antique coach—half-coach rather, for the front end was a baggage-car—fascinated rather than annoyed them. They were delighted with the wine-red plush seats, the intricate brass hardware, the hanging kerosene lamps. In effect they were taking a step back into the past, and the past was where Joyleg properly existed.

Delight however, was tempered by local patriotism. "Surely," Lucinda said to the conductor, "this car hasn't been in continuous service on this line since it was built?"

He smiled benevolently. "No ma'm, and that's a fact. Our unhandseled cars were bespoke by the government during the Kaiser's War, so we put the retired ones back on. I don't rightly know what become of the others. Heard they were maybe sold Mexicowards, or perhaps China. Government pulled the insides out, turned them into troop trains."

"Nationalization," said Lucinda triumphantly. "Democratic administration. Ruined the railroads."

"Well, ma'm, I wouldn't know what it did to others, but it saved our goose. Kept us going all through the *dep*ression."

"Ha!" said Weathernox. "Ha! Excuse me."

Lucinda ignored him. There was a short silence, broken by the conductor. "Next station's ARMbruster," he announced. "Armbruster, Coopers Crossing, Big Shallow, Villiersville, Three Forks . . . last stop's Union Junction, Union Junction." He paused, smiled treasonously at them. "That's Blountsburg," he said slyly.

IV: Blountsburg (Union Junction)

THE DEPOT at Blountsburg showed some signs of having been repaired since Andrew Johnson's swing around the circle—but not many. There was no stationmaster, telegrapher, or porter visible. No one called, *Taxi . . . ?* Beyond the depot a wide road of yellow mud wound like a relaxed snake, in sweeping curves, the crests of its ruts oozy and glistening in the sun, their depths frozen stiff.

"Doesn't seem to be a great deal of activity," commented Lucinda, searching the landscape for some moving object other than a group of hopping, quarreling sparrows.

"You'd think in a place as dead as this," said Martha, "they'd at least be out to watch the trains.

Train, I mean." She was from Missouri; the two Tennesseeans gave her the pitying stare aboriginal inhabitants save up for ignorant aliens.

"There's someone now," said Lucinda. "Coming this way."

They all turned to watch the stately, irresistible progress of an heroically proportioned woman making her way from the store to the depot.

"Excuse me," said Weathernox. "We're on our way to Sevier."

Speech made them suddenly and permissibly visible. "Sevier, hay? Not many goes there."

"We're actually on our way to Rabbit Notch," confided Lucinda, "but I understand we have to go to Sevier first."

The woman swung the mailsack reflectively from one finger. "Rabbit Notch, hay? Not many goes *there*."

"But you know of it?" asked Weathernox eagerly.

"Don't believe's been a creature from here to there in sixty-seventy years."

"We are—we have to go," stated Lucinda firmly.

"You got to, you got to. Free country."

"Perhaps you could tell us how to get there?"

"Get there, hay? Don't know about getting to Rabbit Notch. Don't believe anyone's been from here to there in fifty-sixty—"

"To Sevier, then," Lucinda pressed.

The woman sucked in her pendulous underlip. "Like's not I'll be taking MacCray's mail and freight in two-three days. If you've a mind you could ride along with me for dollar apiece. And a quarter each for your bags," she added.

"The price seems fair enough," said Weathernox. "But we have to go right away."

"Right away, hay? Well, you have to, you have to." She began walking firmly away. "Still here in two-three days, come see me then." She headed for the town's one store.

WAIT A minute," called Weatherknox. "Is there no other way of getting to Sevier?"

"Shank's mare."

"Hospitable and communicative," muttered Martha. "Might as well be in Maine."

They treated this shocking comparison with the silence it deserved. After a moment Weathernox reflected, "If they're this shy of strangers in Blountsburg, what will they be like in Rabbit Notch?"

"Let's see how they are in Sevier first," suggested Lucinda. "Coming?"

They picked their way over the ruts. Weathernox pulled open the door of the store with a flourish to allow the brief escape of warm

air smelling of a coal-stove, sweet-cured tobacco, linty piece-goods, pickle-brine, sharp cheese, damp wool, dry saltfish, penny candy (anise), kerosene, stick cinnamon, cloves, cider, oilcloth, leather, country ham, molasses, and sawdust. They stood in the entrance a moment, letting the conglomerate scent lap about them, then they filed in.

Lucinda began, "Is there anyone in town who could drive us to Sevier today? Or perhaps rent us their car?"

The proprietress shook her head with vigorous satisfaction. "Nup."

"It's on government business," Weathernox said.

The headshaking froze. "Government? Blockaders?" She scowled hideously. One great hand reached toward a collection of cowbells, the other slid over to the meat cleaver. "Blockaders, are you? Speak up!"

"If you mean, are we internal revenue agents," Lucinda said crisply, "the answer is 'no'. Have you ever heard of women revenuers?"

"Mmm. Well . . . guess not." The large head shook grudgingly.

Lucinda smiled at her. "We're on business for the House of Representatives—nothing to do with the Treasury—Mrs. . . . Mrs.—?"

"Davney," supplied the woman as though loath to admit them to this intimacy. "All right," she conceded abruptly. "Government, hay? Congress? Congress can afford to send you to Sevier, Congress can afford to pay your way. Fifty dollars the lot. Take it or leave it."

"Fifty dollars!" cried Lucinda. "Outrageous! You said a dollar apiece before—"

Mrs. Davney's chins descended into her neck. "Said, two-three days: dollar apiece and a quarter each for the bags, yup. Go today —fifty dollars the lot."

Weathernox said, "We'll take it, Mrs. Davney. Though please understand, the government isn't paying, we are."

"All one to me. Cash is cash."

Lucinda was still seething. "How far is it?"

"A right smart chance. You'd not like to walk in them heels and tote your bags—not even if your man took most of the load."

Before Lucinda could correct this last assumption, Weathernox had his wallet out and was handing over a bill. Mrs. Davney took it in a swift, sweeping motion. "Will! Oh Wee-yill!" she called.

WILL HAD a single eye and a single arm; he was tall as his wife and as spindly as she was stout. He walked with an unbalanced, shuffling gait. "What's it now? More trifling Yankee drummers with nicknacks and

folderols? Got aplenty already, I say. Move slow."

"M'usband," Mrs. Davney said proudly. "People for Sevier, Will. I made treaty to take 'm for fifty dollars."

Their eyes met in complete, mutual approval. "Gas noil come high," Will Davney said. "Not aspeak tires. But treaty's a treaty. Davneys never went back on our word. Well, sooner we go, sooner I'll get back."

They all followed Mrs. Davney outside.

A noise like hissing steam sounded forth and a car whose designers had never heard of tail-fins or even streamlining jack-rabbitted into view. It was not merely the age or the design of the vehicle which startled them, but the oddity of its indecision between touringcar and station-wagon. There was a prolonged hiss, and everything was swallowed up in a cloud of steam. "The Stanley Brothers' favorite model," explained Weathernox.

"Come on if you're coming at all," Mrs. Davney's voice cut through the vapor. "Else I'll be obliged to travel without you. And you won't get your money back neither," she warned.

V: Sevier

HOP IN and settle wherever your pleasure is," Mrs. Davney invited, as though a wide choice was involved. "Just loaded up; no weal gained by making an extra trip of MacCray's trade goods."

With a vehement hiss the car jumped forward but, swiftly as it moved—and even the roughness of the road could not deny its speed—Lucinda still had time to observe that Blountsburg wasn't so ill-supplied with cars and trucks as Mrs. Davney had implied. After all, what was the gas pump for? The other vehicles were younger, but none was late enough to be really low-slung.

Thoroughly annoyed, she said, "If this is a steam-car, Mrs. Davney, what did your husband mean by gas and oil coming high so that you had to charge us—"

"Pilot light," the voice from the front seat billowed back. "Runs on gas. Burner uses coal oil. Kerosene, that is. High, terrible high."

The road did not narrow as they climbed over rolling country. It wound relaxedly in full, unpaved width—enough for a six lane super-highway—between far-spaced habitations, here and there a well-kept homestead with snug outbuildings, here and there a haggard farmhouse with propped-up barns.

"With electrification and better farming methods," commented Weathernox, "in a few years all these places will look as good as the best."

Lucinda was tempted to an-

swer, what's good for TVA is good for the country. Her legs were cramped and—at the moment—she thought Tully Weathernox a sententious bore. "Spending public money won't make people work. My aunt fed and kept herself on five acres, put me through high school, and saved money. She had no electricity and never spoke to a Department of Agriculture man in her life."

"She must have been a fine woman," said Weathernox. "On the—"

"She was." Lucinda felt an unfamiliar emotion misting her view of the road. It couldn't be affectionate memory, for she had none, grateful though she was to Aunt Mary Esther-Ann. "Farmers who prosper work hard. Those who can get something for nothing remain shiftless as ever."

THEY CLIMBED a higher hill than most. Mrs. Davney lifted a hand from the wheel and pointed. "Sevier," she announced.

Lucinda craned and peered. The dark mass drew apart as they approached, resolved itself into a dozen or so houses clustered in mutually suspicious groups. They were all in the weathered silver-gray uniform of wood never painted or whose paint had long been erased by sun and rain and wind. Behind them, unobscured for the first time, rose the hills, brown and white pudding balls where snow and bare earth alternated in patches. Farther, much farther, on the mountains, towering gruffly, everything was white except where the snow, shedding and sliding off branches from its own weight, had revealed the dark pines.

"Dreary," croaked Martha.

"Bracing," corrected Lucinda, heartened by their proximity to the starting point. From here she could reach Rabbit Notch and the felons, and—again the challenging thought: why not, why not? perhaps the governorship.

"You won't know these hills in a few weeks," said Weathernox. "Spring bursts on them like a—like a thunderclap."

"I can't wait," shivered Martha bitterly.

If Lucinda had thought Davney's establishment in Blountsburg primitive, she had to admit the architecturally self-confessed former farmhouse which was Sevier's store was far more so.

Several men and two women, evidently alerted by the bicycle horn Mrs. Davney had squeezed unrelentingly upon entering the Greater Sevier area, waited.

It was a grave pleasure and one with presumably fixed rules: the Sevierites unloaded Mrs. Davney's freight with quiet comments.

As the trade-goods were re-

moved and the travelers released, they got out stiffly, stretched, watched the villagers scatter as soon as the return freight was laden aboard. Lucinda shouted above the preliminary hiss of steam, "Now how do we get to Rabbit Notch?"

"See MacCray," Mrs. Davney shouted over her shoulder.

THE STORE was dark, but warm and cozy. "Mr. MacCray?"

"Duty to you," murmured the short, grizzle-bearded man behind the counter, either forewarned or utterly stoical. He cleared his throat and raised his voice. "Pretties for the ladies? Victuals? Sweetmeats? Swaddling—no. Something in velvets or taffetas? Prime three-knob snuff perhaps?" His voice dropped a tone. "Fine line of spirits at reasonable, nay, modest prices, warranted not less nor three years old." It must have been a long, long time since anyone had entered the store who didn't already know every pin in it, and he was making the most of the occasion.

"Thank you," said Lucinda. "I'm afraid all we want is the way to Rabbit Notch."

MacCray inclined his head. "Mmm. The Notch? None from hereabouts goes there, can tell you that. 'Tis no easy jaunt."

"Surely there's a bus," suggested Martha with evident irony.

"Bus? Oh . . . omnibus, you mean. Heard of them to Knoxville afore they put on the trolley-cars. Bless you, Ma'm, we don't have devices like that up this way. Horseback and buckboard's well enough for folk like we, though Old Squire had a shay or surrey or somewhat. I suppose though, Amos Turbyfill'd let out his rig for hire."

"We'll take it," snapped Lucinda recklessly—for her.

"Will you now? Amos'll be mightly pleased; not more than a courtin couple ever uses it once in a few years. He'll make a point of silver though; won't take paper. All them Turbyfills has been set that way since the wildcat bank went tore-down broke in Villiersville."

"Where will we find Turbyfill? We want to leave immediately."

"Do you now? Ah, if it was only to Warm Soack or Pitch Pit, you could go by bull-cart—was there folk from either borough here today to carry you back. Rig's too tender for them places. That matter, rig'll not get you to the Notch neither, nor a bull-cart."

"Why not?"

"No road."

MARTHA cried, "No roads! But how do we get to Rabbit Notch, then?"

MacCray drawled, "Well Ma'm,

that's a question I puzzle to answer."

Before he could go into a lengthy dissertation on the history of transportation in Sevier, Lucinda exclaimed, "But people from Rabbit Notch come down here to get their mail, don't they?"

"Only one ever comes this side of the Gap is Gustus Praseworthy. He makes the run bout once a month when he brings the li—the whi——when he brings down produce to trade and picks up the government letter for Master Joyleg."

"Oh!" cried Lucinda. "Aha!" bubbled Weathernox. "Well!" said Martha.

There was brief silence while MacCray looked from one to the other.

"Joyleg . . ." Weathernox rolled the name on his tongue. "What's he like?"

The postmaster shook his head. "Don't know. None from Sevier living have ever seen him, no sir, and if the account be true he has never come down out of the Notch since settling there. There have been dark tales of pacts with the devil and suchlike. I've heard tell how my old grandser's dam once sighted the gaffer, but she'd never narrate about it. Myself, I've no desire to lay eyes on Master Joyleg, and if 'twere not my duty to handle his government letter I'd as soon not."

VI: Franks Pay No Taxes

"YOU SEE!" Lucinda could not contain her triumph. "Hearsay! Tales and mumblings! Seized upon by cunning rascals."

Weathernox showed no signs of agitation. Instead, he said to MacCray, "If your great-grandmother caught sight of Joyleg, simple arithmetic shows what a very old man he is. What a very, very old man—well over a hundred. And I'm not surprised that legends cluster around him, they always do to such ancients. Now then, if Praseworthy gets down, he must get back up, else he wouldn't be able to come down again next time."

"Right," agreed MacCray; "Sometimes he rides the jack and sometimes the jenny, whichsoever he don't ride packs the freight. And sometimes he brings along a two-three more, to trade off."

"So," finished Weathernox, "if he can ride a jack or a jenny I guess we can?"

He looked at Lucinda. She nodded shortly. Martha looked glum.

MacCray shook his head. "Wouldn't do for the womenfolk. Never at all. No sir."

"Why not?" demanded Lucinda, bristling for equality.

"No sidesaddles. Not a one in town. If you're bent and determined to go, you'll have to leave

the ladies. Miz Stevens might put them up whilst you're—"

"Thank you," interrupted Lucinda. "We shall not need Mrs. Stevens' hospitality. I've come to go to Rabbit Notch, and go there I will. I've ridden mule-back and I'm not unused to roughing it. I've campaigned in some pretty rugged territory. In case you don't recognize me, I'm Lucinda Rose Habersham." She paused modestly.

"Honor to know you, M'am." MacCray bowed gallantly. "And you, Mr. Habersham. Good Tennessee name, 'tis."

"I am *not*—" began Weathernox, much more annoyed than seemed called for.

"I represent the next district in Congress," Lucinda pressed on. "The Congress in Washington. And Mr. Weathernox—of Willie Jones County—represents the one next to it."

"So you're a Congresslady. My, my. The women hereabout been fidgetin to vote long's I can recall, but they never do get around to it. It'd be legal now, wouldn't it? And the folk in your district —that'd be Chinquapin now, wouldn't it, where they hanged a poor feller back in Ninety and Nine or so for no more than shooting a blood-enemy—sent a lady to Congress, ay? Do tell."

"You mean you have no contact with the outside world at all?" demanded Martha.

MACCRAY drew himself up offendedly. "I surely wouldn't say that. I been as far as Chattanooga myself, thirty year back—and there was four-five boys from here who fought the Germans in Europe *and* Japan. We get both wish-books here, and city papers now and then. Salesmen have drove clear up here from Blountsburg for my order instead of getting it from Miz Davney, though naturally not every year. And we've got thirteen reGIStered voters. We're no means bodily out of date like the Notch folk."

Lucinda, in passing, noted and regretted the thirteen voters, for it was certain such self-sufficient characters couldn't help but mark their ballots rightly. "What Congressional district is Rabbit Notch in?"

" 'Tain't in none."

"Impossible!" cried both Representatives simultaneously.

"Well M'am and Sir," MacCray said slowly, "—it's a fact about the Notch. They ain't in no district because they ain't in no county. No county at all. None of the three'd have 'm. Willie Jones said—or maybe 'twas the other way around—'They pay no taxes, we don't want 'm.' Chinquapin—or maybe Willie Jones—said, 'And we're not ones to take your leavings.' Our county looked matters over —looked 'm over from here, that

is, Notch dwellers being touchy then as now—said, 'There's not an ell of ground there could be assessed for the cost of posting it.' So each draws its lines, leaving Rabbit Notch to t'other, which winds it up in none. And since district lines hereabout follow county lines, why . . ." He shrugged.

"You mean they don't pay taxes?" Lucinda demanded, aghast.

"None's I ever heard of."

"That's—that's impossible." She almost said, UnAmerican.

"Say they, why pay taxes for nothing?"

"Aren't they afraid their land may be seized?" asked Weathernox.

MacCray laughed briefly. "Shouldn't care to be the one to try. Nor does any sheriff fancy being Archibald-Bell-The-Cat. No, they pay no taxes, not them Franks."

"Franks?"

"Old name they call themselves. Don't know why."

Lucinda said firmly, "Something must be done about it."

"Yes M'am," said MacCray respectfully. "But they figure themselves tolerable the way they be, all right."

THERE WAS a brooding silence. Then Weathernox asked, "When does this Praseworthy make his monthly trip?"

"Let's see. March Eighteenth, almanac says; government letter come with today's post as usual —mmmm—he could arrive tomorrow. Or day after. But he'll happen along before Fools' Day for sure."

"The first of April? We can't wait that long," said Lucinda, visioning all the wild spending that could go on in her absence. "If he doesn't show up tomorrow morning we'll rent whatever donkeys are to be had here and get to Rabbit Notch as well as we can. After all, this isn't Tibet or Bolivia. And now we need sleep. Could Mrs. Stevens put us up for the night?"

"Sure to, if I ask her," MacCray said. "Seeing she's my sister. And the congressman can abide abovestairs with me if he'd like."

VII: Rabbit Notch

IN THE morning, after breakfast, Lucinda and Martha started out to rejoin Weathernox at the store. The morning was gray and cold. Down the frozen ridges of creamy mud which served Sevier as a street, came a string of four donkeys, led by a man in a fox-pelt cap who could only be Augustus Praseworthy. "Turn around," she hissed at Martha, seizing her secretary's elbow.

"Wha-what?"

"Come back. We must change."

A short time later the two women, dressed in slacks, entered MacCray's store. It was warmer than the outside, but though the fire licked at the mica or isinglass window of the stove, Lucinda could still see her breath. For that matter she could see Praseworthy's too. He was addressing Weathernox with a certain truculence.

"And what might be your concern in the Notch, goodman?"

"I'm Congressman Weathernox; my business is with Mr. Joyleg."

The man absorbed the information slowly. It was clearly disturbing. "A squire, be you? A law man? From Nashville?"

"I am—or was—an attorney, but not a law man in the sense I suppose you mean. And not from Nashville—from Washington."

Praseworthy looked at Weathernox with doubt that graduated into respect. "Federal city, hay?" He wagged his head unhappily. "Be flayed and pegged," he muttered. "The pension . . ."

"What about the pension?" Lucinda demanded, coming forward, tired of the obscurity relegated to women in Sevier whether they wore skirts or pants. MacCray gaped in interest, but Praseworthy refused to acknowledge her existence.

"Yes," said Weathernox, "what about the pension?"

"How do you mean, good sir?"

"I mean—" Weathernox began.

"He means the pension presumably goes to one Joyleg. How does it happen you know of it?" Lucinda was sure the donkey driver was one of the ring.

"Why . . . why," muttered Praseworthy, addressing Weathernox as though it had been he who had spoken, "Talk . . . Not much else to do about the fire of a night but talk whilst making reparation on the gear. Time and again talk turns to the pension, and be the congressmen be coming to do justice to Master Joyleg or be they not . . . ? 'Tis a long year since the pension money went far enough. And now—I'll be flayed and pegged."

"I'm not sure I understand," said Weathernox.

"Aye," sighed MacCray. "Understanding's not easy."

"But be that as it may, can you take us—that is, Representative Habersham, Miss Forsh, and myself, back with you to Rabbit Notch so that we can talk to Mr. Joyleg in person?"

"How long would you be fixin to stay about the Notch?"

"Not long—just long enough to talk with Joyleg," said Weathernox.

"Just long enough to prove he's a fraud or—more likely—doesn't exist," Lucinda corrected.

"Take a power of provin'. Old dog-fox was sound of wind and limb yesterday. Endorsed his last

month's document and sent it down to trade with." He took out an oblong blue card. The three breathed in sharply, bent over it. On the back, in a large, archaic hand, in rusty ink, was the signature, hardly wavering at all: *Ifachar Joyleg.* Weathernox smiled; Lucinda set her mouth firmly.

"Yup—a power of provin'. Well, if you're set and determined to go, I'll not trade the extra beasts 'til next trip. Meanwhile I'll be about my commerce with the goods-monger here and be ready to sally shortly."

METHODICALLY the Rabbit Notch courier loaded his purchases and exchanges aboard one of the donkeys. "Me and you'll trade off ridin' and walkin'," he said to Weathernox.

"What about saddles?" demanded Lucinda.

"Recollect M'am, I warned you there weren't no side-saddle in all of Sevier," said MacCray.

"No-no, I meant ordinary ones."

"Don't need no gear to ride straddle," said Praseworthy contemptuously. "Man and boy I never had aught betwixt me and the brute but my breeches."

Weathernox looked at Lucinda inquiringly. "I guess I can manage bareback if Martha can," she replied.

"I wish I was back home," said Martha. "Otherwise I don't care."

Actually Lucinda found her seat more comfortable than any saddle she had experienced. She moved her knees high and ran her fingers over the furry hide. Martha looked uneasy and Weathernox, as might have been expected, looked quite absurd, his feet almost touching the ground.

Praseworthy jerked the rope bridle of the lead beast and they started off.

ONCE, LOOKING back, Lucinda caught sight of Sevier huddled far below as if to escape the cold, and once Praseworthy, breaking the silence which had fallen on him when he passed out of the wordly turmoil of Sevier, gestured to two hair-thin wisps of smoke or vapor. "Pitch Pit there . . . Warm Soack yonder." After that there was nothing to remind them men dwelt in these mountains, or ever had. By and by mists descended, then it began to snow .

Lucinda thought she knew the hills, but she had never been through any part quite so wild. She caught herself searching for blazes on the trees. The wind, now not merely blustering but howling, flung sharp snow in her face.

The wind shifted, the snow stopped. Reaching a hogback, they came upon a bald place

from which they were able to catch a glimpse of the crest's profile. From here it could be seen that Rabbit Notch really was a notch, a pie-shaped plateau protected by blunted peaks on three sides, open only to the south. Lucinda thought it must have looked fair ground indeed to settle on in days when a man was concerned only with climate and fertility, game and wood, not on money or markets.

Praseworthy's voice broke through. "About to cross the Gap. Hold on, all." A thin, terrified squeal from Martha answered him.

The donkey's tiny hooves thudded on a wooden bridge of uneven planks, worn, warped planks—a very narrow bridge without any railing. To right and left, and through the breaches between the planks they looked down into a deep cleft. How deep it was, Lucinda didn't care to speculate. "Close your eyes, Martha," she admonished, "and hang on tightly."

When they were across, Lucinda reached forward and held her knees with her hands. It was easier to keep them from quivering that way. Their guide halted the caravan.

"Stomp your feet a bit," he advised. " 'Twon't take but a minute."

"What?" asked Weathernox.

"Here," ordered Lucinda peremptorily, "help me with Martha."

Obediently he dismounted, and together they went to the secretary. She was still clutching grimly, her eyes tight shut. Weathernox lifted her off the donkey; Lucinda and he supported her until she grew steady enough to stand alone. Then Lucinda reached for Weathernox's arm. "Tully! Look! What is he doing?"

PRASEWORTHY had hitched all four donkeys to a strange apparatus and was leading them around in a steady circle. "A windlass—a ship's windlass," said Weathernox; "how the devil could it have been dragged up here and over that chasm?"

"But what for?"

"We'll soon see."

As they watched, a rope came up, slowly and tautly from the abyss, and the wooden causeway swung with deliberation to one side. It was not fixed to anything on the far edge of the gap, and evidently rode on some sort of pivot. With only a protesting creak or so, it moved along its ninety-degree angle and came to rest snugly against the rock shelving.

"We—we're completely cut off," Martha wailed. "No one can get to us from the outside world."

"Ay up, you're safe now, Mis-

tress," Praseworthy observed, unhitching the animals and gesturing them to remount. "Let the heathen rage howsoever they list, none of 'm can cross over unto the Notch without leave."

Lucinda glanced at Weathernox, who was walking in long, easy strides—he and the guide had changed off—as though he crossed drawbridges into isolated retreats daily, as a matter of course. She could not take the incident so calmly. Suppose Joyleg's gang were not only cheats and forgers, but robbers and murderers as well? What could Weathernox do against them?

Though the tilted plateau that was the Notch looked small and flat from the edge of the Gap, as they went further they could see it was expansive, rolling with gentle hillocks on which last year's cornstalks were moldering black and brown and gray. There was not a trace of snow and the ground did not look hard-frozen. Odd-looking sheep nibbled in the rows. The farther they went, the more it lost its distinctive quality—though it was distinctive enough simply by being located out of geographical context—the peaks receded and disappeared, the land seemed just another stretch of farming country, with a snake-fence here and there, an occasional black-and-white chicken which looked different from the usual plymouth rocks, and a rare, rangy-looking, undersized cow, treading daintily indifferent to gaggles of geese.

Weathernox pointed to these last. "If I hadn't read they were practically extinct I'd say those must be the Pilgrims' Gray Geese."

"Gray Geese," conceded Praseworthy. "Fine roastin' come Twelfth Night or Commodore's Birthday. Not heard of Pilgrim, though. No such name hereabout."

They came to a log house which might have posed for the woodcuts in an old biography. The ends of the logs had not been trimmed, they protruded unevenly, the roof was crossed with transverse poles and a sticks-and-clay chimney oozed smoke. Praseworthy nodded to a man with a long rifle who stood beside the trail. "Cousin Drew."

"Cousin Gustus."

COUSIN DREW allowed his head to incline slowly toward the three strangers in manifest question.

"Up to see Master Joyleg," explained Praseworthy. "Male person's Congress man, fixin' to see about the pension."

Cousin Drew's mouth shut into a threadlike line.

"Is it far to Joyleg's?" asked Weathernox.

"A small chance," said Praseworthy.

"Does he live alone?" Weathernox persisted.

"Do and don't," replied Praseworthy cryptically.

The cabins seemed regularly spaced. More children appeared who stared, marvelling—the girls in long dresses and caps, the boys in "clam-digger" pantaloons—and were joined by dogs, all bearing a family resemblance, as did the children. Inbreeding was inevitable in these remote places.

"Here," said Praseworthy abruptly, "you'd best pack the letter to Master Joyleg yourself. Please to dismount; I'll take the beasts."

Lucinda was startled. "Aren't you going to show us the way?"

"It's not needful. Follow after your nose."

"Now what on earth does he mean by following after our noses?" Lucinda asked.

"All I know is, you can't help it, unless you walk backward. Anyway, we'll soon see."

LUCINDA, looking back and down, felt there was something vaguely amiss about the way the settlement had been laid out or grown. She pointed. "Those cabins are too far apart for a village. Much too far apart. And they're too close together for farms. Unless . . . good Heavens! Tully, do you imagine they . . . ?"

He nodded. "Why not? Communal fields? Very possible."

"Col*lec*tivism!" She tried to make him realize.

"Oh my dear Lucinda—" a manner of speech of course, but the notion of being his dear Lucinda was disturbing. "—cooperative farming is an American usage as old as Jamestown and Captain John Smith. He stopped, sniffing. "There's a funny smell in the air."

"Donkeys," suggested Lucinda. "Or their sudden absence."

"No, no. Sweetish. Mmmm. Sort of familiar . . ."

Lucinda took a deep breath. "Mash!"

"Of course. I knew it was familiar."

"No wonder they're content to have no law or taxes here. Utterly anarchial."

He shrugged. "It would cost more to enforce the law than would be gained in revenue. And the purpose of taxation is revenue, not prohibition." They came in sight of the house. It might not have been impressive by any other standards than Rabbit Notch's, but by those it was a mansion. The logs were not only peeled and fairly matched, but shaped; instead of the minimum of meager windows there were a great many, close together, all glazed. Some were tiny bullseye panes, others were clear glass and large enough.

"Well," Lucinda whispered. "If that's Joyleg's, *some*body's certainly made a good thing out of Uncle Sam's carelessness."

"Or else it goes to show how good old American know-how and backbone can triumph over even the parsimony of penny-pinchers and nickelnursers. Imagine doing all this on eleven dollars a month. Now what?"

"Good Heavens," cried Lucinda. "What did we come here for? Now we march in and expose Joyleg, of course."

He hesitated. "Listen, Lucinda whether he's a neglected hero as I believe or a villain as you do, he's still an old man—a very old man—undoubtedly fragile and easily unerved. Surely you don't want to be responsible for what might be tantamount to murder?"

WITH SOME hesitation Weathernox advanced to the door. There was no answer to the hollow bang. He turned. "Could we be too late? Poor old man, alone and neglected—"

"Oh, really," said Lucinda impatiently. She brushed by him and opened the door. The poor old man could well be taking advantage of their hesitation to make a getaway. The large, high-ceilinged, panelled room was gratefully warm, even stuffy. The evident source of heat was a great fireplace in which logs burned and crackled, but it also seemed to seep in from a room beyond.

"Hello," called Weathernox. "Anyone home?"

Lucinda thought she heard a faint voice in the room beyond, then Martha clutched her elbow. Somone was sitting in the high-backed chair before the fire. A hand drooped over the side. It was long and brown and knobby at the joints and serpentined with veins.

"Mr.—Mr. Joyleg?" asked Weathernox.

The hand leapt, closed and opened, fell again to the chair arm. A weak noise like the beginning of a whimper rose. "Ay? Who be ye?" The voice was feeble, tremulous. Lucinda saw there was a mass of quilts in the chair, topped by a knitted cap. Slowly the cap rose. There was a face under it, the color of tea-stains, with sunken cheeks, a hooked nose, a long cleft chin on which white bristles sprouted unevenly. The feature which demanded and held attention, however, was the eyebrows. Starting —it seemed—deep in the sockets and preempting a wide sweep from the forehead, they were thrust outward in a thick mass, writhing and tangled, fining off to wisps and whorls far forward. The white hairs were broom-stiff; working their way out between them were rare, fine, dark ones which curled slyly. The

whole effect was arresting, compelling—as though the eyebrows had not been sapped of their vitality but had drawn it from the rest of the body, parasitically.

"Mr.—Mr. Joyleg?" Lucinda found her voice a little unsteady.

VIII: It Can't Be True

THERE WAS a sound at the inner door, of the sort people who are nervous of them make at cats. A flickering light was there—Lucinda realized suddenly that it had darkened since they entered—held by a sturdy-looking woman.

"You'll be the outlanders Cousin Gustus brought up from below." She held a saucer with a dark looking candle in it. Her long dress fell from chin to ankle with no interruptions save those provided by nature.

"I'm Representative Weathernox, and this is Representative Habersham and Miss Forsh. I'm afraid we came in uninvited, but there was no answer to our knock."

The woman curtsied to Lucinda. Straightening up, she said, "Ay Master, there's none as knocks here. We're simple folk—even Master Joyleg—and think it not amiss to come and go freely."

Cautiously, Weathernox approached the old man's chair. "Forgive our intrusion," he said. "You *are* Isachar Joyleg, receiving a monthly pension from the federal government?"

"Isachar Joyleg. Servant."

Lucinda hadn't realized she had been holding her breath.

"Then you must be—that is . . . You were in the Civil War?"

All three leaned forward. "In the war? For sure. Civil . . . ? 'Twasn't civil . . . raw heads and bloody bones. Naught civil in war, no . . ."

"The War Between the States, then. Or the War of the Rebellion. Umm—the Great Rebellion?"

The eyelids flickered. Fire glinted in the pupils, tiny red sparks. "Rebels ay? . . . 'Twas a nice question. 'Disperse, ye rebels', hay? . . . Called the Commodore a pirate . . ."

MAG TURNED and spat into the fire. "Time he had his soak," she said. "He's not usually near this poor. Can't recollect it in all my days, though I've heard of hard winters when he lay for weeks like a mummy. Thaw's overdue, that's what it is, I make it." She raised her voice. "Come along, old sir; your warm soak's waiting."

He made a noise in his throat as she peeled away the quilts. Underneath was a furry robe, which she laid aside. Then she plucked out two pillows wedged on either side of him and he half slid into her arms. "Never seen

him this poor," she said. She hoisted him to his feet. As Tully moved forward she shook her head. "Obliged to you, but I can manage. I'll call my niece and have her warm some victuals whilst I settle Master Joyleg. The march and all must have whet your appetites."

"Oh, you mustn't trouble," murmured Lucinda.

"Old he'd take it mighty amiss was you to spurn his welcome. Thirzah!" She started off, the old man's legs moving slowly and stubbornly. "Thir-*zah?*"

"Yes, Aunt?" the reply came from another room.

"There'll be company for supper. Set four places, though belike himself will not be eating."

Thirzah entered to set the table. She seemed overcome with shyness and whispered faintly, "Please to help yourselves," and backed out.

THE FOOD was good, very good, though strange to their palates. "Feel like I was eating something prepared by an old, old recipe," said Weathernox, swallowing. "Mag could make a fortune opening some exotic little restaurant."

"My, this mountain air has certainly given me an appetite, said Lucinda, polishing off her second helping.

"I can't remember when I've enjoyed a meal so much," said Tully. He pushed his chair back and got up from the table. "Do you mind if I let in a little fresh air? It does seem a bit stuffy in here."

"Not at all."

A clear, icy gust came rushing in, and a shout came trumpeting. "Some plaguey dolt has let a poisonous draft of night air in! Scathes and strays—d'ye want me to catch an affliction? Y'rogue —whoever you be—batten that hatchway on the double!"

There was volume to the shouting voice but no depth or resonance. "Someone must have come in a back way," suggested Lucinda.

Tully called out, "It's shut, sir. May I ask who's there?"

"Who do ye suppose? Who were ye expecting—Simon Girty, or me Lord Howe?" There was a clattering of wood on wood. "What's your business? Mag, girl, there's strangers without, foreigners belike, mayhap even outlanders, French soup-suppers from the mincing sounds of them. See what's their affair here, that's a love."

They heard the murmur of Mag's voice, but couldn't make out the words. "Odd," muttered Weathernox.

The other voice growled, "Come afore, did they? When I was poorly? I tell ye, lass, I was not poorly, just—me mind was on other things. Strangers?

There's been no strangers come a-calling since I don't know when . . ."

"How peculiarly he speaks, whoever he is," said Lucinda. She raised her voice. "If Mr. Joyleg has finished, may we see him again? If it won't tire him."

"A wench, by gad! A strange wench! Nay, lass, 'twill not tire me. Just bide a bit till I slip on me breeches. Ha!"

Lucinda's eyes widened. "That couldn't be him," she whispered. Then she laughed. "Why I suppose it's someone else with the same name. They're all cousins here, aren't they?"

"Now then, Mag, look sharp. A foreign wench, ay? 'Tis a long day since I've clapped eyes on a dear creature as wasn't blood kin to every other soul in the Notch. Tie me ribbon, Mag, and mind the ends are even and lie straight. Stap me vitals: a foreign nymph! Ha!"

THE TWO representatives were still looking at each other in perplexity—Martha was absorbed in the fire—when a step sounded in the doorway. He stood there, the fringes of his buckskin coat swinging gently. One bulge-veined and knuckled hand gripped a knotty stick, more like a cudgel than a cane. His gray hair—startlingly picked out here and there with strands of absolute black—was long, clubbed behind with a ribbon. His shaven cheeks were hollow but not sunken, his thin mouth was drawn firm under a great, jutting, bony nose, his eyebrows—

Lucinda recognized the eyebrows first. They were more than bushy and wiry, the black and white hairs long and trailing; the same alive brows she had seen on the old, old, very old man hunched, bundled and feeble, in his chair. But that one's eyes had been dim and rheumy, almost vacant; this one's—

His eyes. They weren't merely the physical focal point, they were the explanation and key to him. His hands, his skin, his stooped bearing, even the set of his mouth despite the compression of the lips, all spoke of age, great age—vigorous but unmistakable. But the eyes were not old, the color—the blue-gray of a winter sky—was not faded nor the sharp glance dulled. His eyes were powerful, commanding, willful. They were eyes which had seen an incredible lot without losing the desire to see much, much more.

He bowed. The gesture was antique but not humble. "Your servant, sirs."

Tully stared, swallowed. Martha snuffled. It was Lucinda who spoke, and she found herself rising to her feet. "Are you the Mr. Joyleg—Isachar Joyleg—"

He came into the room on a bound, support from his stick superfluous. His eyes darted from her slacks, to her face and bosom. "The same. Ecawd! A minx in breeks! An old jape and a neat one, 'tis a pocketful of years since I've enjoyed such a frolic. I mind once we smuggled a doxy aboard of the old *Alfred* . . . No matter, 'tis not a tale for maiden ears. Forgive an old man's loose tongue."

"You were in the navy!"

"Aye M'am," he bowed.

"Wonderful!" cried Tully. "Whom did you serve under? Porter? Farragut? Or possibly Cushing?"

"Never heard of um. Who be they?"

Tully stepped back in evident confusion. Lucinda too, was taken aback. How could a sailor forget Farragut, or even Porter? Cushing . . . well, frankly, she was a little vague on Cushing herself. But there was Worden, of the *Monitor*, and DuPont, and . . . and Dahlgren—whoever *he* was . . . But one thing she wanted to get out of the way, no matter what admirals he had served under and forgotten. "Mr. Joyleg, you receive a pension from the Federal—"

That did it, of course. No veteran was ever so old as to forget his pension. "Aye," cried Joyleg; "the scurvy bletherers, the knavish federalists, they've served me ill. A pension of eleven dollars: an eagle and a piece of eight every thirty days, whilst his majesty King John fills his pot-belly with Madeira wine and Chesapeake Oysters in the Federal City . . . Nay, he's dead, ain't he? And Red Tom on the same day . . ."

"I'm not familiar with the names—" began Lucinda.

"Not familiar with the names of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson? Nay, outlander though I plainly perceive you must be, still—"

Tully scowled; it was the first time she had seen him so evidently annoyed. "Mr. Joyleg, just what war is it in which you claim to have served?"

"So 'tis come to this, has it? The knaves now begrudge me even the pittance of less than two pound a month. 'Claim', says you. What mischief . . . ? I'll answer and be damned. The War Against King George. The War Against Great Britain. The War For Independence. The Revolution. Take your pick."

There was a long silence. Lucinda, very slowly, very gently, shook her head. Poor, befuddled old man, dreaming—like Don Quixote—of the past until the line of reality wavered. Tully broke the quiet. "Mr. Joyleg," he began, his face pale and set. "Mr. Joyleg—" He stopped, took a deep breath. The breath changed

to a sniff. He repeated it. "Mr. Joyleg, you've been drinking."

IX: Spirit of '76

LUCINDA laid her hand on Tully's arm. "No. He isn't drunk."

The anger went out of Joyleg's face. He sighed, slumped, leaned on his cane. "I thank you, dame. Nay, I'm not drunken."

Tully gestured. "But really . . . You can hardly expect us to believe a man old enough to have fought in the Revolutionary War is still alive," he said, almost pleadingly.

Joyleg considered this. He looked up from the fire at them. "Last time I crossed over the Gap, 'twas in me mind I'd come here to die. But I didn't, did I? No, no—" he shook his head, wondering at it himself, "—I didn't die . . ."

Another silence. Lucinda began, "The Federal Government—"

At once the firelight danced in the old man's eyes. "Aye Ma'm, there's the nub of it. Federal government . . . Federal District, Federal laws, Federal army, Federal taxes, Federal excisemen, Federal popinjays paid with Federal coin. Damme, we need some Liberty Boys, some Bloody Rangers, some honest whigs—not the fellers Harry Clay, that gaming macaroni from the Kentucky country, stirred up to vote for poor old Will Crawford and General Harrison, him as killed Tecumsi—some real Democratic-Republicans, some good Pennsylvanians like Albert Gallatin appeared to be afore he . . . Ay, I'm twaddling again. Don't bring to mind as I've had the honor of hearing your names."

TULLY, WITH a flurry of apologies, made the introductions. Joyleg nodded, inclined his head, but Lucinda got the impression that he wasn't quite sure who was who. Then Tully said the wrong thing again. "If you could offer some evidence . . . so we wouldn't look so foolish in getting recognition for you for your service in the Civil—"

"Civil again, do ye call it?" roared Joyleg. "Evidence, is it? Blood and guts! Do ye want to see King George's lead in me chest? Or the bale of bum-paper and pie-wrapper they called money and paid me off with in Eighty-three? Or Captain Barry's letter, offering a commission? Or—"

Martha sneezed. Joyleg was instantly the solicitous host. "You've been about in the noxious night air, good sir; 'tis full of miasmas, leading to fevers and consumptions. Happily I have a sovereign restorative—"

"A-a-AH . . . choo!"

"Bless my liver, 'tis another doe set out in pantaloons—thick as alewives they be. Never fear, poor she, our mountain dew works as well on a woman as a man. Mag, dear doll, fetch us a draft from the old keg, the one I broached for the Commodore's Birthday."

"Dode drig," Martha refused firmly. "Probised by gradbother."

"Lord love you, dear filly—drink the dram down, 'tis naught but physic to quench the malign fluids. Nay, nay, don't choke or splutter.

"Bud—"

"He's right, Martha," Lucinda interposed. "Look on it as medicine."

Joyleg nodded approvingly. "Well spoke. Now then, tell me what a sensible female like yourself is doing abroad in smallclothes with a poxy tipstaff."

"You are jumping to conclusions, Mr. Joyleg," said Tully. "Congress does not enforce laws. I am not concerned with suppressing violations of the Excise; Rabbit Notch has nothing to fear from me. I believe a man has a right to make whisky for his own use, particularly in inacccessible places where his corn might otherwise rot and certainly couldn't be profitably sold."

Joyleg looked at him searchingly. "Fair words; I'll trust you're none of Tim Pickering's crew, no, nor one of Gallatin's turncoats neither. You spoke of evidence before. Do ye think I'd lie?"

"Not exactly—"

Joyleg slapped his knee. "Right. Was I a rogue, I'd lie, and was I a rogue, any papers I'd show could be false."

"I'm sure any documents you have would be well worth a careful examination," Lucinda murmured.

Weathernox pressed him, "Do you mean you have no memory of the Civil War at all? Fort Sumter, Chancellorsville, Appomattox?"

"Sumter? Chancellorsville, Appomattox? I know them not."

TULLY SIGHED, sank back in the settle. "If only it were true. What a thing it would be for our national morale to have a veteran of the Revolution still among us—the Spirit of Seventy-six invigorating us. Such a man would be above politics. He would—don't you see?—unite Republicans and Democrats—"

"Wasn't aware they'd split," said Joyleg.

"—Dixiecrats and Adam Clayton Powell. Why, if Mr. Joyleg turned out to be one of Washington's men—"

"Well, I baint. Never was. Not for a minute."

The two representatives cried, "*What?*" in a single voice. Lu-

cinda thought, at last the mists have cleared from the poor, muddled old mind.

X: From The Maintop Of The *Bonny Dick*

SOLDIER? DO YE think I'd be such an addlepate, such a ninny-dizzard, wittold, or noodle, as to go for a foot-slogger? Drill night and day for that stiff-necked Prooshian? Mince and prance for the French markee? March bare-arse-naked in the snow for that Polander, Kosk-yoosko? Isachar Joyleg may have come to be a dotard in time, but give me leave to tell you: Dame Mehetavale Joyleg raised no spooney bairns . . . God rest her soul."

Lucinda shook her head helplessly. "If you weren't in the service, how can you claim a pension?" she asked.

"Damme, do ye think the war was won by dog-robbers and such? Did ye never hear of the time we harried the lobsterbacks' own land from the *Bonny Dick* and struck fear into the hearts of the Hanoverian squires as they sat snug on their fat backsides by their hearths?"

"The *Bonny Dick?*" inquired Lucinda, puzzledly.

"Is it . . . do you mean the *Bonhomme Richard*?" Weathernox hazarded.

"Aye. So fame's not lost entirely. The *Bonny Dick* . . ." he retreated into a mist, returned abruptly. "Bonny she was not. And you can't believe I was aboard her, ay? That I never served under John Paul his self? Yes, Isachar Joyleg was on the *Bonny Dick,* and afterward with the Commodore on the *Ariel,* too. Sergeant Joyleg of the United States Marines at your service—no soldier. No sir.

"Was I with Jones when he spoke the *Serapis,* you may ask? Where else would I be but up to the top with me platoon of musketmen when the captain of the Sassenach frigate (fifty guns, and the *Bonny Dick* naught but a sloop, fit for dipping herring from the German Ocean and little else), seeing he stove us in on one side and was raking us fore and aft on the other, halloes across, 'Have ye struck, Sir?'

"I looks down, and there's poor John Paul, his little ship sinking beneath his feet, dead men all around, and that lunatic frogified dancing-master in command of the *Alliance* running off after firing into us. Blood and guts was ankle-deep on the deck, and the blackness of despair was on me Commodore's face. I knew by the hang of his head what the answer had to be. I thought back on the dreary months we'd stagnated in French ports, groaning and helpless—though many's the dear French girl tried to lighten our mood—and how our friends

and kin at home were hard-pressed, and how John Paul—aye, and Dr. Franklin too and Silas Deane begged and prayed till we got the old tub, ill-rigged and worse supplied, he called the *Bonny Dick*. I thought of all this, looking down the shrouds, and I couldn't bear to see us come to such an end of things.

"'Have ye struck, Sir?' calls Dickie Pearson. 'No sir,' I bawls out, 'We've not started yet!' John Paul lifts his head and pricks his ears. 'What did you say?' shouts the Englishman. 'I said, "I have not yet begun to fight, Sir,"' John Paul shouts back, and zooks! it turned out to be the truth. The *Bonny Dick* was sunk, yes, but we took the *Serapis* for prize."

LUCINDA listened, rapt. Then she pulled herself up short. Of course it wasn't true that this man had witnessed it all, but oh, if it only could be true . . . "Sergeant—I mean, Mr.—Joyleg, are you sure you didn't hear it all from, say, your grandfather and—"

He stared at her, outraged. "Grandfather, sitha! Why, damme—"

"I didn't mean . . ." faltered Lucinda, fearful of the consequences of such excitement to his worn heart and fragile body.

He calmed down, grinning unexpectedly. "How to satisfy you I didn't hear it from another? Well, M'am, they do say females have no logic, but this I have never held. So follow this reasoning, if you will: John Paul was a Scot. I'm part so meself (North Briton's a Hanoverian term; I'll have none of it), so I'll not support the slander that a Scot is closer than a Yankee or Frenchman. Still, 'tis' known that a Scotsman'll think hard afore he gives something for nothing.

"Now John Paul weren't merely a Scotsman, he was a canny one, and had been a braw merchant into Guiana and Tobago afore his trouble. Still he was a grateful man for all that; he never forgot Joyleg up there on the maintop. He had naught to reward me at the time save some of the plate we manumitted on our raids—I've a pretty piece or two still lying around—and the thanks of Congress to him amounted to eighteenth on the Captains' List and a dress sword unfit to cut butter less it had been larded. But later on now he was sweet-man (saving your presence, but truth's truth) to Dutch Kate, who pizoned her husband, the Emperor of Rooshia. Do ye think he forgot his old sergeant then?"

It can't be true, thought Lucinda. Yet to suppose he looked it all up before 1868 and that it has stayed fresh in his mind ever since is to presume a miracle

greater than the age he claims would be.

"If you do, ye little know the Commodore. Admiral he was then, in the Rooshian service, but always Commodore to us. Evidence? Aye, I've evidence. Bide you here."

Joyleg went into the next room. In a few minutes he returned with a heavy, curling parchment, weighted with seals, and a single sheet of foolscap. He handed them both to Lucinda.

The parchment was inscribed in what she vaguely recognized as cyrillic characters. It had a scrawled signature above the seals, and beneath it, some paragraphs beginning, *Nous, Catharin, a la Grace de Dieu, Imperatrice . . .*

LUCINDA, who didn't read French fluently and was doubly puzzled by the peculiar spellings and turns of phrase, turned it over doubtfully. What was evidently a translation was carefully engrossed on the back. "We, Catherine, By Grace of God, Emprefs and Autocrat of All the Rufsias, Prince of Muscovy, Grand Duchefs of Kieff, Duke of Nowgorod, King of Byzantium and Jerufalem, Grand Hetman of the Oukraine, Ruler of Crim Tartary and Cazan, &c &c &c; Proclaim to all Men under Our Hand and Seal, that We have this Day devized to Our loyal and dear Servant, *Jno Paul Jones*, Chevalier &c, Knight &c, Rear Admiral in Our Imperial Navy, Acting Vice-Admiral of Our Black Sea Fleet &c &c &c, And to the Heirs of his Body OR to his other Heirs & Afsignees FOREVER, the Rank of Boyar & Gofpodar in all Our Rufsian Lands and at Our Court, together with ten thoufand (10,000) fquare verfts in the Gouvernment of Sibirfk (as fhown in the Map attached hereto and the copy of this Document in Our Archives in Peterfbourg) up to the Sky and down to the Centre of the Earth, including all Timber, Peltry, Gold & other Minerals, and whatfoever Nomads, Vagrants, Efcaped Servants &c &c (excepting only foldiers, Crown ferfs, & others in Our Employ, loyal to Us & on lawful bufinefs) to be ferfs to faid Chevalier Jones, to have & to hold, to hypothecate & fell; in appreciation of Services great & numerous which he hath rendered to Our Body & Our Nation . . . Ekatrina, Czaritfa."

The foolscap sheet was laconic. "I, the aforementioned Chevalier Jno Paul Jones, sometime Cmdre USN, do hereby devise the said grant from the Empress Catherine to Isachar Joyleg Esquire as a Token of Remembrance of his part in our Engagement with HNS Serapis, and this devisement recorded HIM Embassa-

dor's Notary in Paris this day. 10 July 1792. J P Jones, Captain, Navy of the U States."

Well, said Lucinda to herself, passing the documents over to Tully Weathernox, so there was a Joyleg—an Isachar Joyleg—with Jones, all right, but how do we know this is the one? But even as she asked herself the question she knew that the burden of proof had subtlely shifted: if the papers were false (she was sure they weren't), it was not up to Joyleg to prove them genuine, the carbon tests, the verification of watermarks, inks, signatures, would be up to those who couldn't believe. And Isachar Joyleg was Isachar Joyleg; those who refused to accept him as one and the same would have to show just when he was born and how he had come to have his story so pat.

"Um," said Weathernox. "Well . . ." He looked helplessly at Lucinda, who stared implacably back. The silence was broken only by the sound of Martha diligently sipping her medicine. "Well," repeated Weathernox, "I'm sure . . . that is, I hope there'll be no trouble convincing everyone. When you come to Washington—"

Instantly Lucinda Rose had a picture of Joyleg in a Veterans' Administration hospital ward, bleak and white and deathly, badgered by psychiatrists and gerontologists, prodded and tested and questioned by nurses and internes and specialists, a spectacle for visiting officials, newspapermen, article writers, actuaries, lawyers, pressagents, theatrical producers, sapped like an old tree torn up by the roots. Never, she told herself fiercely, never!

WHEN I WHAT?"

"But naturally you'll come to Washington," Weathernox bumbled on. "We'll get your pension adjusted in no time, and the President will shake your hand—"

"More likely hand me over to that black byblow, Alec Hamilton, a pox on him, the brass-leg. No sir—"

"But Alexander Hamilton's been dead more than a hundred and fifty years."

A slow, grim smile spread over Joyleg's craggy features. "What's that? Did Colonel Burr really put lead through him?"

"So you *did* know!" cried Lucinda.

Joyleg sighed and rubbed his chin. "You hear so much. So Alec never got to be President for all his scheming and conniving. Eh-heh." A sudden thought seemed to strike him. "Does that mean there's no tax on spirits now?"

Weathernox echoed his sigh. "I'm afraid not. I believe it's

something like eight dollars."

"Eight dollars on a barrel of whisky? Nay, sir!"

"Not a barrel—a gallon."

Joyleg looked at them speechless, then at the demijohn. Martha had quietly helped herself again and was still sipping. "And I took up my squirrel-piece again Alec Hamilton for fifty cents a barrel."

"You took up— You were in the Whisky Rebellion?"

"In it? Ecawd man, *I begun it!* In a manner of speaking, that is. 'Twas the good liberty cause, and all the mealy office-seekers were on our side till they saw the wind blowing t'other way. Us veterans asked ourselves how we who couldn't stomach King George's stamps were supposed to buy King Alec's."

"But that's all a long dead issue," said Weathernox with a trace of impatience. "The Whisky Rebels were all pardoned."

"Pardoned?" Joyleg's voice went up. "All of 'm?"

"Oh yes. By George Washington himself."

"Well, blast the pockified wretch, that hangman dog, blackleg, and crapulous Hessian. He never breathed word. 'We must move sly, Master Joyleg,' quotha, 'and not stir them up again you.' That scant-soap will never get my suffrage for hog-warden."

Lucinda, completely bewildered, queried, "Who . . . ?"

"Why, that tosspot Congressman I give six Spanish pieces and a hanch of venison to get me allotted stipend raised from eleven to twelve dollars. Aye, the foul scut, cozening me and then absquatulating for Texas [he pronounced it, Tex-shuss] along of Sam Houston and Colonel Bowie to try his hand at cozening the Dons."

"I'm sorry to hear such a thing of a fellow Representative," grieved Weathernox. "What was his name?"

Joyleg frowned, knuckled his temple. "What was the runnion's name, now? Never forget one—nay, nor face, neither—Cocker? Crocker? Crockett! Damned old, drunken old Davy Crockett, with his fancy white shirts dirty around the neck, his blue swallow-tail coat with possum-grease on it, and his high white beaver, won with a five-ace deck . . . Never trust a popinjay, I say, and b'gad I never shall again."

The horrified silence was broken by Lucinda's repeating, "Davy *Crockett*?" in a weak voice.

(to be concluded next month)

In a crisis, micro-seconds count. But not even the controllers of microseconds can save themselves from the unexpected results of their own . . .

DECISION

By ROBERT H. ROHRER, JR.

Illustrator WALKER

THE speaker stood on the ten-foot high, narrow platform. Before him was a crowd of ten thousand people. He was saying, "He cannot answer to these accusations because he . . ."

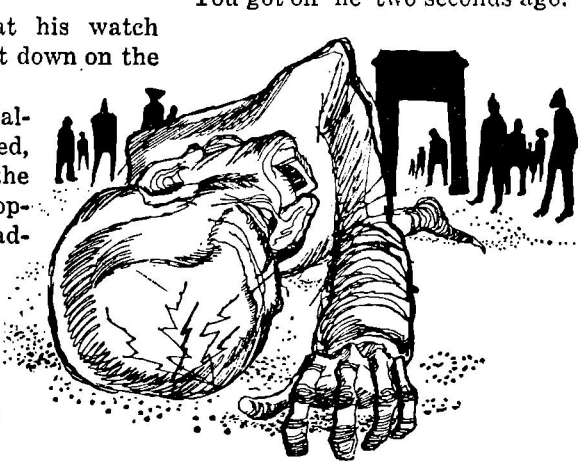
A shout went up. The speaker stopped.

Parke glanced at his watch and slammed his fist down on the desk.

"Damn that Gallegher," he growled, and picked up the telephone. "Hello, operator? Get me headquarters." He drummed his fingers impatiently for a few milliseconds, then said, "Hello headquarters? This is Audio. Connect me with Gallegher in Visuals, please." He waited as headquarters had him linked with the other department. Then a high, robust voice spoke up.

"Gallegher, Visuals," it said.

"Blast it, Gallegher," Parke roared, "where's the next word? You got off 'he' two seconds ago."



"I know, I know, cool down," said the other. "Something's come up. His eyes have left the page without recording a vision of the next word."

"What! Have you checked with Hearing Department?"

"Yep. They recorded a shout about fifteen milliseconds after 'he' got off. His eyes jumped from the page immediately. Must be headquarters' doings. They make all the decisions around here."

"You're right. We'd better get off the line. If it's anything serious, H.Q. will be contacting us pretty soon."

"Righto."

Gallegher's receiver fell into the cradle, and Parke slammed his down worriedly. Something bad was going on—he knew it, or headquarters would have switched Visuals back to the page again. When the guy you're working for is so important politically, and he's reading a speech in front of a big crowd—anything's liable to happen.

Exactly one millisecond later the phone rang. Parke snatched up the receiver and spoke into it anxiously. "Parke, Audio," he said.

"Parke, this is Gallegher again," said the voice on the other end. "The Old Man wants to see us right away at H.W. Better hurry—something's boiling over."

"Roger." Parke set down the phone, grabbed his coat and hat, and rushed to his transportation chamber. Strapping himself in, he mulled apprehensively over the situation. It was the crowd that worried him—a crowd that might be full of fanatics or Commies—

HE braced himself for the slight jolt of transportation, and then stepped from the chamber into the office of the Old Man. Gallegher, Fiske of Hearing, and Stanhope of Neck Muscles stood around the desk. Parke joined them.

The Old Man began speaking immediately. It was obvious from the briskness of his speech that this was something big. "Now boys, we've run into some trouble —bad trouble," he began, flipping a switch that killed the lights and illuminated an illustrated graph on his desk top. "In the left balcony of the building facing us, an intended assassin has his gun levelled at our man. The way things are now, if we don't do something immediately, he'll catch him right between the eyes," he said, pointing out on the graph the positions that he had mentioned.

"How much time do we have?" Parke asked.

The Old Man looked steadily at his watch. "Three seconds exactly," he said coolly. "My reports here show that the assassin has just begun to squeeze the

trigger. Contact will be made between the hammer and the shell in approximately two seconds and seven hundred milliseconds. We have very little time, gentlemen."

Gallegher spoke. "Don't we have enough for a spring sideways, sir?"

"No," the other replied. "That would take a little over four seconds. The muscles would have to be tightened from the feet on up, and they're too relaxed to try, now."

"How about the neck?" queried Stanhope. "Could I have it jerked to the side in time?"

"To do any good, that movement would have to be accompanied by a slight drift sideways. At the angle the gunman has on us, a head movement would not get us out of the line of fire," the old man said grimly.

"I think that it's clear that there is only one thing to do," Parke said. "We've got to cut off all leg power."

"But—that's *dangerous*, Parke," Gallegher objected. "Once power has been shut off, there's a hell of a time waiting before we get it connected again. And, in this case, we might never get it back on. He's a pretty old guy, you know."

"Nevertheless, I'm sure that you must agree that it's the only thing to do," Parke defended his plan.

"But what if the legs should lock instead of buckling?" Stanhope asserted.

The Old Man interrupted. "Gentlemen," he said, "I am afraid that evidently it is the only thing we can do. We shall face the consequences later, yes, and they may be horrible, but at the moment," he utilized his watch again, "we have exactly two seconds and nine-twenty-three milliseconds to act."

"I'll get Peds for you, sir," Parke offered, and picked up the phone. In a moment the Old Man had ordered that all power to the leg muscles be disconnected.

"Now all we can do is wait—and hope," the chief said.

HOW long before we can tell which way the joints of the legs will go?" asked Parke.

"About one second," said the Old Man. And then, grinding his fist into the blotter on the desk, "One second."

Four men stood in the large chamber, waiting, watching the illustrated graph anxiously. The telephone's harsh ring intruded upon their thoughts. The Old Man picked the receiver from its rest, and spoke nervously into it. "Headquarters, Chief Manager speaking." His face blanched slightly as he laid the phone down. "The hammer and shell have made contact," he said.

Parke started. He hadn't re-

alized that so much time had passed. Gallegher spoke first.

"And no news from the Peds yet?!" he asked in a rasping, shocked tone.

"None—" the Old Man began, but the telephone interrupted him. He said nothing, this time merely listening. A stub of a smile relieved the sober lines of his face. He cradled the receiver.

"The legs didn't lock?" Stanhope inquired hopefully.

"Better," the chief replied. "The left leg locked, but the right didn't. Our man will have wheeled around out of the way of the oncoming bullet in less than two hundred seventy milliseconds."

Parke patted beads of sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. "Close," he muttered. "Close."

Stanhope sank into a chair while Gallegher contacted the Arm-Muscle Department to ready them for the coming fall. Then the three department managers left for their respective departments to direct the actions during the drop to the platform floor.

Parke leaned back in his chair and waited for instructions from Visuals. But as he propped his feet on his desk, there was a sudden, violent jar, and he fell over backwards to the tile floor.

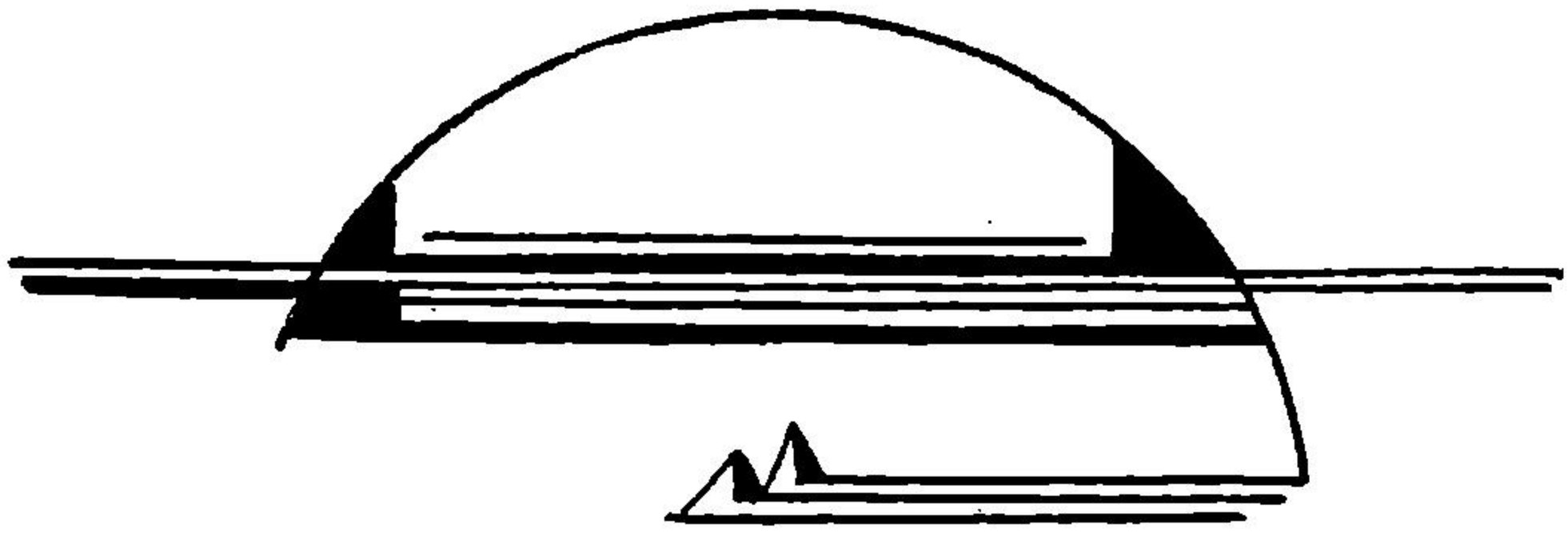
In a matter of microseconds the telephone was jangling. Parke, ignoring the rapidly deepening red murk outside, grasped the receiver and jerked it to his ear. Gallegher gasped from the other end, "Going fast—idiots—edge of the speaker's platform was—too narrow—nothing arms could do—fell over head first—ten foot dr—"

There was a loud clump from the other end, and they were disconnected.

The red mist seeped into Parke's office, overspreading its area in a few microseconds. The manager clapped his hands to his head, staggered against the wall, and fell to the floor. The telephone exploded as headquarters disintegrated.

Darkness closed in.

THE END



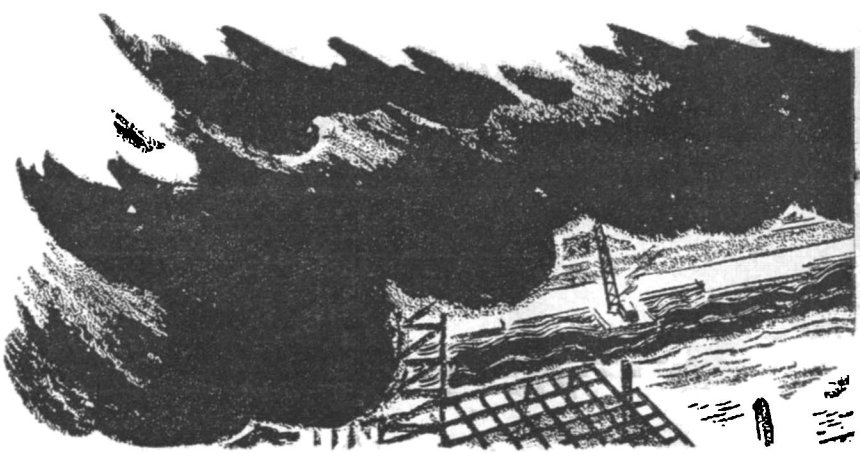
the DARKNESS on Fifth Avenue

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Illustrator FINLAY

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

THE year 1929 was a boom year for science fiction. Hugo Gernsback, who had fathered AMAZING STORIES, *lost control of the magazine but not his interest in science fiction. He came back with the first competition the field had yet seen, producing under one banner* SCIENCE WONDER STORIES, AIR WONDER STORIES *and* SCIENCE WONDER QUARTERLY *all in the same year as well as a group of pamphlets called* THE SCIENCE FICTION SERIES. *It was a year when the weird-fantasy magazine,* WEIRD TALES, *aware of the stepped up tempo was offering* The Dunwich Horror *and*



Virgil
Finlay

The Silver Key *by H. P. Lovecraft as just two of many stellar performances from a team that included Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Henry S. Whitehead, S. Fowler Wright, Gaston Leroux, Seabury Quinn and Otis Adelbert Kline.*

In the general periodicals such as BLUE BOOK, *Edgar Rice Burroughs followed quickly on the heels of* Tanar of Pellucidar *by showing* Tarzan at the Earth's Core. *Somehow, in an* ARGOSY *magazine that had just completed science fiction attractions by Otis Adelbert Kline, Erle Stanley Gardner, Ralph Milne Farley, F. V. W. Mason, Garrett Smith and Ray Cummings, a veteran named Murray Leinster managed to score powerfully enough with* The Darkness on Fifth Avenue *to rate three sequels and a "welcome back!" from devoted science fiction readers who had seen only a few things by him in the previous eight years.*

Murray Leinster was to remain a "regular irregular" in science fiction from that point on. The Darkness on Fifth Avenue, *published when S. S. van Dine was all the rage in detective stories and scientific sleuthing was very much the vogue, forcibly reminded the readership that science was not the exclusive property of the forces of law and order, that brilliant minds could ally criminal ingenuity with science and that a scientist might well have to be the strong right arm of the law if sanity were to survive.*

CHAPTER 1

Blotted Out

THE moon was shining brightly in Central Park as Police Lieutenant Hines went at a leisurely pace toward his home. He'd been at a party, and it had been a tiresome one, as far as he was concerned.

The gravel under his feet crunched and crackled. He pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lighted it. The path curved and recurved. It came out at the edge of the lake and followed along its shore. And the moon was rising high above the tall apartments that line Fifth Avenue. Its light flickered and shimmered on the water in small, irregularly-shaped lambent flames.

Hines slowed down and stopped, to look at it. Shrubbery on every hand, silvered by the moonlight. The rising shores of the farther side of the lake were made queerly glamourous. The throbbing, rumbling murmur of the city all about him came as a curious incongruity. It seemed

particularly odd because the wavelets of the lake were running up on the shore edge with small lapping noises, and it seemed that the city should be thousands of miles away. And Hines could hear the heavy, rather monotonous splashing of the huge fountain at the end of the Mall, but it sounded like a waterfall.

"It is pretty, isn't it?" said a girl's voice behind him.

Hines turned around. A girl was sitting on a bench, quite alone. She couldn't have been speaking to any one else.

She lifted her hand as if in a gesture for him to sit down beside her. He couldn't make out her face, but the slim silken legs were shapely in the moonlight, and the dress was fresh and cool.

Police Lieutenant Hines smiled to himself. Being attached to the detective bureau, he never wore a uniform, and he was off duty anyhow. He said unreproachfully:

"Sister, I'm a cop. You ought to be careful."

But the girl chuckled. She clasped her hands together and laughed; and then she chuckled again.

"But, Mr. Hines, it isn't against police regulations to speak to an acquaintance in the park, is it?"

Hines stared and suddenly flushed.

"I'm Kathryn Bush," said the girl on the bench, still amusedly. "Remember me, now?"

"Oh, Lord, yes!" said Hines.

"I'm not hunting copy tonight," she assured him, with a bare trace of malice. "I came out to be by myself and look at the moon and be stupid and romantic. The combination's necessary, isn't it—stupidity and romance?"

HINES puffed at his cigar.

"I was wondering myself," he admitted ruefully. "I just came from a party. The girls were pretty and stupid, and the music was stupid and pretty. And I didn't have a good time. I've been enjoying myself more, just looking at the moonlight, than I did at the party."

There was a little pause.

"'Sentiment on the Police Force,'" murmured a soft voice. "'Police Lieutenant Hines Discovered Moon-Gazing. Famous Vamp-Proof Detective Prefers Chaste Luna to Chasing Flappers. Special to the *Star*!'"

Hines stiffened and groaned. That was the exact method Kathryn Bush used in her column in the *Star*. She could make any man ridiculous; and she could twist her column to the bitterest and most sardonic tragedy when she chose.

"Don't!" said Hines desperately. "Please! I'd—"

"I wouldn't," said the girl. But she chuckled. "It wasn't even a temptation. Don't worry. I like you much too well. You do play fair, Mr. Hines, and you get fair play in the city rooms. I was sorry, afterward, that I treated you as I did."

She'd served him up to her delighted readers after the Paulson murder case, which he'd handled. On the whole she'd let him off easily. He knew it. She'd been no worse than gently malicious about one or two of his personal traits—enough to let people who knew him rag him.

There was another pause.

"I fibbed when I said I came out here to be alone," she said suddenly. "I had a sort of hunch that something was going to happen. Intuition, if you like. I don't know—I get hunches sometimes. When I saw you, I knew I was right. You generally manage to be where things are happening, too. What's going to happen?"

"Nothing that I know of," said Hines. He was relieved by her promise not to use him again in her column. "I was just walking home. That's all."

"Then," she said comfortably, "you'd better sit down. Something is going to happen. It always does."

Hines sat down. The waves were lapping almost at their feet, on the other side of the path. A park light glowed perhaps twenty yards away. Now and again the soft purring of a motor car on one of the automobile roads came to their ears.

"What do you think will happen?" asked Hines, mildly amused.

"I don't know," she admitted. "It's just a feeling."

The purring of a car came near. It was a heavy, powerful car, and the singing of its tires was as loud as the noise of its motor. It was moving slowly—very slowly. It went by the bench hardly more than fifty feet away, on the other side of a planting of shrubbery. A voice came suddenly from it, a trifle muted by the distance and the car's movement.

"Hell! How long's it goin' t' take yuh?"

Hines stiffened. He knew that voice, but couldn't place it. Some one he'd had dealings with some time. A crook's voice.

"I'm ready now."

This second voice was clipped and precise. Hines frowned to himself. He didn't know the second voice at all. But the first was —was—somebody he knew, and somebody who was wanted.

"Jam on the brakes, Pete," ordered the voice he knew. "He's goin' to try it now."

BRAKES squealed, thirty or forty yards away. The park

was very quiet indeed. It seemed as if the two on the bench could even hear movements within the softly purring car.

Hines felt the girl looking up at him. He was listening, while he racked his brains for a name.

"I think it must be happening," she said detachedly. "My hunches do work out sometimes."

The harsh, precise voice reached them:

"Look at the moon."

Involuntarily the girl raised her eyes. The full moon was swimming in a sea of stars. It was big and bright and smiling—

It went out.

Pitch darkness fell instantly. Hines was on his feet in a second. He felt the girl's hand tighten convulsively on his arm. He unbuttoned his coat unobtrusively, seized his service revolver.

But he was staring about into a blackness which was exactly that of a moonless night with a sky full of thunder-clouds. The suddenness of the fallen darkness was horrible. Its completeness was terrifying. The silence all about became ghastly.

There was no noise except the lapping water and the sound of a powerful motor idling at low speed a little way off, and a tiny sound which was not even a whisper—the vagrant night breeze stirring the leaves of the trees and shrubbery.

The silvery moonlight was cut off, absolutely. The moon had gone out. The stars had ceased to exist. Yet, dimly—very dimly—the opposite shore of the lake was visible. Its outline was sharp. And flickers of what could only be moonlight came from there, bright and vivid and scintillating. Hines flung his head back once more. The sky was blotted out exactly as if some one had suddenly placed a roof over a part of Central Park.

Then a voice came from forty or fifty yards away. The clipped, precise voice of the second man in the car.

"Satisfied?" It was almost a snarl of triumph.

"Yeah!" came the first voice again. It was awed, and it was exultant "Plenty! If y' c'n do the rest y' say, it's a cinch!"

The darkness lifted, exactly as if some one had turned on soft lights with a switch. The moon shone down again, round and benign and placid, swimming in a sea of stars. There was the minor roaring of a heavy car going into first speed, second, and away.

Hines suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"Lefty Dunn!"

The girl beside him was shaken. Her grip on his sleeve showed that. The abrupt and complete darkness and its equally complete and abrupt removal, had unnerved her. But she shook her-

self a little and became the newspaper woman again.

"It happened," she said coolly, in a voice that quavered only a little. "But what was it?"

"That voice was Lefty Dunn," said Hines grimly. "I thought he was in Chicago. He's wanted—for murder, among other things. If he'd known I was sitting here, he'd have taken a chance on trying to plug me, with a good car for a get-away. He has no particular reason to love me."

"But the darkness!" said the girl sharply. "What was that? And why was it done?"

Hines looked at her blankly for an instant. Then he searched the sky. From horizon to horizon the stars shone out through the smoky haze wich the city itself interposes between itself and heaven. There was no trace of cloud, no trace of any mistiness which was not of the city's own production.

I THOUGHT—" Hines knitted his brows, and then said impatiently: "I don't know what it was, but I've got to get word in that Lefty Dunn's in town. He's — Good Lord!" He stared at her. "Did you hear those voices in that car, and what they said?"

"Of course!"

He took her elbow and began to march her along the path at a rate that forced her to trot a little.

"Lefty said, 'When are you going to be ready?' and some one said they were ready then. And that second voice said to look at the moon, and the moon went out. And then somebody, the same voice, asked if Lefty was satisfied." Hines was talking almost feverishly and increasing his pace toward the Mall. "Do you see what it means?"

"I see," said the girl practically, "that to-morrow afternoon I have a headline, 'Moon Turned Off in Central Park,' and some wise-cracks about cruelty to petters in the city's recreation spaces."

Hines was hastening his pace almost to a run. The path they were following branched. One branch led out to the smooth automobile roadway. The other meandered on about the lake. Hines fairly dragged the girl down the shorter branch, toward the nearest police phone.

"Please don't!" he said sharply. "It is too serious for that—much too serious! Lefty Dunn's a dangerous man. He's one of the very few men who can organize criminals into coöperation. Don't you see that if we aren't crazy, both of us—"

Lights swept the ground before him. A horn honked in a startled fashion. There was a swoop and a rush and a humming noise. Hines grabbed the girl and jumped backward.

A huge car flashed by so swiftly that its back mudguard flicked at the girl's sheer skirt.

A voice came back from it. "Get t' hell outer the way!"

The car was gone, and Hines was staring after it and reaching into his pocket, his lips compressed.

"Things are happening," said the girl beside him. "Thanks. They weren't a bit careful, were they?"

"That's Lefty Dunn's car again," said Hines grimly, "and I got its license number which may mean nothing at all."

The car was speeding away, smoothly and silently, its headlight beams visible through mist and dust-swirls.

Hines began to write swiftly; but the girl caught at his arm again.

"Look! Oh, look!" she gasped.

The automobile roadway branched, ahead, and there were two cars with gleaming headlights coming down toward the intersection. Each one was perhaps twenty yards from the point where they would be visible to each other.

Lefty Dunn's car slowed down; and suddenly, before it there poured out a dense cloud of blackness. It was not smoke. It was not dust. The headlights of Lefty Dunn's own car bored into it and were smothered instantly, without being dissipated or reflected. It did not waver, as a mass of smoke or vapor would have done.

Dunn's car was going ahead still swiftly, though at less than its former rate, and it did not run into the darkness. The darkness kept on ahead! It seemed even to have a definite cone-shaped form.

Now the intersection of roads, and the traffic policeman at that intersection, and the tall hillock of earth behind it which had been brilliantly illuminated a moment before—everything was blotted out utterly.

From that incredible oblivion came a terriffic crashing noise. Instantly thereafter the darkness vanished. The headlights of Lefty Dunn's car shone pitilessly upon the scene. One car had its nose halfway into the chauffeur's compartment of the other. Both of them had been slued around by the shock.

A woman began to scream shrilly in one of the cars. A man dragged himself out of the other. The traffic policeman ran to the spot, blowing on his whistle.

Lefty Dunn's car swerved to avoid the wreckage, took the right-hand road, and swept on out of sight.

THERE was nothing in the least peculiar about the rest of it. It was merely an automobile accident, and an ambulance

arrived and administered first aid, and a long time later two derrick-cars arrived and towed the crippled machines away; and there was only a puddle of oil and a few splinters of glass left to show that anything had happened. The only thing at all odd was that the traffic cop and all the occupants of both cars insisted that they had simultaneously been stricken blind for a few seconds before the crash, and that that blindness had been the cause of the collision.

CHAPTER II

A Terrible Weapon

HINES left the office of the commissioner of police next morning with his jaw tightly set. In his own car, on the way back to his office, he swore softly but luridly; and he went into his office with an expression in which impatience was the least disagreeable ingredient. The commissioner of police had been incredulous and at the last impatient himself. The corroboration of the traffic cop had been dismissed as a very clumsy alibi for carelessness. Even the park policeman who had seen the moon go out for two minutes withered under the commissioner's sarcasm. Hines sat down at his desk and swore steadily, getting madder the longer he thought about it. He knew what he had seen. Two other members of the police force backed him up. A total of seven people in two cars which had been smashed up made exactly the same statements. And the whole thing was dismissed as a pipe dream.

It was only when disgust began to take the place of wrath that he noticed a report on his desk. He'd given orders that the license number he had noted down should be traced. The report was laconic, in the usual form. The license had been traced to Oliver Wetmore of—Central Park West. Mr. Wetmore was in Europe, and the car, a Pierce-Arrow, was in storage. The reporting officer had examined the car in the storage garage and found the license plates missing.

"Stolen," said Hines grimly. "Anybody who went to put a car in storage or take one out could have taken them. Somebody did. It's a dead end; but it proves, anyhow, that whoever was using 'em last night is crooked."

He called headquarters and succinctly repeated the report, asking that all officers on beat be ordered to look out for the number and report it by police phone. Within half an hour every uniformed man on the streets of New York would be watching for it, among other things. Those other things would include twen-

ty-seven small lost children; five runaway girls, with descriptions attached; seventeen stolen cars —license numbers given; anywhere from four to fourteen fugitives from justice; and a philosophical anarchist.

It did not look especially promising. Hines knew it. But he also knew that the famous police dragnet sometimes has its inexplicable successes. Meantime he made some telephone calls.

The Museum of Natural History referred him to the research bureau of the American Electric Company. After twenty minutes of more or less patient waiting he had an anonymous specialist in research physics on the wire, who listened with amused patience to his account and then told him tolerantly that what he had seen was impossible. Light could be neutralized, to be sure. Monochromatic light could be altered by another monochromatic wavelength to a non-visible color. And interference would neutralize even sunlight, but only by the use of partial reflection, which was only practicable under laboratory conditions.

Hines thanked him politely and hung up.

"But, dammit, I saw it!" he growled.

The phone rang as he prepared to make still another call. It was Kathryn Bush.

"Good morning." She seemed to be amused. "Have you been told you're crazy?"

"I have!" said Hines grimly.

"So have I," she laughed. "But I have a news item for you. It wasn't used anywhere, but it's news. Get a pencil and write it down."

Hines pulled a memo pad into place. "Ready."

SHE read slowly. There is a vast amount of news that goes into newspaper offices, and more especially into the press associations, which is either unimportant or improbable and never sees print.

"'Edginton, New York. This town has heard a lot about freak weather, but Elias Rowe, of Stony Mountain, makes the latest contribution. Mr. Rowe drove over from Stony Mountain to-day to ship two calves and buy supplies. He reports that Stony Mountain is getting the fanciest brand of summer weather yet. He first noticed it a month ago, when as he was plowing his north twenty field he noticed a grateful shade. He looked up and saw the sun shining brightly, but with most of its heat missing, and the sky much darker than usual. He went home and put on his coat.

"Nearly every day since then he's been getting fancier weather. He reports that yesterday it was pitch-dark for over half an

hour in his barnyard, so dark that even with a lantern he couldn't see to water his horses at dinner time. He was inquiring how long these here eclipses were going to keep up, but when assured that nothing of the sort had been seen in Edginton, he drove home muttering about city wisecrackers. Local wits assert that Stony Mountain has either an inferior brand of sunshine or a very superior brand of moonshine.'"

"Got it," said Hines laconically. "What about it?"

"It's about a month old," came the voice over the wire.

"I was wondering if it didn't refer to some experiments with apparatus that might—er—turn out the moon."

Hines stared. Then:

"It sounds like it," he admitted. "I'll look up Edginton—"

"I have," said the voice in the receiver, comfortably. "It's a little hamlet of about three hundred people, away upState. Stony Mountain isn't a village. It's a mountain, with no more than two or three houses within miles. A splendid place to do experiments of this sort in."

"Thanks. You ought to be on the force."

She laughed once more.

"Oh, this stuff is a bribe. I expect to be given the inside, when you find out what's up."

"Something's up, all right," agreed Hines grimly. "Lefty Dunn had those two cars smashed up just to see if he could, I'm thinking. The moon business was a test, the wreck was an experiment."

She rang off, and Hines read the clipping over again.

This clipping had been discarded from the news because it was impossible. And what Hines had seen had been termed impossible by a scientific authority. And yet, if Hines wasn't crazy, he'd heard Lefty Dunn ask somebody to give a demonstration of some sort, and the demonstration had been the putting out of the moon.

Considering what had happened later, it seemed probable that some piece of apparatus had been pointed upward into the air, from the car in which Lefty Dunn was riding. Later the same car had shot out a beam of darkness straight ahead of it instead of upward, and that beam had blotted out its own headlights, the headlights of two other cars, and a park light just over a traffic officer's head. It was at least conceivable that the production of an accident had been another demonstration.

But the question before Hines was, why had Lefty Dunn been chosen as the person to be convinced that a certain apparatus could throw a beam of darkness in any chosen direction from a

car? What had he meant when he said, "If y' can do the rest y' say, it's a cinch?" What else had the man with the clipped, precise voice claimed he could do? Was the beam of darkness ahead of the car the thing in question? Was—

THE phone rang sharply.

"Hello!"

"Lieutenant Hines, a report on the license number you queried." Clickings, and the fainter voice of a patrolman on beat, making his regular report at the box telephone. "The car with license J 41166, sir, is parked just off Madison Avenue on Fifty-Eighth Street, sir. It's been there two hours, sir, and I tied a ticket to the steering-wheel and made a note of the number and recognized it as one to look out for."

"Still there, eh?" asked Hines.

"Yes, sir."

"Keep an eye on it. Lefty Dunn was riding in it last night," said Hines briskly. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

He hung up and instinctively felt beneath his coat for the regulation revolver. Lefty Dunn would be a dangerous man to arrest. If the street was crowded it wouldn't be wise to try it unless they could jump him so he wouldn't have a chance to pull a gun.

The little police runabout had no outward indication of its official status. But there is a certain sequence of numbers that you never see on any but police cars. The letter designation on the license plates is "C," and the next to the last two figures are three and six.

Honking impatiently, the little runabout threaded traffic, crossed against traffic lights with a certain confident impunity, and went streaking up Madison Avenue. Hines was driving, and he was in civilian clothes, of course. His companion smoked languidly as the car darted northward.

Its horn blew impatiently as the patrolman on beat dawdled past. He looked unhurriedly, and made an inconspicuous motion with his hand. Hines drew up to the curb, stepped out, and stopped the patrolman with exactly the air of one asking for information.

"In front of the Blowbar Building, sir," said the uniformed man. "Been there about two hours, now. The tag's on the steering-wheel."

"Right. Thanks."

Hines went leisurely to the corner. He saw it at once. The car of the night before, powerful and gleaming and insolent, standing before one of those incredibly slender eighteen-story buildings that spring up on narrow frontages in New York. The building was new. Next to it an

old-fashioned, sedate brownstone house still stood blowsily, with a "Furnished Rooms" sign visible in the front parlor window. There were three other houses just like it, and then a massive building of six or seven stories that went on to the end of the block and Park Avenue.

Hines went briskly across the street, turned into the office building, and scrutinized the floor directory carefully, as if he were looking for a name and was puzzled at its absence. Nothing. The lobby was merely a golden-marble entryway to the building, and a means of communication with its two elevators, both now aloft. There was no one in sight at all. From inside, however, Hines could look the car over thoroughly. It was a Packard, not a Pierce-Arrow, and he was justified in making an arrest on account of the false license plates alone. The street, too, was by no means crowded, and while gunplay would not be desirable, it could be risked.

HE went out of the building and saw his companion from the roadster strolling toward the corner. The patrolman idled negligently near by. And then, quite suddenly, there was the clashing of elevator-doors from the building he had just left, and four men came out. Hines looked at them swiftly, recognized two of them. He thought he recognized a third. The fourth was Lefty Dunn.

He signaled with his hand. His companion and the patrolman drifted his way as the four men moved to the car and stood a moment, talking, beside it. The door of the blowsy brownstone house opened and a man came out of it. He was a tall, blond individual with flowing yellow whiskers. He came down the steps to the pavement.

Hines saw a nod pass among the men beside the car. One of them climbed into the chauffeur's seat and pressed on the starter. Hines unbuttoned his coat. And suddenly his whistle shrilled.

It was not quite quick enough. He blew it instead of opening fire, but even a shot would not have been quick enough. The three men beside the car had jerked glittering things out of their pockets. The sharp barking of automatic pistols cut through the shrilling of the whistle, and the tall man shuddered suddenly and began to collapse slowly to the pavement. The automatics barked.

Suddenly everything went dark. One instant Hines had been hurtling himself toward the huddled group of three men who were pumping lead at an evidently intended victim. The next instant he was careening

through a blackness that was utterly opaque. He could not see the ground below him, or the sides of the street, or the sky. He felt the pavement striking the soles of his feet, but otherwise he might have been lost in the abyss of nothingness.

The whistle went on shrilling eerily in the darkness. In that absolute opacity before him a man cursed, and some one began to shoot at random. A bullet stung the skin of Hines' arm. He shot savagely at the sound. There was no flash to shoot at. He stumbled on the curbstone as someone squealed. A voice was roaring orders, and the exhaust of the big Packard boomed. Caroming wildly on, Hines struck a man. He fell on him savagely, striking viciously as the man collapsed, twisting an automatic from the unseen fingers and flinging it away. The man writhed and was still.

The voices were almost on top of him. Hines shot furiously at the space below them. Then a clash of gears, so near that he put out his hand. Something brushed against it and was gone. He knew the feel. He had reached out and touched the moving tire of the car at the curbing. He had been so close that but for the blackness he could have leaped into it. It roared away, sharply, swiftly—

There was silence except for the traffic noises, and startled, excited exclamations. The patrolman was blundering about.

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant Hines!"

"Here!" snapped Hines. "See how far this damned darkness extends. I've killed a man, I think, and they killed another one first."

"It stopped at the corner," said the plain-clothes man dazedly, blundering toward Hines in the blackness. "I came into it because I heard you shooting, sir. What—"

Hines swore again. He'd struck a match, which had not seemed to light, and he'd burned his finger on the invisible flame. He struck another, now, and held it carefully closer and closer to his eyes. At four inches he could just distinguish it. At two inches its flame was clear. He thought he could see his finger in the light.

But he began to feel the man underneath him. His victim, no doubt. A sickish feeling came over him as he felt something warm and wet on his fingers. He felt unspeakably ghoulish, squatting there in the darkness. The hair rose at the back of his neck.

WITH an infinitely slight sensation of flickering, the darkness vanished. The street, the sky, the buildings on every hand flashed into view. There

'was a dead man under him, and his hand was stained red, and there was another man lying quite still on the pavement a few yards away, and the patrolman was in the act of blundering against a brick wall. The plain-clothes man was fumbling his way with outstretched hands through broad daylight.

Hines stood up. He wanted to be sick, and he was filled with a vast and incredible rage. Two other uniformed men were running toward the spot.

"Get an ambulance," snapped Hines savagely. He looked in the direction in which the big car had disappeared. It was no longer in sight, of course. It had turned into Park Avenue and was mingled indistinguishably with the other traffic. "Take a look at that man there. See who he is. I'm going to look in this building."

He turned into the office building. An elevator was coming down. The doors slid open as he reached out his hand to touch the summonsing button. A broad-shouldered man with a professional Vandyke and a professional-looking bag in one hand and suitcase in the other, stepped out.

"Can you tell me what that shooting was?" he asked harshly. "I'm a doctor, and I thought I might be needed. You're hurt! Here, let me fix it."

"It's not my blood," snapped Hines. "There are two men out in the street who need looking after. I'm a police officer."

He dismissed the elevator-passenger summarily and fixed the colored elevator-boy with his eye.

"Y-yes, suh!" gasped the elevator-boy. He turned several shades lighter when he saw a glistening reddish stain on the hand that pointed a grim finger at him. "Y-yass, suh!"

"You know the clients of this building. How many offices have been rented lately—within a week or two, or a day or so?"

"A-ain't but one, suh."

"Take me there, in a hurry," said Hines savagely. "Speed!"

It was clear enough. The four men who had come out of the building had timed their exit for the emergence of the man they'd shot. They must have been in some office in the building from which they could see the brownstone rooming house, and possibly even into, say, a skylight room. When the man they intended to kill put on his hat and approached his door, they had started for the street.

Moreover, Hines had been able to look into the Packard fairly thoroughly, and it had contained nothing but the cushions. There was no sign of any complicated apparatus for the production or a direction of a beam of any sort.

The darkness must have been sent down from some point in this building.

The elevator-boy was trembling visibly, but the doors swept shut with a swift hissing sound and the car abruptly shot upward. If the stopping-point of the elevator had not been automatically controlled, it is certain that the operator could never have made a reasonably accurate landing. The glass doors slid aside.

"Th-there y' are, suh."

"Which door? Wait here!"

THE pebbled glass of the indicated door was unmarked and plain. Hines tried it, standing behind the solid wall. No sign. The door was unlocked. He flung it wide and stepped within.

The office was small and empty of all furniture, and was dusty as if it had been left unoccupied for a long time. One or two nails in the wall, and a few untidy smudges upon the paint were evidences of some previous occupant, but the only sign of its last inhabitant was a half dozen radio B batteries near the window with wire terminals still affixed. The red sealing-compound tops were bright and shiny and untouched by the dust which lay heavily upon the floor. And there was a smell of tobacco in the air. More, it was tobacco which had not had time to stale.

Hines jumped to a conclusion. He put his head out of the window. A short blast on his whistle made the patrolman's head swing back. Two other uniformed men had arrived at the spot where shots and a police-whistle blowing indicated something wrong.

"Nobody to leave this building!" shouted Hines through cupped hands. "Hold the doors until I get down!"

He went swiftly back to the elevator. The operator trembled again.

"Who rented that office?" he snapped, "and how long had he had it?"

"M-mistuh Preston, suh," said the trembling colored man. "He —uh—he rented it las' week, suh. Sayd he was a doctuh, suh, but his furniture ain't come in yet. He was in heah a coupla hours to-day, suh, an' some frien's of hisn, suh, jus' went out 'bout five minutes ago."

The elevator began to sink rapidly toward the ground floor.

"What does he look like?" demanded Hines. "When did you see him last?"

"Uh—you, suh," quavered the operator, "you seen him, suh. He got outer the car an' spoke t' you, suh, when you got in."

Hines clenched his hands and ground his teeth. Memory came to him enragingly. The voice that had asked what had caused

the shooting, and that had offered to bind up his supposed wound—it had been the same voice that had spoken in the car with Lefty Dunn the night before.

The instant the elevator doors opened, he knew the futility of pursuit. The shots had been fired all of three or four minutes before. A crowd had already gathered and was surging closer and closer about the uniformed men who now struggled to keep the two dead men from being trampled on by the merely curious crowd. The square-shouldered young man with the Vandyke and suitcase had walked out into that crowd and vanished. There were plenty of taxicabs about. He was undoubtedly sitting comfortably in one of them and being driven to a destination which might be any of the million homes in Greater New York.

Hines nodded despairingly to the plain-clothes man who had essayed to guard the door and keep the occupants of the building from leaving until Hines' arrival.

"That darkness was made by a man in an office on the fourth floor," said Hines bitterly. "He was working with Lefty Dunn to kill that other man, and he's got away. Oh, my God! What a fool I am!"

CHAPTER III

Boldness Wins

HINES'S self-disgust held until the ambulance left and the crowd had dwindled to a mere sprinkling of sightseers who pointed out to each other where the two men had been standing when shot, and other argumentative persons who debated with much vehemence and no information whatever on whether or not the reported cloud of darkness had actually been present.

The man with the yellow whiskers was breathing, but that was all. He needed surgical attention in a hurry. He was rushed to a hospital. The same ambulance took away a huddled figure in very natty clothing and a sporty cap to whom surgical attention would be of no use at all.

There would be only commendation for Hines for shooting that second man. He was Micky the Dope, wanted by several States and by the Federal government in addition. Decidedly, Hines had come out of the affair with credit.

But he was bitterly disgusted with himself. He had more than a hunch, now, that there was much more at stake than merely the shooting down of a still unidentified man. There was, it was very clear to Hines, more in-

volved than the capture of Lefty Dunn.

Hines was the only man in New York who saw the possibilities inherent in the settlement of darkness down upon parts of Central Park the night before. He was the only man in New York who could have nipped those possibilities in the bud. And he had let the man with the clipped, precise voice walk right past him after speaking to him.

"There's going to be hell to pay before we get him," he groaned, "if I know Lefty Dunn and if I guess right what that man's got."

He waited impatiently for the fingerprint wagon and rushed the photographer and the finger-print technician up to the deserted office with the radio batteries on the floor.

"There'll be fingerprints on those batteries," he announced. "At least two sets—the man who sold them and the man who handled them in here. I want to know which is which, and the best set of prints you can cook up of that second man. And here, by the window." He pointed. "Here on the sill, and right here where a man'd steady himself when he looked out to get a good sight of that house next door. There were five men up here, I think, and they were watching and waiting for a man to get ready to go out.

"Yes?" said the finger-print man. He yawned. "Anything else you want?"

Hines managed to grin.

"Plenty," he admitted. "The commissioner thinks I'm crazy. If he finds out I dragged you up here—when the shooting happened down in the street—he'll be sure of it. I want proof that Lefty Dunn was here this morning, and Micky the Dope—that's the man I plugged—and Joe the Greek, and I think Pete Lazzarini. The last two have records, but they aren't being looked for. Lefty and Micky were supposed to be out of town. Now, will you find those prints for me?"

"If they're there," said the finger-print man.

HE got right to work. First he dusted a little of his grayish powder about the B batteries and blew very gently. He surveyed the result with satisfaction.

"Pretty," he said pleasantly. He went over to the window and went through a slightly more involved process on a small area.

"Plenty of prints here," he said boredly. "All right, lieutenant. These prints are new ones, and some of them are very nice ones. I'll have photos ready in two or three hours, but I can't promise they'll be untangled right away. That'll take time."

With a sigh of relief, Hines

left. He debated an instant down in the lobby of the building. He ought to— But the man in the hospital might recover consciousness. It was most important of all that he tell who had wanted him out of the way.

Trace down the man with the motive, and sooner or later Hines would trace down the gunmen themselves. And if he traced down the gunmen, sooner or later he'd find out who had flung on a curtain of darkness at a remarkably convenient moment. And if he caught that man, he'd have forestalled a number of undesirable happenings he began to feel more and more sure were in the wind.

At the hospital the blond man was still unconscious and Hines was impatient.

"But he may come to any moment," the surgeon told him comfortably. "I took a chance. Unconscious, no response to stimuli, severe shock. No need to give him anæsthetic shock besides. I had an ether-cone handy, but he didn't murmur while I worked on him. Much better off. He can talk as soon as he comes to, instead of your having to wait an hour."

Hines was thinking busily. His eyes hardened.

"Any chance of his living a few days?" he demanded. "Long enough to do some identifying if I catch a man I'm looking for?".

"He should live ten years," the surgeon said placidly. "A bullet glanced off his skull, and there's not even concussion. Another went through the fleshy part of his shoulder. A third just missed his knee-tendons—a narrow thing, that. He'll be able to walk out of here in three or four days, most likely. He was lucky. Why was he shot at?"

"That's what I want to find out," said Hines.

"Go up to his bed, then," said the surgeon.

Hines was pacing impatiently up and down the corridor outside the ward when an idea struck him. He examined it warily. Then he called a nurse. In five minutes the still unconscious man was shifted to a private room, and his clothes were brought in.

Hines was going busily through the pockets and frowning savagely at the lack of identifying data when there was a knock on the door. A nurse put her head in and said:

"The young lady you were expecting."

HINES' face was blank when Kathryn Bush came in.

"You're not playing fair!" she said, her eyes stormy. "I had to fib to get in. But the press must be served. I told them you were expecting me. I guessed you'd be here. How is he?"

"Knocked cold," said Hines. "That's all. Then he added exasperatingly, "But look here—"

"Look here?" she echoed reproachfully. "I'm responsible for your getting the leads in this affair from the beginning. If I hadn't had a hunch and gone to the park, and if I hadn't risked arrest by speaking to a police officer who happened to be moon-gazing, and if I hadn't kept him talking to me, he'd never have known a darned thing was out of the way! And I gave you some important stuff this morning. It wasn't fair to hedge."

"Good Lord!" said Hines irritably. "It came too fast. I didn't have time to do anything. Certainly not to telephone you—"

"Oh!" She seemed mollified. "You would have phoned me if you could? That's all right. Now, what happened? A wild account of mysterious shootings, and darkness in broad daylight, was phoned in, and I grabbed the assignment. Threatened to weep all over the city editor's desk if he didn't give it to me. So I'm handling this for the *Star*. It sounded too insane to be true, but I knew better, especially when I heard you were in it. What really did happen?"

Hines went back to his investigation of the clothing, while he told her jerkily about the whole thing.

"The city editor wouldn't believe it," she said placidly. "As an assignment it is a dud. I told him about the moon and the accident last night and he looked at me as if he expected me to say I was Mary, Queen of Scots in one minute more. I blushed. Actually, I blushed! I felt proud of that blush afterward. Something of youth has survived even the city room."

Kathryn was possibly twenty-two or three, but whatever Hines might have intended to say, it was interrupted by a nurse. She came in, bent over the bed, and glanced up.

"He's conscious."

Hines moved swiftly to the bedside. Bland, clear blue eyes looked up at him above the rather incredible yellow whiskers. A booming voice said without emotion:

"I have been conscious for some time. *Verdamm!* Is that what happened?"

There was a distinct accent in his speech, but his sentence-structure was the careful accuracy of the educated European, tinged, presently, with exotic colloquialisms.

"If you heard me talking," said Hines, "you heard what happened. Yes. I'm Police Lieutenant Hines, and I want to know some things. Please try to tell me who you are and who you think wanted to have you killed."

"In spite of the very deffil of a headache," said the booming voice from the bed, "I have been trying to think of the answers to those questions for at least fife minutes. I saw the gentlemen who shot at me, yes. You, Herr Hines, were running toward them when I fell. But I nefer saw any of them before at any time. And I am *verdammt* if I know why they should shoot me. I am being calm, howefer. I shall give it my attention. Maybe I shall think it out. How much am I hurt?"

"Not badly," Hines assured him. He was biting at his lips and frowning in thought.

TELL me," said Kathryn suddenly, smiling down at the bandaged man on the bed. "Were you ever in a place called Edginton, New York, or a place called Stony Mountain?"

The candid blue eyes turned to her, but they were wide with astonishment.

"Young lady," said the booming voice plaintively, "as a scientist I haff refused to admit magic into my considerations. But how in der name of forty-sefen deffils do you know that I came from there only a short time ago?"

Kathryn was twinkling triumphantly at Hines. He grunted.

"You win," he said briefly. "Go on."

"Who worked with you up there?" she asked. "I think he had you shot."

"Breston? No. He is a scoundrel in his way, and I do not like him. But he is a good scientist, and I haff no quarrel with him."

Hines grunted at the name. "Preston: he's about thirty-five," the detective said shortly, "very broad-shouldered, and he affects a Vandyke beard. His voice is rather harsh, and he speaks very precisely."

The wide blue eyes swung blankly to him.

"I think I will haff to call on more than forty-sefen deffils," the booming voice said more plaintively still. "*Himmel!* You know eferything. That is him. Do I need to say that my name is Schaaf—"

Kathryn looked up.

"Oh! You made the direct measurements of the size of a molecule."

The patient blinked.

"I nearly starff to death," he observed, "because there is in America no way for a theoretic physicist to earn a lifing. Nobody has efer heard of me. And I am shot at by utter strangers, I wake up in hospital—I must be in a hospital—and a young lady tells me where I haff been, a gentleman describes to me a man I most prifately dislike, and then I am reminded of a relatifely unimportant mistake I made six years ago."

Hines grunted impatiently.

"Preston's the man who had you shot, all right. And I think I know why. Professor Schaaf, it all works down to this. Up in Edginton you were working on the production of darkness, the neutralization of light—"

"No. Not I. I merely did measurements for Breston. He offered to gife me passage-money back to Europe if I did them. He got them cheap. Measurements of der mass and dimensions of der atmospheric ion, and changes in der mass and volume of der molecule when der allotropy of ionization took place."

"Well, then, Breston, or Preston, he was working on the neutralization of light—"

"*Ach*, no! On der production of fluorescence in ionized bodies under der iufluence of short Hertzian wafes. Wait—yes, I suppose you could say that. It is not scientific, but you might say that. When his apparatus finally got working it gafe off darkness that was like der bottom of hell."

Hines emitted a grunt that was almost explosive.

"Ha! Now we're getting somewhere! He has an outfit that makes darkness. It was used to help his gunmen escape when you were shot at, and I have excellent reason to think it's going to be used for more criminal purposes still."

"Criminal? It was pure science. Theoretic science. Der fluorescence of ionized substances under der influence of short Hertzian wafes. Does that sound like a help to safe-blowers?"

HINES drew a deep breath and began to talk. When he mentioned the shutting off of moonlight in Central Park, Schaaf nodded rapidly. He seemed to have lost surprisingly little strength.

"Yes. He could do that. He was working on a beam apparatus when I left, so that der darkness would be gifen off on one side only. He could not read der instruments before."

The account of the automobile accident that seemed to have been deliberately produced made the yellow-bearded man frown angrily. When Hines had given a succinct account of Lefty Dunn's police record and the ambitions he might be expected to cherish, Schaaf was rumbling in his beard.

"Hm— I see. I see. Maybe I can help you. Maybe I can't. I try, anyhow. I did not like Breston. He made me mad. When I saw der success of his experiments come about I said, 'Breston, I congratulate you. Der Atchison medal is der same as yours. If you carry on your work as splendidly as this, it may be efen that I shall yet read of you as a Nobel Prize man. You haff

der disposition of a dyspeptic crab, but you are a great scientist and I congratulate you from der bottom of my heart.' I said that to him, in spite of der fact that he had made me mad. And he laughed at me. 'Atchison medal?' he said in a sneering sort of way, 'Nobel Prize! Schaaf, you are a damned fool. I am for bigger things than that.' And I turned around and left him. I thought he must be crazy."

Hines said curtly:

"With Lefty Dunn's organizing ability, he might pick up anywhere from a hundred thousand dollars to half a million within the next week, in New York City alone."

"Maybe, then, he is not crazy. You tell me, anyhow, he tried to get me killed. Hm—Lieutenant Hines, you send somebody to my room at that abominable house where I liff. Get eferything out of it. Eferything. I have papers of my own, and there are some memoranda of his that I took by mistake. I had intended to send them back to him. It was by accident that I took them. We will begin to see what we see. I haff an idea. And I will need all that I can findt about his figures."

Hines looked at the girl. She had been listening. But a good reporter, these days, does not go about with a pencil and a pad of paper. With soft shirts and soft cuffs in vogue, he does not even write on his cuffs. And Kathryn had no cuffs, anyhow.

"I'll go myself," said Hines briefly. "I'm going to post a guard at your door in case anybody has heard that you're still alive. My own opinion is that it would be wisest for you to die."

Schaaf blinked, and then smiled wryly.

"*Ach*, yes. It is better that I die. For der sake of my health, let us say. Fery well, I haff expired, and while you go get der things from my room I will think der wise deep thoughts of der defunct."

Kathryn smiled at the man in the bed and followed Hines from the room.

"I'm coming, too, if you don't mind," she announced, in the hall outside. "As a news story, this is a dud. Even if the *Star* printed it, the other papers would laugh. But I want to follow up what happens, because if Lefty Dunn and his friend Preston do use that darkness, I'll have the whole story for the *Star* while the other papers are just guessing. You see?"

"I do," said Hines, relieved. "It shouldn't be printed just now. I was trying to think of some way to persuade you to kill it, as far as publication.

IT took less than five minutes to get two uniformed men on

guard outside the yellow-bearded man's door, but it took ten to arrange that if any inquiries were made, by telephone or otherwise, the answer would be given that the bearded man shot on Fifty-Eighth Street had died without regaining consciousness.

"Schaaf knows too much about what Preston has developed," said Hines dryly. "Of course Preston wants him killed."

Then the little police runabout went sliding through traffic down town again. The finger-print car had vanished from before the Blowbar Building. Hines let his mind linger hopefully on the possibilities finger-prints might offer if they turned out well. He went up the steps of the blowsy brownstone house. An angular woman with her head in a towel opened the door.

"I'm Police Lieutenant Hines," said Hines briefly. "A lodger here was shot about two hours ago and taken to the hospital. I've come to take charge of his effects."

He displayed his badge. The woman wiped her hands nervously.

"O' course you can go up," she said uneasily. "O' course! But his things have been took. A friend of his came an' said he'd helped put Mr. Schaaf in the ambulance, an' Mr. Schaaf was very likely hurt bad, an' he paid the room rent that was due an' packed the things up, an' 'bout half an hour ago he sent a taxi for the things that were left. He said Mr. Schaaf would be in the hospital for a long time an' he'd take care of them for him."

Hines's jaws snapped shut.

"He was a broad-shouldered man," he said grimly, "with a beard like a doctor."

The woman nodded, relieved.

"Yes, sir. He'd been to see Mr. Schaaf before, sir, but he missed him."

"When did he come in, today?" demanded Hines.

"Why, right after the ambulance left, sir."

Hines ground his teeth.

"I'll look at the room," he said savagely, "but it's no use."

It was very clearly useless to look in the room. It had been stripped clean of everything but the furnishings plainly provided by the house itself. The bureau drawers were emptied. The suitcase one would expect any transient to possess were gone.

"That was Preston," said Hines to Kathryn Bush with a savage calmness. "He was in here, packing up papers and such things, while I was in the building next door. He was probably in this room when I stopped on the sidewalk, not certain whether to come here or go first to the hospital. Nerve? That man has it!"

"And you think—"

"He'll bleed New York dry," snapped Hines. "He'll make the police force a laughing-stock."

CHAPTER IV

Black Horror

THE shooting of an unknown man who died without regaining consciousness was not big-time news. The curtain of sheer darkness which eye-witnesses swore had blocked the whole of Fifty-Eighth Street for nearly five minutes would have been big-time news had anybody believed in it.

Reporters who questioned Hines got noncommittal answers, found out that of the two men killed one was a well-known gunman previously supposed to be in Chicago, and let it go at that.

The finger-prints satisfied Hines completely and convinced the commissioner finally, but that bit of evidence was not made public. So the killing got an average of a quarter-column on an inside page in that afternoon's papers; the curtain of darkness was either not mentioned or was referred to as a smoke screen left behind by the fleeing car, and the whole affair was summed up as a New York reflection of a probable Chicago gang-war.

Schaaf grimaced when he reread the accounts three days later. Hines had moved him from the hospital to his own apartment, and the big German was recovering rapidly. And as his strength came back a certain grimness came with it.

"Breston," he explained firmly, "is a scoundrel. He stole my records, which I had intended to publish. Those records are important. *Himmel!* I had an entirely new method of measuring. Der amplitude of der Brownian mofement in a dilute electrolyte enabled me to calculate der ion-masses perfectly. I had proof of der multiatomic nature of der molecule of six supposedly simple substances, by der demonstrable extra weight of der ions. Sooner or later I shall find Breston, and I shall exterminate him! I haff all my work to do ofer again, and right now if somebody offered to sell me der whole city of New York for six cents, I couldn't buy enough dirt to stop a watch."

Kathryn chuckled.

"I've an idea, Professor Schaaf," she said encouragingly. "When this thing breaks, you're going to get publicity. You're dead right now, of course, but when you're resurrected you'll be famous. And when you are famous—"

"When you are famous, efen if you are a fake," said Schaaf pessimistically, "der laboratories fall ofer themselfs to offer you a

salary. All right. You make me famous, Miss Bush, and you, Mr. Hines, giff me a chance to practice *Schrecklichkeit* on that *verdammt* Breston."

He retired behind a cloud of smoke with every appearance of gloom. But presently he was explaining, in answer to Kathryn's questions:

"Breston does not make darkness. Not directly. He has found that ionized particles are fluorescent under der influence of certain short Hertzian wafes. And there are ionized particles eferywhere. Especially where there is dust. Fluorescence is der property of absorbing light of one wafe-length—one color—and radiating out light of a longer wafe-length, another color.

"You take rhodamine dye, for instance. You throw ultra-violet rays upon it. Der ultra-violet rays are a color so far past der blue end of der spectrum that it is infisible. But when they strike der rhodamine, they are absorbed and radiated away again as light of der most fifid of scarlet. Well, under der influence of Breston's short Hertzian wafes, der ions on dust-particles and in der air absorb all der colors of fisible light. And they radiate it away again as infisible colors we call heat, which is so far past der red end of der spectrum that you can't see it.

"Ordinary air contains enough ions to cause der absorption of practically all der light in der room. A laboratory with Breston's apparatus in it gets as dark as der bottom of hell, and after awhile it is as hot as hell's chimney."

KATHRYN rose.

"I'll call on you," she said soberly, though her eyes had devils of mischief in them, "to give me a special interview. 'Thermometry in Hades. Famous Savant Measures Ultimates in Heat and Discusses Refrigerating Rooms for Red-Hot Mammas.'"

"Laugh," said Schaaf pessimistically, "but laugh in print, Miss Bush, and I won't complain."

He lapsed into a depressed silence as Hines and Kathryn went out.

"He takes the loss of his notes pretty seriously," said Hines, frowning. "So do I. He might have been able to work out something to neutralize the infernal thing."

"It's still hanging fire?"

Hines opened the car door for her. "Still," he said grimly. "We can't locate Lefty Dunn, but we do know that half a dozen of our most prominent gunmen and gangster-leaders have met him. We offered one of them, in particular, to forget about two of his most useful murderers if

he'd come across with information that would enable us to nab Preston and Dunn. But he insisted he didn't know what we were talking about. The commissioner soft-pedaled the newspapers, but he's convinced. There were too many eye-witnesses to the last stunt."

"And so?"

"We're passing out word to all the big jewelers to put paste in their shop windows, and the banks especially have been warned to take extra care."

The little runabout was running swiftly down upper Broadway. The parked center-spaces with the air-ducts for the subway beneath were flowing by at an even, regular rate. Columbus Circle appeared dead. The façade and canopy of an uptown motion-picture palace swept by to the right.

A heavy gray car jerked suddenly out into the traffic and came purring up to a space no more than ten yards behind the runabout.

Quite silently and quite suddenly everything was blotted out. One instant the runabout was speeding along with Hines frowning abstractedly at the wheel; the next it was rolling through an opaque blackness that was so sudden that it stung the eyes. The girl gasped in her seat beside Hines. All the world was obliterated. The girl beside him ceased to exist; the wheel in his hands and his hands themselves could not be seen.

For perhaps three seconds there was stunned silence everywhere; then a multitudinous squealing of brakes, a scared squawking of horns.

The runabout shuddered as Hines jammed his foot down hard on the accelerator. It shot ahead through nothingness. There was a peculiar little lurch. He had swung imperceptibly to the left, and his left-hand tire had just slipped down the tiny drop of the surface-car rail exposed by road repairs.

"We're all right for a block or more," he snapped into the blackness all about him. "I'm following the car track, and all's clear for at least that distance."

He drove on and on. Brayings and bellowings arose on every hand. Every car in motion had stopped stockstill and its driver was sounding his horn desperately. Every man, it may be, believed he had been stricken blind. Certainly no man dared attempt to drive.

Hines eased the car to a stop.

"Get down in the bottom of the car," he said quietly into the nothingness that surrounded him. "I don't think they'll risk coming this far in the dark, but get down."

He felt the little car responding to her movement. Then

there was a wait of seconds—minutes. Then, with a sudden flickering, the light went on again.

PEDESTRIANS, groping hysterically for something solid to hold on to in their inexplicable blindness, grew dizzy and dazed at the sudden restoration of their sight. Drivers of many cars burst into speech which varied from the ludicrously prayerful to the grotesquely profane.

But Hines had whirled about in his seat and his service revolver was out and ready. The sudden return of light dazzled his eyes for a moment, but he saw a big gray car that had not quite stopped turn abruptly and dart off into a side street. It was crowded with men. It was the car that had pulled out from the curb and followed along some ten yards behind him.

With a grimace that was not in the least mirthful, Hines put his revolver away.

"Fooled 'em," he said harshly. "But I think hell's to pay to-day. This was half an accident."

Kathryn scrambled to her seat.

"I was s-scared," she said quietly.

"They saw me drive by," said Hines grimly. "Lefty Dunn has reason to dislike me. And I killed one of his men the other day, when they shot Professor Schaaf. So when they saw me they pulled out into the traffic behind me. They figured I'd do what everybody else would do when the blackness fell—jam on my brakes and blow my horn. And they'd come up to the car, turn off the darkness, fill me full of holes, and turn on the darkness again when they moved to a corner and turned down it. They could have sighted their way easily enough in two seconds of brightness. But I stepped on the accelerator instead."

The traffic was a nerve-racked, hopelessly disorganized mass of shaky drivers. Drug stores were being packed with clamorous people demanding a doctor's attention. Women had either fainted or were fainting all about. Because of the incredibility and consequent non-publication of the three previous uses of the darkness-producing device, every person who had been in the darkness considered that he had suddenly gone blind.

Hines jammed on his brakes again and fought his way into a drug store. He made two calls—using his police badge to force a way into the phone booths—and fought his way out again. The first strictly individual panic began to give way to a stunned amazement as people discovered that not only themselves but every one else had been blinded at the same instant.

The runabout circled Colum-

bus' statue and went streaking down Seventh Avenue.

"I called headquarters," said Hines savagely, "and reported that I thought the whole works would come off within an hour or so. I admitted it was a guess, but Dunn and Preston are in a car fitted up to make darkness, and they aren't taking chances for fun."

"Please!" said Kathryn imploringly. "Please don't put me out of the car to make room for a detective. Please don't! If you're right I'm going to realize my life's ambition and scoop the town. The first things I learned in newspaper work were that there isn't any Santa Claus, and scoops don't happen any more. But please let me stay in this car!"

Hines shot on down town.

"Headquarters said the Merchants' National is moving three-quarters of a million in currency some time this morning. That will be Lefty Dunn's meat, if he can make it. When I stop the car you find a place to take cover."

A small, firm hand closed over his arm ecstatically.

"You're a darling!"

THE runabout swung east at Thirty-Ninth Street.

"I phoned Schaaf, too," said Hines jerkily. "Told him I thought the darkness just now was intended to get me, but that I didn't believe it was planned. Just that they'd caught sight of me. He agreed, and said if things went dark there he'd crawl under a bed. They'd have to turn off the darkness to find him, and he'd have a chance to get some of them. He's enthusiastic and hopeful."

"He's rather a dear," said Kathryn exuberantly.

There were a series of staccato poppings to right and left. Half a dozen motorcycle police dived through the traffic and shot ahead, weaving in and out, in a dead run for Fifth Avenue.

"There's proof the commissioner's convinced," said Hines dryly. "He's afraid not to be."

He grunted in annoyance and swung in to the curb again.

"What's the matter?"

"I proposed that patrols of four or five men be put at strategic points down town, wherever being able to turn on the darkness would offer a killing. The darkness is shot out in a beam ahead of the car. The back part of the car that makes the darkness will be visible, as we saw in the park. And if we have a patrol closing in on the edge of darkness, wherever it may be, they'll spot that car."

He had dived out of the runabout and was plunging in to use a telephone again. Kathryn remained seated, her eyes shin-

ing. She began to visualize headlines, a by-line on the first page, photographs.

Then, quite suddenly, she realized that the headlines she had imagined were hopelessly bad, from a newspaper standpoint. Police Lieutenant Hines would be featured in the story, of course, but his name and title would not—would definitely not by any chance be set in hundred-and-twenty-point type across eight columns.

He came out, frowning.

"They'd forgotten it. It seems certain to be Fifth Avenue. They're going to post men now."

He shoved in the clutch and put the car in first. Fifth Avenue was only half a block away.

And there was a sudden flickering in the air, and then an abscure duskiness everywhere, and suddenly Thirty-Ninth Street ceased to exist about a hundred feet ahead of the car. There was a huge, thick wall of darkness that rose out of the earth and towered upward. For three seconds it loomed far above the tiny vehicles in the street, and suddenly it broke, and for three seconds more the light showed again, and then the cylinder of darkness abruptly formed once more and held.

Hines jammed on the brakes. He stared at the impalpable barrier of opacity that rose a hundred feet in the air.

"It's turned on," he said grimly.

Kathryn stared. The blackness looked almost exactly like the section of a monster cylinder of black velvet. There was not a particle of flickering or wavering about it. It was steady enough to seem tangible. A touring car with the top down was exactly halfway into it, and a woman in the back seat began to scream. The car began to back, slowly, and emerged from the apparently solid mass of darkness. The chauffeur stared up at it, his face a sickly gray. He backed and backed, senselessly, until his car crashed into a parked car behind him.

The black cylinder curved gently, and up aloft it could be seen to have a less definite edge. Four stories up on the Lord & Taylor Building one could see a cobwebby darkness begin at the edge of a window, and deepen to the complete opaqueness of a solid barrier only at the other side of the glass.

THEN a monstrous, muffled uproar began on Fifth Avenue. It was the horns of many, many thousand cars being sounded by panic-stricken drivers to prevent their being run into while they could not see to drive. That moaning, discordant uproar began far down town. It extended far uptown again. It

seemed to reach from one horizon to the other. And a vast column of implacable darkness lay athwart the city. It seemed to grow in size as it went uptown. At Forty-Second Street it was definitely over a hundred feet in height. At Fifty-Seventh it was two hundred, but seemed less tangible. It was thinner at the edges. In the Eighties it seemed hardly more than a thick, dense smoke that made all drivers slow down to a crawl and careful drivers stop altogether. At One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street it was a shadow only. Beyond the Bronx it was not noticed.

But from Madison Square to the Sixties a deep, discordant bedlam rose to the skies. The horns of thousands of helpless, stationary cars arose in a vast bellowing sound that seemed like a million-tongued cry of agony.

CHAPTER V

Wolves To The Hunt

FIFTEEN minutes before, Fifth Avenue had been entirely normal, which is to say that it was crowded and picturesque. From curb to curb the asphalt was a solid stream of vehicles, going swiftly north and south in parallel lines, then halting abruptly for a space, and darting into swift motion again. The sidewalks contained their diverse populations.

About Madison Square, north of that small and isolated parking space the city fathers permit, there were openings in the wheeled traffic. And people could walk comfortably on the sidewalks, pausing to gaze into windows without being jostled, or they could hasten if they chose without jostling others.

Whistling young men in their later teens pushed wheeled boxes with a self-admiring dexterity from the location of one wholesale firm to the location of another wholesale firm. The occupants of the sidewalks were mostly men going from one place to another place.

Around Thirty-Fourth Street the character of the pedestrians had changed entirely. At least half the crowds on the sidewalks were women, and in consequence there was vast confusion and more than a little obstruction to anybody who had a definite destination. The wheeled traffic was a solid mass of gleaming vehicles, and a swift mechanical purring came from the space between the curbings whenever certain colored lights showed appropriate tints in suitable directions.

At Thirty-Ninth Street the pedestrian traffic was almost exclusively female, and most men moved west to Sixth Avenue if they were in a hurry. And a surg-

ing, solid mass of motors rolled north and south in mechanical obedience to lights and whistles in their five-block units.

This was fifteen minutes before the event that made women who could afford it have nervous breakdowns, and gave other women less luxurious nightmares for weeks afterward.

At about that time taxicabs began to appear here and there on the side streets leading to the avenue. The taxis stopped anywhere within a block of Fifth Avenue and disgorged their fares.

Most of those passengers were youngish men, and nearly all were impecably dressed, and a few of them had that curious bluntness of features that comes of many batterings in many battles. Some, however, were distinctly shabby and furtive-eyed. And there were a few figures who were not young at all, but old and bent and broken. But in all these anomalous newcomers to the avenue one common feature could be observed. All were eagerly expectant, and all were more or less uneasy, or at least in doubt.

But for the most part the arrivals passed unnoticed. A patrolman at Thirty-Seventh Street widened his eyes at sight of one little group of amiably chattering young men who smiled and talked and very curiously did not move their lips at all. That patrolman turned deliberately about and strolled in their wake, swinging his night-stick and privately cursing the fact that so many women had not stayed at home that day, and that a policeman has so many duties entirely unconnected with the basic duty of his profession, and that he might lose sight of those young men if some fool woman stopped him to ask an idiotic question.

A traffic cop stepped over to a motorcycle patrolman resting on a still but chugging mount beside the curb.

"Better keep an eye on that car, Pete. I think I know the guy that's drivin' it."

And the motorcycle sputtered loudly and drifted off into the stream of vehicles.

A doorman outside a particularly exclusive store cocked a wise eye at a bent, white-bewhiskered figure trudging rather pathetically through the crowd, buffeted about by chattering women. The doorman was an ex-cop, and reflected inaudibly:

"There's old Schmeel, out of stir again. He'll be gettin' in trouble if he tries his old dip tricks in this crowd."

THESE observations were made, it is true. But the vast majority of the new arrivals slipped unnoticed into the throng. Even the fact that a

great many of them looked now and then at their watches passed without comment.

Of course, no one could have been expected to observe a gentleman who had rented desk-space three days before, in a front office overlooking the façade of the Merchants' National Bank. He was gazing intently out of the front office window, and he held an office telephone in his hand.

No one could have guessed that he was talking to a man in another office fronting on Madison Square. Nor would any one guess that the man next to him with another telephone instrument in his hand was similarly connected with a telephone booth in a confectionery store just around the corner from Fifth Avenue.

A big gray car parked in the triangular parking space where Broadway crosses Fifth; it was not particularly observed, even though it was not empty of people like the other parked cars. And nobody at all noticed that the man at the driver's wheel was a broad-shouldered man with a professional-looking Vandyke beard, or that he was looking intently up at a window in which a man stood with a desk telephone in his hand.

Fifth Avenue for its whole length was a picture of swift and colorful movement in the bright sunshine. From the sidewalks where women predominated a babble of voices arose with the shuffling sound of many feet in movement. From the roadway came the booming, purring noise of many motors and the singing of innumerable tires. It was a highly picturesque and wholly normal sight.

But suddenly, one of the two men in the office facing the Merchants' National Bank said sharply:

"It's in sight."

The other man spoke into his transmitter. A clumsy gray object had appeared in the flood of wheeled things flowing below. New Yorkers gave it no second glance. Armored cars, equipped with bullet-proof walls and tires, and armed with machine guns and hand-grenades, move regularly through the streets of New York. It is, you see, the most civilized city in the world, and therefore land battleships are necessary for the movement of valuables about its thoroughfares.

"Get movin'," snapped the man whose phone communicated with the phone-booth around the corner. "The cops are comin' out now. They' goin' to rush it."

He listened, hung up the receiver, and lit a cigarette. His hands trembled a little. Four policemen were issuing suddenly from the bank But six young men were rounding the corner,

five of them having just ceased a cordial conversation in a candy store lobby on having been joined by the sixth from within. The policemen more or less efficiently checked the flow of pedestrians. They had a clear path made from the bank doorway to the curbing at the exact instant that the armored car came to a complete stop. It was excellent, neatly timed work.

"It's stopped. Get set!" The man at the telephone to Madison Square was tense. He'd seen, too, the six young men among the milling, curious crowd that had been checked by the police guard.

The door of the armored car opened. Simultaneously, two men appeared in the doorway of the bank, carrying apparently heavy bags. They came quickly down the steps.

"Shoot the works!" snapped the man at the telephone. His voice was strained to the breaking point.

THERE was a breath-taking pause, just about long enough for a man in a window on Madison Square to make a signal with his hand, and for that signal to be acted upon by a man in a parked car. Then, quite suddenly, darkness—tangible, blank, and absolute—fell upon the earth. All visible objects were blotted out.

It held for three seconds. Then unbearable and unbelievable daylight flooded the world once more. A shot, two, three— Then darkness fell again in the same incredible quietness and with the same unbelievable intensity.

From the darkness there arose the sound of firearms crashing savagely. There were screams. And then from south to north, as far as the ear could range, came the discordant, throaty bellowing of automobile horns. Men, struck blind, jammed on their brakes and set their horns to bellowing. The tumult that arose was horrible and insane; it was insistent and terrifying.

The crashing of guns ceased. The crowded, stunned mass of people before the Merchants' National heard panting snarls, heard a voice gasp triumphantly, "Got it!" and then many of the blinded, staggered people were hurled aside.

The bellowing horns of the cars were enough for orientation. Men and women who had stopped stock-still with their hearts in their throats at the sudden feeling of hopeless blindness upon them, were hurled to the ground.

A compact group of panting figures was heading swiftly and ruthlessly northward, and battered its way through the dazed crowd until a shrill whistling sound was audible through the deeper toned bellowing of the horns. Those figures turned in their savage progress, then, and

clutched at the man who blew that whistle. He chuckled. A blind man is a good guide in darkness. He went before them, tapping, down a side street.

Unbelieving people who stared from bright sunlight at a monster cylinder of darkness that seemed to have engulfed Fifth Avenue saw six hatless young men come panting out of that darkness, dragging two heavy bags, saw them pile themselves into a waiting car, and saw that car plunge madly away from the darkness and the uproar that issued from it. And a blind man chuckled and went tapping his way back into the darkness.

That, though, was not the only occurrence which later showed that the darkness had not been unexpected. An old, bent blind man, returned from guiding panting gangsters to the light, went zestfully about his ancient trade. A dip, of all men, needs his eyesight second only to his nimble fingers. But here all men were blind.

There was the cushioned tapping of a stick amid all the tumult of blaring horns, and figures felt one brush accustomedly against them, and were too dazed to feel gentle but nimble old fingers abstracting here a wallet, there a watch.

Proprietors and clerks in jewelry stores fronting on the avenue heard the tremendous crashings of their plate-glass windows, and burglar alarms rang resoundingly, clanging clamorously even through the bedlam from without. Those clerks and those proprietors were entirely helpless to stop the clutching fingers that reached in and groped, and left empty traps where treasures had been on view before.

One man was found dead with a knife wound in his back, when the darkness lifted, and he was known to be a person who had acquired a certain amount of wealth by very dubious means, but nobody ever found out who had preferred the opportunity of a safe revenge to the chance of robbing with impunity.

FOR fifteen minutes Fifth Avenue was in darkness, darkness that was tangible and blank and absolute, and in that fifteen minutes forewarned persons of the underworld reaped a harvest. Each to his specialty, they sprang like wolves in the blackness whose duration they foreknew.

The list of thefts alone filled two columns in the next morning's papers, and there were some persons badly hurt—mostly women, who clutched hysterically at hands that groped about them. The list of smashed cars and traffic accidents was impressive. There had been three or four drivers who lost their heads


Virgil
Finlay

and plunged madly through the blackness until brought up by insurmountable obstacles.

And since the underworld is the resort of people of all grades of mental distortion, there were one or two crimes that were quite too horrible to be reported in full.

But at the end of that fifteen minutes, with the barest possible trace of flickering, the darkness vanished as suddenly and as silently as it had come. The sunlight shone again upon hordes of motors, blaring frantically, and upon streets full of people who abruptly charged frenziedly here and there the instant they could see to flee. There were small crumpled figures which were women who had fainted, and who were, quite frequently, inconspicuously robbed of purses and trinkets while the hysteria of the light returned still held.

In all this uproar a gray car moved quietly out of the parking space the city fathers still permit in that vast triangle of asphalt where roadway crosses Fifth Avenue. The columnar—later it was proved to be the cone-shaped —beam of darkness that had been sent north from Madison Square had widened out at that spot.

For nearly two blocks in every direction the darkness had held about Madison Square. So that the gray car moved undisturbedly out of the parking space, and turned, and went down the nearly emptied lower Fifth Avenue to Ninth Street, and there turned east and vanished.

And nobody seemed to notice that it was driven by a broad-shouldered man with a Vandyk beard.

CHAPTER VI

Waiting In The Darkness

THE street lamps glowed with a peculiar glitter upon pavements still wet from a recent rain. The rumbling of the city, which never ceases, had died down to that partially discordant muttering which is the city's voice in the small hours.

Kathryn came out of the doorway and shivered a little at the damp chilliness of the night air. But she smiled warmly when Hines held open the car door for her.

"It's decent of you," she said gratefully, as she stepped in and when the car started off. "I almost refused to get up when the telephone call came, but I'm glad I didn't. You think something's going to happen?"

Hines nodded. The little car was purring toward Broadway and swung into the nearly deserted but brilliantly lighted way. It began to shoot on down town with a singing of tires.

"Either we get him," he said

tiredly, "or we'll have to throw up the sponge. I've never worked so hard in my life as I've done this last two weeks."

It was two weeks since a cone of darkness had lain along Fifth Avenue's length for fifteen minutes and left New York panic-stricken. In those two weeks Hines had been doing the work of at least six men. He was the only man in New York, aside from Schaaf, who would recognize the man Preston. And Preston had to be found.

"Crooks are fools," said Hines drearily. "You'd think those yeggs that were tipped off about the darkness would have known how to take advantage of it. But we picked up six more men to-day that we'll be able to send away for long stretches. Fingerprints, of course. You'd think a man who was going to smash a jewelry store window, knowing he couldn't be interfered with, would have the sense to wear gloves. We've got the men who robbed Blakes', and Houton's, and a couple of others. Their fingerprints were on glass fragments inside the windows. They'd cut their fingers on them and flung them out of the way as they groped for the stuff on the trays."

"But no trace of Preston?"

"None. Oh, we've done what we could. We've third-degreed and sweated every man we've picked up. We've had the station houses full, too. And we've worked. We've caught a bunch of the little ones, and recovered a good bit of property, and we have the goods on half a dozen fences we've been trying to get for a long time; but Lefty Dunn and his mob got away clean, and Preston with them—and they got three-quarters of a million from the Merchants' National. In currency."

There was silence as the car sped on down the nearly deserted street, passing no vehicles except occasional brilliantly lighted taxicabs. It passed Columbus Circle, and a little later it passed Times Square, and still went on down town.

"I—I feel almost ashamed of myself," said Kathryn soberly. "I tried to help all I could, when you were working to forestall Preston, but secretly I was almost hoping you'd fail. It would let me scoop the town. And it did. My salary was raised because I had all the story and Professor Schaaf's explanation of what the darkness was. But—it was terrible. And people are still afraid it will happen again."

"Why not?" asked Hines tiredly. "It can. We haven't a thing to go on. Schaaf's had the American Electric laboratories put at his disposal, and he's buzzing about there blissfully, talking about the possibility of heterodyning *'die verdammte* short Hertzian wafes that cause der

trouble.' But he's got to duplicate Preston's results before he can try to neutralize them. And so far there's been no reason why Preston shouldn't turn on his darkness anywhere in the whole city and make another clean-up at any minute."

BUT there've been precautions—"

"Oh, yes. Sternutatory gases —sneezing gas bombs— in show windows, ready to be set off. Half-million-candle-power flares that will burn five minutes in every bank. That much light probably won't be absorbed by those ions Schaaf talks about. And guns. Most of all, there's the fact that people know what they're up against, and will fight back even in the dark. But I'm putting a lot of hope in tonight's work."

"What's happening to-night?" asked Kathryn.

"The banks have been working by non-negotiable paper more than ever," said Hines uninterestedly. "Wall Street went into spasms for awhile, but took to issuing certificates for its negotiable securities. Short of getting currency out of the Reserve Bank down there, it would be pretty difficult for Preston to make much of a killing where most of the money is. But money has to be shifted now and then.

"There's four millions in money and securities that has to be shifted to-night. It was intended to do it secretly, but we found the news had leaked. We think it leaked, anyway. And if it did, it leaked to Lefty Dunn, and he'll make a try for it with Preston's help. We're going to try to step on it. I've helped with the preparations, Schaaf's helped more. He saw Preston's outfit up-State, you know, and he made a suggestion or two that looks promising. I'm going to park you with him, if you don't mind."

The car was far down town indeed now. Kathryn saw "Broome Street" brightly illuminated on a corner signpost. But the runabout went on and on, and the buildings grew taller and taller until the thin thread of sky overhead was almost lost between the desolate lean flanks of the structures on either hand.

Hines turned off to the right, stopped the car, and switched off the lights.

"We'll walk from here." He looked at his watch. "Half past three. Two hours to daybreak. You'll lose a lot of rest."

"I got some sleep," she said.

They walked on toward the Battery. Their pace seemed a crawl, after the swift flight of the little car, and they seemed rather to be moving through a cavern than any inhabited city, and the desolation of dead buildings seemed to press down upon them and appall them.

It was a long, long walk through a desert of brick and steel. Suddenly Hines turned in to a deserted doorway, and a voice spoke softly, and they followed a hall to where a shaded electric bulb burned dimly, and Kathryn saw figures sitting in readiness for something. She could not know what.

There were one or two uniformed men among them, but the others looked strange indeed, and Kathryn could not distinguish the cause of their oddity. She was hustled into a tiny elevator that promptly began to rise to the steady humming of a hidden motor, through dark and unoccupied floors with the smell of emptiness.

The elevator stopped. A walk along a dark hallway to an open door. Into an unlighted room in which a pipe glowed and in which there was the sound of movement.

"Hines?"

"Right," said Hines briefly. "I've brought Miss Bush. She gave enough information before that affair of two weeks ago to have given us a chance to stop it. She's entitled to a front seat."

A VOICE growled. Kathryn smiled wickedly in the darkness. That was the commissioner, sitting up here in a darkened room.

"Ah, Miss Bush," Schaaf spoke amiably from the darkness. "You did not giff me der chance to thank you for making me famous. Come and share my window. Hines is going down into der street again."

She moved hesitantly through the darkness until he took her hand and pressed it. He led her to the square of grayish light that was the window.

"We are ten stories up," he told her. "If you do not mind der height, look down."

She saw the street far below her, empty and gray and desolate, but peculiarly clear by reason of the shaded street lights.

"Der bank is opposite us," said Schaaf softly, as if afraid of betraying the presence of an ambush by normal speech. "You see der little lights inside. They haff four millions of dollars ready to be mofed in an armored car, when it comes. They feel, Miss Bush, about that four millions of dollars as I felt about my notes on der proof of der multiatomic nature of der sodium chloride molecule. That four millions is fery precious to them, Miss Bush, though they will nefer spend a cent of it. Just as my notes were fery precious, though I could not spend them."

He craned his neck. Far away, down the deep and narrow chasm below the window, a brightly lighted taxicab came in a peculiar silence. It seemed to roll noise-

lessly down the deserted street, and red and green and yellow lights glittered upon it, and the white paint of its hood glowed brightly as it passed close by a street lamp. It came on, and maudlin song arose faintly from it. It sounded like a drunken group of revelers, moved by some whim to invade the financial district at night.

It passed below and went on.

There was a muted whirring. The commissioner's guarded "Hello!" Then gruntings. He hung up the receiver.

"Their lookouts, most likely, in that taxi. They don't know we know about the leak, but they're scouting, anyway."

There was the movement of other bodies in the room. Kathryn suddenly realized that there were probably four or five other men in there, silent and waiting. One of them snapped a lighter and shielded the flame with his hand while he puffed a cigar into a glow.

Kathryn caught a sudden glimpse of a curious collar about his neck. It was a telephone transmitter hung in place, and there were headphones over his ears. This was an office already fitted with several phones, evidently, which had been taken over for use as a temporary headquarters for the night.

"Er—hadn't we better—" began the commissioner uneasily.

"Shush," said Schaaf placidly. "Lieutenant Hines told me how it should be done. Shush for awhile now."

Kathryn wanted to giggle. She felt very nervous and very much thrilled, and more than a little apprehensive; and her muscles were uncomfortably tense.

A man came out of the bank, far below. He looked up the street and then went back inside again. The bank became black and blank and dark again.

"They expect der armored car," observed Schaaf. "Now we can haff a little smoke. You might tell them."

He was talking toward the back of the room. A man spóke quietly into a transmitter.

Kathryn gazed about and saw nothing. Schaaf felt the movement.

"Wait. Der performance will be intricate," he said, and chuckled.

A MINUTE. Two. Then there was a brittle little tinkling of glass somewhere. The scraping, musical sound of glass falling down the stone side of à building. Kathryn started.

"That—that's a fire over there It must be!"

Smoke was welling hazily out of a broken window in a building on the opposite side of the street and a half block away. A wavering riddish glow became visible.

"To be sure," said Schaaf tranquilly. "It is an excellent effect."

He glanced once at it and stared down, looking far uptown and ignoring the gradual accumulation of a vast mass of whitish vapor curling up the sides of the buildings across the way. A second window broke with a second brittle tinkling. A fresh billowing of smoke came out.

"Here is der armored car coming," said Schaaf.

A man spoke quietly into a transmitter. Kathryn looked down.

Far away, coming sturdily down the deserted street, one of the squat gray armored cars which carry valuables from place to place in New York was speeding noiselessly. Four motorcycle policemen ringed it about.

It swept up to the bank and stopped. One of the motorcycle policemen suddenly pointed upward. There was an intensification of the red glow back of the thick smoke. The motorcycle cop had stopped his machine. He now ran swiftly to the nearest corner and worked busily at a little signal box.

"Eferything according to schedule," said Schaaf. "He is turning in der alarm."

A muted whirring. It was a telephone bell, muted. A man answered, and said quietly:

"Two cars are coming down Church Street at forty m.p.h."

Kathryn felt a little electric thrill running over her. The commissioner stood up and came over to one of the windows, gazing down nervously.

Schaaf said meditatively: "I do not hear der engines. Tell der bank not to hurry. And tell them of der two cars."

A man murmured at the back of the room. Kathryn was staring at the fire. The smoke coming out halfway up the building across the way was thick and dense, and the red glow behind it was fiercer. Then she heard a faint clatter and clanging.

"Hines," said Schaaf in her ear, "he is a smart man. He thinks that somewhere in der buildings all about there are men watching who can report by der telephones, and can signal that der beans are spilled. That is der reason for der verisimilitude."

The clanging and hooting grew louder. Making a monstrous tumult, building up a tremendous uproar, fire engines came racing down the street. A steamer clanged to a stop and coupled swiftly to a hydrant. A hook-and-ladder came racing. A hose-tower after it.

The bank doors opened, and men made ready to come out.

AROUND the corner of the nearest street two heavy cars came hurtling. A machine

gun began to spit, and filled the cañonlike space between the tall buildings with a snarling uproar. Water geysered upward for an instant and swung sharply toward earth.

Kathryn, staring down, saw the four-inch stream from a hose strike the foremost car and crash in its windows like so much wet paper. Then, abruptly, the street and the lights and the armored car and all the puffing fire engines ceased to exist. And at the same instant something flared intolerably overhead and the buildings on either side of the street for many blocks to north and south began to gleam brightly.

"Breston," said Schaaf, very calmly indeed, "he has turned on der dark. I guessed right about der probable height of der phenomenon. Now, we shoot der works!"

A river of darkness seemed to have filled the street below. A dull black substance seemed to have welled up instantly and to flow silently and without disturbance between the tall rows of buildings, as the Styx itself must flow between its banks. Flares, the huge magnesium torches that are used by aircraft for landing at night, were burning atop buildings for blocks on either hand.

From the motionless surface of the darkness the smoke and steam of the fire-engines coiled upward into the glare above. The fire which had been the excuse for calling the fire-engines had abruptly gone out, and the welling smoke from the windows had ceased. The watchers in the tenth-floor office looked down upon a surface of blackness imprisoned between the walls of office-buildings. And submerged in that abysmal dark there were men.

Dull, thudding concussions sounded from below. Windows quivered.

"Bombs," said Schaaf calmly "They were ready to smash open der armored car if they were too late to nab der shipment before it got in. Now they use der bombs because they are scared. I will bet anybody that Breston is shaking in his shoes."

The horrible shrill scream of a man in agony came echoing cavernously from the impenetrable blackness below.

CHAPTER VII

Fighting The Invisible

A MAN spoke quietly at the back of the office.

"The bank doors are closed and the money's safe. They want to know if they can turn the juice into the doors."

"*Himmel!* No!" snapped Schaaf, as the commissioner rumbled an assent. "Firemen are

sweeping der hoses all about. Do they want to electrocute them if a stream of water hits der doors?"

The commissioner hastily made his assent into a negative, and returned to his study of the incredible scene. The buildings rose out of nothingness, and their sides were apparently incandescent from the flames burning above.

Down there under the surface of the blackness, the fire-engines swept their streams of water to right and left and up and down. They were working blindly, of course, but whatever those streams of water struck would go down. Plate-glass, cars, men.

"*Verdamm!*" said Schaaf presently, though without dismay. "Hines is a smart man. He don't take chances. We were hoping, Miss Bush, that a stream of water would smash into der car where Breston had his apparatus working. If it got into der coils it would short-circuit them and der apparatus would work no longer. We could take a look at *die Schweine* then. But der engines are still working, judging by der steam that comes up, and still der darkness holds. Hm—Ah, here comes der first flare down."

A ball of fire, incredibly white and unbelievably fierce, descended before Kathryn's eyes. It was swinging down swiftly by a dangling steel cable. It went down in swift swoops of fifteen and twenty feet at a time.

"A magnesium flare," said Schaaf softly. "It has half a million candle-power. We try him on der dog. Ha!"

The flare reached the definite surface of the blackness. It seemed incredible that no glitter came from that surface. It dived into the flood of darkness. Its white light turned to red. Down and down— Fifteen feet in the black flood and it could be seen as a dully glowing red ball, no more.

"No more flares," said Schaaf quietly over his shoulder. "They don't work. Der darkness absorbs all der light. But keep der other flares going on der roofs. Now we try."

A voice spoke quietly from the row of telephone instruments.

"Lieutenant Hines reports that the street is full of gas. Sneeze-gas."

"No. 3 expedient gone to hell," said Schaaf calmly. "We hoped from der water, and we hoped from der flares. And we had sneeze-gas and tear gas bombs ready to smash in der street. But they intended to use it themselves to disable der armored-car crew and der bank people, I suppose, and they must haff masks. It is der deffi that Breston got so much money two weeks ago. He has capital to supply his friends with all modern improfements. Hm. All right. Tell that fire-eater

Hines to get ready to go out with his mopping-up party and raise hell. Set der gongs going."

A man spoke quietly at the back of the room, and to the chatter and chuffing of engines in the street there now was added the heavy measured clanging of monster gongs. The engines shut off abruptly.

"Der gongs are signals," said Schaaf quietly. "It is Hines' idea. They signal to der firemen to cut off der water, and he and his gang go out hand and hand to sweep der street and grab anybody that has not a rubber suit on and smash him behind der ear. He and all his men are ex-soldiers, and they pretend it is a patrol between trenches. Also, der gongs keep them oriented so they know which way is which. Those motor cycle cops had orders to duck in der armored car if der darkness fell. I hope they remembered, or somebody is likely to sock them in der jaw."

THE commissioner growled from the next window. There had been a sudden silence. The firemen had fumbled their way to their engines and climbed up on them. The street below should be empty of all living creatures except Lefty Dunn and his gangsters, desperate and at abay, and the sinister figure of the man who, allied with the underworld, seemed to have had the city at his mercy. Shots sounded suddenly from below.

"Somebody is going to get scared, now," said Schaaf. "Herr Commissioner, our Lieutenant Hines is out and fighting like der deffil. Der gentlemen for whom we are gifing this party will try to run away now. If you will giff orders—"

"I've got a cordon all about the darkness," growled the commissioner.

"Der idea is," said Schaaf patiently, "that Breston has not a full-power darkness-producing outfit with him, or else maybe der water got to some of his batteries and cut down his power. He can't drife a car in der darkness. He will try to walk, carrying that suitcase apparatus with him. Tip off der cordon of reserfs to leafe one man at efery corner, especially der corners where there are police telephones. Maybe they can tip us exactly where he arrifes."

The commissioner coughed, and swore privately to himself for not having issued the orders on his own initiative. He gave them.

"That, also, was Hines' idea," said Schaaf placidly.

He looked at his watch in the glare that came in the window. Another shot below. Three more. A shriek.

"It should be sunrise in half an hour more, maybe less," he ob-

served. "I hope der *verdammt* fool is caught before der people try to come down this way to work. Otherwise we will haff to stop der subways."

He looked sharply at the girl beside him. She was shaking peculiarly. Her lips were caught between her teeth and her eyes glistened suspiciously.

"Shush!" said Schaaf in her ear. "I know. I am scared to der bottom of my marrow, too, but that fighting fool Hines is all right. He has to be! And if you cry now, I will tell him about it afterward! That is a threat! Shush!"

She caught her breath, struggling to fight down sobs of nervousness.

A man said briskly from the row of telephones:

"The cordon, sir, reports that the blackness is moving. It's moving on down town. It is three blocks long and three wide, and it has moved half a block south."

Schaaf grimaced, and then grinned.

"Haff somebody yell that out in der street to Hines. He will know what to do. Are members of der cordon posting themselfs in der high buildings and smashing in doors to get at telephones so they can watch der darkness and tell us? I suspect Breston will switch it off for an instant to try and see where he is, after he mofes a block or two."

A man spoke brisky into a telephone. And Schaaf said pleasantly:

"Hines efen tought of that, in case all der other things did not work. I told him he was a pessimist, but I admit now that he is smart."

Silence. There were no more shots. The lights flared brilliantly outside. One dimmed, and another took its place. The unwavering, opaque blackness below—it was almost impossible to look at it without believing that it was a solid substance—seemed to flow noiselessly like a river of death between the starkly illuminated buildings on either side. but Schaaf said suddenly:

"It is going down! He has mofed a block or more with his apparatus!"

KATHRYN stared. The upper limit of the blackness had receded. It was hardly more than three stories above the street, now. As she watched, very, very slowly it went down still more.

"He is going south. On foot," said Schaaf, "as Hines predicted."

Five minutes later the street itself was dimly visible. The street-lights appeared as dull red glows, which grew brighter and turned white. The squat gray armored car appeared. There were two figures moving spasmodically on the pavement beside it. The

darkness drew on toward the south. Two more figures, crumpled up and still. A car, slued around with its windows smashed and the hood torn off its engine by the force of a stream of water. Minutes later another car appeared dimly as the darkness became merely murkiness. It, too, was washed clear of windows.

"I bet," said Schaaf intently, "Breston almost got caught by a stream of water, and hid behind his car for protection from der hoses until they were turned off."

"Is—is *he* safe?" asked Kathryn in a strained voice. She was not, one gathered, asking about Preston.

One of the men at the telephones said quietly:

"Lieutenant Hines asked just now for the position of the center of the darkness. I gave it to him from the reports of the cordon around its outer edge."

Kathryn gasped in relief.

One of the other men at the telephones said swiftly:

"Report. The darkness was turned off for about two seconds. Preston was seen, carrying two heavy suitcases and staring about him. There were two other men with him. Lieutenant Hines fired on them and saw one of them fall."

Silence. Looking down from the windows now, the street was clear. But to the south the darkness rose from the pavement and filled the space between the buildings.

"It seems cruel," said Schaaf gently, "for all der whole police force to be hunting down three men as if they were mad dogs, but they are mad dogs. Der newspapers did not print all der crimes that happened on Fifth Afenue the other day. They could not. And Breston permitted those crimes deliberately. He arranged to turn der underworld loose for a share in der profits. He got that share. And he will do it again if we do not catch him."

The commissioner coughed, and said suddenly:

"See if the gas has cleared down in the street enough for us to go down."

A quiet inquiry.

"It is reasonably safe, sir."

The commissioner strode to the door. Kathryn looked appealingly at Schaaf.

"It is working like a well-oiled clock. We go down and follow der darkness, and maybe we see Hines, eh?"

The elvator was brightly lighted, now, and descended with a cheery hum. And the street was bright, though it was a ghastly brightness. They emerged to the sidewalk. An ambulance clanged up and stopped. Men had come out of the armored car and were bending over the writhing figures beside it.

"Sneeze-gas," said Schaaf quietly, "it is terrible. It produces a horrible exhaustion. But it is not fatal."

The still figures a little distance off were gangsters, with gas-masks adjusted in marked incongruity to their loudly checked and now soaked and draggled clothing. Uniformed figures were moving about, investigating. The firemen were cheerfully coiling up their hose and preparing a return trip to their engne-houses. Two more bodies of gangsters. A man in a rubber suit—one of Hines' men. Twenty yards on, another gangster.

THERE were seven gangsters and two police in the space of a block. Beyond that the pavement was blessedly bare. Schaaf looked east at the first sidestreet.

"Der sky is lightening. Day will soon be here," he said quietly "I think we get Breston."

They walked quietly after the slowly moving mass of darkness. On the ground-level, here, it looked vastly different. It rose in an irregular, clumsy curve. Seen from behind it looked oddly like some monstrous, prehistoric monster edging itself painfully down a cañon whose walls closed tightly upon its sides.

Four blocks down they found two policemen carrying off a figure on a litter.

"Lefty Dunn, sir," said one of them, satisfiedly. "Lieutenant Hines shot him, sir. He's dead."

Two blocks further a policeman was beaming as he inserted his key into the police telephone box.

"Just taking up cordon work here, sir," he reported happily. "The darkness is dwindling fast. It's hardly more than two blocks long and wide, sir."

"His batteries are running low," observed Schaaf. "Soon he is in der soup."

They hurried a little, now. It seemed as if the two fleeing men were guiding themselves by the trolley-tracks and could make better time in the horrible darkness all about them. A little farther on there was a clatter and clanging, and a chemical engine appeared where a policeman was playing a hand fire-extinguisher on the awning of a corner cigar store.

"Ah," said Schaaf pleasantly. "They are getting desperate. They tried to make a diversion by starting a fire. That is foolishness. It only adds arson to der charges of robbery and murder."

The cigar store was at the corner of Wall Street and Trinity churchyard showed a certain duskiness at its southern edge, but that was all.

And five minutes later they were able to view the darkness as a whole. It had moved out into

the clear space which is Battery Park. The flagpole of the Aquarium rose above it. It was a circular, flattened mass of black with ragged, hazy edges. It stood like some monstrosity in the mass of green things. It was hardly more than two hundred feet in diameter, and it was certainly not thirty feet high. And it seemed to be still dwindling slowly.

Hines came up, with sweat-streaks on his face and powder-marks on his hands. He was wrapping his handkerchief around one wrist, which was bleeding.

"Cut it," he said quietly, "breaking in a door to get at a telephone booth. I called up Governor's Island, sir," he added to the commissioner of police. "They have some army planes there."

The sky was getting lighter and lighter. The harbor spread out as a lucent gray, and ships at anchor began to take definite shapes through the morning air. The Statue of Liberty rose gray and misty from its base.

The ominous mass of blackness was the only incongruous thing in the whole spectacle of the sunrise. That pancake of malevolent darkness was still, clinging to the outer edge of the park, with nearly half its diameter spreading out over the waves of the harbor. A sudden chug-chugging arose. The blackness began to move. It swept out over the water, moving steadily and doggedly.

"*Himmel!*" snapped Schaaf, his mouth dropped open. "They found a launch! Breston will make for der Jersey shore and land, and der Jersey police cannot make a cordon in time to stop him from landing and hiding himself."

"Don't worry," said Hines grimly. "Look there!"

A LITTLE dark speck detached itself from the earth of Governor's Island. It rose and rose, and a dull muttering drew nearer and nearer. The noise rose to a roar, and an army plane swept above the moving monstrosity of blackness. It circled and swooped.

Something dropped. There was a heavy concussion, a vast and crackling detonation.

And then there was abruptly nothing upon the water, anywhere, except a spouting mass of spray and smoke, and a few remnants of a boat that swirled about and sank as the plume of spray subsided. The blackness had gone out like a blown-out candle.

"Good shooting," said Schaaf comfortably. "That must haff been a big bomb. Now we will haff difers hunt for der fragments of Breston's apparatus, and we will find that we can't do a damned thing with them. Which from der scientific standpoint, is a fery great pity."

Hines unconsciously brushed his hands together.

"It's finished," he said, suddenly very tired.

The commissioner of police coughed. "Inspector Hines," he said, "I—er—I may not have cooperated with you as fully as I should when you first reported this matter; but—er—in the future you will find no cause for complaint. Come in to see me tomorrow."

He moved abruptly away. Hines stared after him.

"Inspector?" Kathryn gasped.

"Yes," said Schaaf placidly. "Inspector Hines. The commissioner is like Napoleon in his promotions. Yes. All of us haff our Napoleonic moments, and he did this fery nicely. You are Police Inspector Hines hereafter and I congratulate you. And I think, Miss Bush, that as a fery good friend of his, if I were you I would take der moment of congratulation as an opportunity to kiss him. It might not be unpleasant."

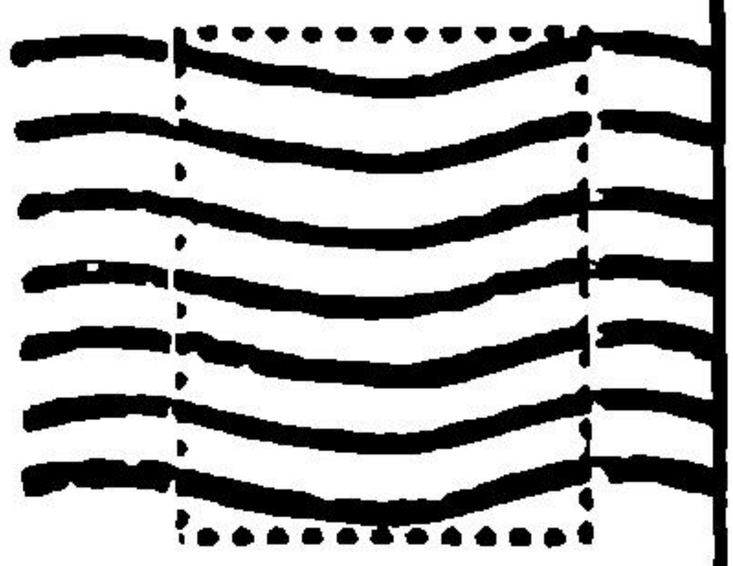
Kathryn swallowed something.

Hines flushed a little. "You've got your scoop," Hines said awkwardly, ignoring Schaaf, "and this time there is nothing to regret about it."

"I—I don't care!" said Kathryn firmly. "About the scoop, that is. It doesn't matter. But I am going to kiss you."

And she did.

THE END



According to you...

Dear Editor:

I feel I must write and compliment you on your most unusual November issue. Excluding your Fantasy Reprint, the best story was Leiber's "Hatchery of Dreams"; it was both interesting and well written. The cover was an absolute masterpiece, definitely one of the best this year. I hope to be seeing more Birmingham covers in the future—along with Vernon Kramer, who did your excellent May and July issues.

The Novella by J. F. Bone was better than I thought it would be. You have published many stories in your long past which are interesting, well written, well plotted, and et cetera; and you have finally decided to include in some of them a new facet of maturity—the "human angle" or the "personal conflict" bit, which adds more depth to the story. Besides J. F. Bone's story, the other example of this, that I noticed, was the excellent Westlake story in your November AMAZING. This "new angle" is great for any field of writing, but it can be overdone. *Analog* usually overdoes it by hiding the science fiction or fantasy so far in the background, that it seems to be nothing *but* a conflict or mystery story.

Your editorial (November *Fantastic*) featured a most unusual series of game-questions. I would like to state my answers (I warn you, though, it sounds like a plot for a fantasy short story): You start out taking a hike in the woods (the Forest of Life, as you put it). It's a cool, clean place and it's autumn (why? because that's when I'm writing this letter). So you find an old and moldy key in the dirt (Ego, you called it). It looks like

tarnished gold, so you keep it thinking you might be able to pawn it somewhere for a couple bucks. Then you come to a cool stream on the side of the forested mountain; it's refreshing, so you stop for a while to rest (as you said, "The body of water is Love"). You see a vessel on the shore and you use it as a drinking cup ("The vessel is Sex"), and the water of the stream is suddenly the wind of Utopia. At that moment, a big and hairy bear comes along, and you find he is Utopia's guardian —no strangers allowed. He puts a curse on you ("The bear is Trouble"). So you do the logical thing—run.

The edifice you find along the way (Death) is a black stone vault. The door is locked so you leave. But where ever you go you find it planted firmly before you in the middle of your path. So finally you remember the golden key. It unlocks the door of the edifice and you find it to be dark-dark inside. You want to turn and run, but the curse of trouble is upon you; you are drawn inside. Your body numbs, all of your life seems to flow into the key (Ego). You are the Ego, the body is dead. You are free.

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, New York

● *Now add a little "personal conflict" and you've got a fantasy story in depth.*

● *More good news of SF and fantasy in textbooks:*

Dear Editor:

I would like to add a few more facts in re of the letter from Miss Ida Ipe in the November issue of FANTASTIC. The textbook Miss Ipe refers to is the eleventh grade text of the Harcourt, Brace and Company *"Adventures in"*— series. It was interesting to note that the editors labelled Finney's "Of Missing Persons" as fantasy and Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" as science fiction. They also quote Bradbury in regard to the differences between the aspects of the genre.

The eleventh grade text mentioned above is entitled *"Adventures in American Literature"* and contains two other related stories which might be considered as fantasy folklore: Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" and Stephen Vincent Benet's "The Devil and Daniel Webster." Needless to say no American literature book would be complete without a sampling of Edgar Allan Poe— two stories and three poems in this text. And there is also Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment." That's seven stories which we can con-

sider science fiction in the general sense of the word. Not bad for a start.

The tenth grade textbook in the series, *Adventures in Appreciation,* carries Kurt Vonnegut's "The Barnhouse Effect" which is an early psi story. The twelfth grade text contains a number of the old English classics which have sfnal undertones. *Beowulf, Macbeth, Paradise Lost, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* "Markheim" by R. L. Stevenson, "Poison" by Roald Dahl, etc. So, you see science fiction is beginning to make a decided movement toward overall acceptance as a separate and individual form of literature. I realize, of course, that the old English classics are great works of literature, but most fans can find sf anywhere they chose to find it. The appearances of Finney, Bradbury, and Vonnegut cannot be put away so easily though, as these men *are* modern day science fictionists appearing as such in the textbooks. Personally I yearn for the day when the real beauty of sf can be captured for the schools in science fiction poetry (*e.g.* Robert A. Heinlein's incomparable "The Green Hills of Earth").

William J. Plott
P.O. Box 4719
University
Alabama

Dear Editor:

Today I bought the December issue of FANTASTIC and, as is my usual habit, opened to the letter section to see what was going on amongst the fans; and what should jump out at me but more "controversy" over David R. Bunch.

In the November ish I'd found a letter condemning Bunch's writing, so I had dug into my back files of FANTASTIC and read "Strange Shape In The Stronghold"; after reading it, I agreed with whoever wrote the letter in the Nov. issue. SSITS, in my opinion, wasn't very good, because (1) it was too &"#$%) (!! confused; I had a tough time keeping up with what was going on because the environment Bunch created for his plot to unfold in was entirely alien to anything I'd read in sf before; and, furthermore, he didn't offer any explanations for it; and (2) because I thought the writing was too jerky. This might have been caused by my inability to follow the plot smoothly (which may, possibly, be just a defect in my mental make-up somewhere, although I hope not).

At any rate, in the December ish I found one (1) letter which expressed liking for Bunch, and one (1) which sat on the fence; therefore I decided to read another Bunch story. I dug into my back files of FANTASTIC again,

and came up with "In The Complaints Service," which I read. I liked ITCS infinitely more than SSITS, mainly because ITCS had a little humor in it, and could follow what was going on (probably because I knew what Moderan was, after reading SSITS), BUT ITCS *had almost no plot whatsoever* (groan). I was calmly waiting for some twist, ironic or merely surprising, in the end, but none came. I felt cheated. A highly good build-up, and then nothing. Phooey.

Ergo I have decided that Bunch has great promise, but that he's not going to get anywhere until he lays off the Moderan junk. I'd like for Bunch to stay; but Moderan should go.

Concerning C. Marlow's suggestion about profiling fantasy authors: I'm all for it. The authors he named would be good for a starter; then perhaps Moskowitz could go on to Bloch, Sturgeon, de Camp, Pratt, etc., etc.

Harry Piper
374 Kingsweight Rd.
Atlanta, Ga.

● *Did you ever try reading a hcnuB Story backwards?*

Dear Editor:

I would say that your December issue was the best one you have published in the last year. I would rate it like this:

First place: John Phillifent's "Point" discouraged me from the beginning; I assumed from the blurbs that it was another Venus story like the Kline series. But when I finally plunged into it I had the amazing experience of actually reading a story with a familiar plot that was at once fresh and exciting. Since this was the last issue of the year, I can safely award this story the "Best Novelette of the Year in FANTASTIC" trophy. And the "best short story of the year in FANTASTIC" would be—

"The Voice Box," by Allan W. Eckert, second place for the issue. Say what you might about horror; this was much more blood-curdling than any Lovecraft story I've ever read with the exception of "Rats in the Walls."

Third Place: Daniel F. Galouye's "Spawn of Doom" had a good idea, but was a little complex and didn't hold the interest as well as, for example, Fred Brown's "The Mind Thing."

Fourth Place: Robert E. Howard's "The Dead Remember". This struck me as being nothing more than a routine ghost story.

Fifth (and last) place: David Ely's "The Last Friday in August" was sort of silly in that the supposed revelation at the end was hardly profound enough to make the remainder of the piece worthwhile.

As to Mr./Mrs. Pat Scott's criticism of my humble opinion, I would put forth this comment, hanging my head in shame:

1) I do not consider "Titus Groan" fantasy; in any case, I was mainly discussing humor-fantasy, or at least non-serious adventure-fantasy (which is my definition of Conan).

2) No, I have not read the *Ring* trilogy.

3) *Alice in Wonderland* is the silliest thing I have ever read in my life. For anyone under 20, it may or may not be good; for anyone mentally above the age of 12, it is rough going.

Charles Dixon
Sewanee Military Academy
Swanee, Tenn.

● *For any fantasy fan who thinks* Alice *is silly, we recommend a reading of Martin Gardner's* The Annotated Alice, *in which almost every line of Lewis Carrol's tale is second-guessed in a lovely, literate, fantastical psychoanalytical way.*

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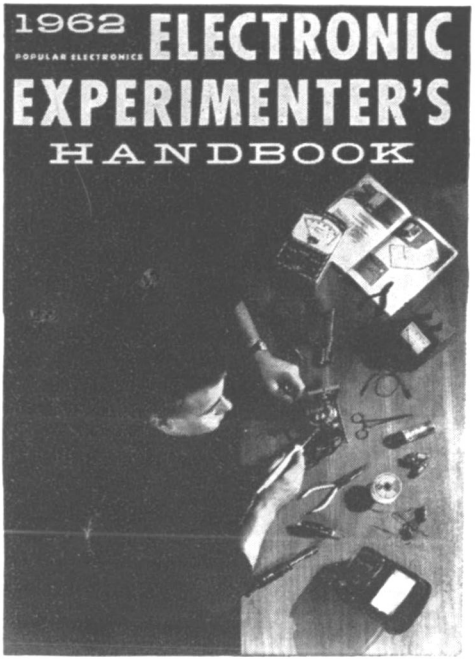

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