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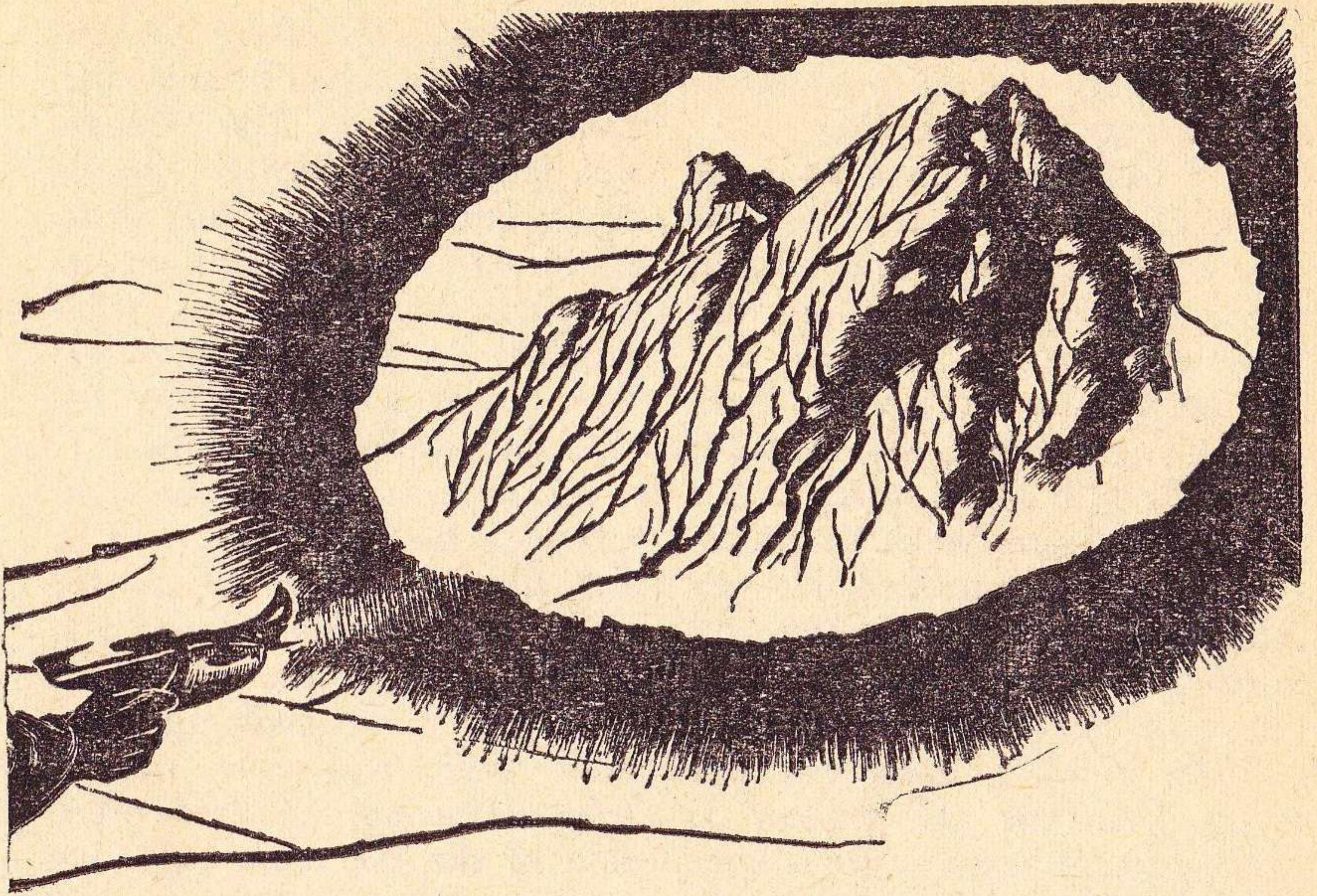
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The Burning World

Can the battle for

freedom ever be won

—as long as some men

still want to fight it?

by **ALGIS BUDRYS**

Illustrated by **SCHOENHERR**

CHAPTER I

THEY WALKED past rows of abandoned offices in the last government office building in the world—two men who looked vastly different, but who had crucial similarities.

Josef Kimmensen had full lips trained to set in a tight, thin line, and live, intelligent eyes. He was tall and looked thin, though he was not. He was almost sixty years old, and his youth and childhood had been such that now his body was both

old for its years and still a compact, tightly-wound mechanism of bone and muscle fiber.

Or had been, until an hour ago. Then it had failed him; and his one thought now was to keep Jem Bendix from finding out how close he was to death.

Jem Bendix was a young man, about twenty-eight, with a broad, friendly grin and a spring to his step. His voice, when he spoke, was low and controlled. He was the man Josef Kimmensen had chosen to replace him as president of the Freeman's League.

The building itself was left over from the old regime. It was perhaps unfortunate—Kimmensen had often debated the question with himself—to risk the associations that clung to this building. But a building is only a building, and the dust of years chokes the past to death. It was better to work here than to build a new set of offices. It might seem a waste to leave a still-new building, and that might tend to make people linger after their jobs had finished themselves. This pile of cracking bricks and peeled marble facings would be falling in a heap soon, and the small staff that still worked here couldn't help but be conscious of it. It was probably a very useful influence.

They walked through the domed rotunda, with its columns, echoing alcoves, and the jag-

topped pedestals where the old regime's statues had been sledge-hammered away. The rotunda was gloomy, its skylight buried under rain-borne dust and drifted leaves from the trees on the mountainside. There was water puddled on the rotten marble floor under a place where the skylight's leading was gone.

Kimmensen left the day's letters with the mail clerk, and he and Bendix walked out to the plaza, where his plane was parked. Around the plaza, the undergrowth was creeping closer every year, and vine runners were obscuring the hard precision of the concrete's edge. On all sides, the mountains towered up toward the pale sun, their steep flanks cloaked in snow and thick stands of bluish evergreen. There was a light breeze in the crystalline air, and a tang of fir sap.

Kimmensen breathed in deeply. He loved these mountains. He had been born in the warm lowlands, where a man's blood did not stir so easily nor surge so strongly through his veins. Even the air here was freedom's air.

As they climbed into his plane, he asked: "Did anything important come up in your work today, Jem?"

Jem shrugged uncertainly. "I don't know. Nothing that's urgent at the moment. But it

might develop into something. I meant to speak to you about it after dinner. Did Salmaggi tell you one of our families was burned out up near the north-west border?"

Kimmensen shook his head and pressed his lips together. "No, he didn't. I didn't have time to see him today." Perhaps he should have. But Salmaggi was the inevitable misfit who somehow creeps into every administrative body. He was a small, fat, tense, shrilly argumentative man who fed on alarms like a sparrow. Somehow, through election after election, he had managed to be returned as Land Use Advisor. Supposedly, his duties were restricted to helping the old agricultural districts convert to synthetic diets. But that limitation had never restrained his busybody nature. Consultations with him were full of sidetracks into politics, alarmisms, and piping declamations about things like the occasional family found burned out.

KIMMENSEN despaired of ever making the old-fashioned politician types like Salmaggi understand the new society. Kimmensen, too, could feel sorrow at the thought of homesteads razed, of people dead in the midst of what they had worked to build. It was hard—terribly hard—to think of; too

easy to imagine each might be his own home. Too easy to come upon the charred embers and feel that a horrible thing had been done, without taking time to think that perhaps this family had abused its freedom. Sentiment was the easy thing. But logic reminded a man that some people were quarrelsome, that some people insisted on living their neighbors' lives, that some people were offensive.

There were people with moral codes they clung to and lived by, people who worshiped in what they held to be the only orthodox way, people who clung to some idea—some rock on which their lives rested. Well and good. But if they tried to inflict these reforms on their neighbors, patience could only go so far, and the tolerance of fanaticism last just so long.

Kimmensen sighed as he fumbled with his seat belt buckle, closed the power contacts, and engaged the vanes. "We're haunted by the past, Jem," he said tiredly. "Salmaggi can't keep himself from thinking like a supervisor. He can't learn that quarrels between families are the families' business." He nodded to himself. "It's a hard thing to learn, sometimes. But if Salmaggi doesn't, one of these days he may not come back from his hoppings around the area."

"I wouldn't be worrying,

Joe," Jem said with a nod of agreement. "But Salmaggi tells me there's a fellow who wants to get a group of men together and take an army into the northwest. This fellow—Anse Messerschmidt's his name—is saying these things are raids by the Northwesters."

"Is he getting much support?" Kimmensen asked quickly.

"I don't know. It doesn't seem likely. After all, the Northwesters're people just like us."

Kimmensen frowned, and for one bad moment he was frightened. He remembered, in his youth—it was only twenty-eight years ago—Bausch strutting before his cheering crowds, bellowing hysterically about the enemies surrounding them—the lurking armies of the people to the south, to the east, the northwest; every compass point held enemies for Bausch. Against those enemies, there must be mighty armies raised. Against those enemies, there must be Leadership — firm Leadership: Bausch.

"Armies!" he burst out. "The day Freeman organize to invade another area is the day they stop being Freeman. They become soldiers, loyal to the army and their generals. They lose their identification with their homes and families. They become a separate class—an armed, organized class of military specialists

no one family can stand against. And on that day, freedom dies for everybody.

"You understand me, don't you, Jem? You understand how dangerous talk like this Messerschmidt's can be?" Kimmensen knew Bendix did. But it was doubly important to be doubly assured, just now.

Bendix nodded, his quick, easy smile growing on his face. "I feel the same way, Joe." And Kimmensen, looking at him, saw that Jem meant it. He had watched Jem grow up—had worked with him for the past ten years. They thought alike; their logic followed the same, inevitable paths. Kimmensen couldn't remember one instance of their disagreeing on anything.

The plane was high in the air. Below them, green forests filled the valleys, and the snow on the mountaintops was red with the light of sunset. On the east sides of the slopes, twilight cast its shadows. Kimmensen looked down at the plots of open ground, some still in crops, others light green with grass against the dark green of the trees. Off in the far west, the sun was half in the distant ocean, and the last slanting rays of direct light reflected from the snug roofs of houses nestled under trees.

Here is the world, Kimmensen thought. Here is the world we saw in the times before we

fought out our freedom. Here is the world Dubrovic gave us, working in the cold of his cellar, looking like a maniac gnome, with his beard and his long hair, putting circuits together by candle-light, coughing blood and starving. Here is the world Anna and I saw together.

That was a long time ago. I was thirty-two, and Anna a worn thirty, with silver in her fine black hair, before we were free to build the house and marry. In the end, we weren't as lucky as we thought, to have come through the fighting years. The doctors honestly believed they'd gotten all the toxins out of her body, but in the end, she died.

Still, here it is, or almost. It isn't given to very many men to have their dreams come true in their lifetimes.

KIMMENSEN'S house stood on the side of a mountain, with its back to the north and glass walls to catch the sun. There was a patio, and a lawn. Kimmensen had been the first to break away from the old agricultural life in this area. There was no reason why a man couldn't like synthetic foods just as well as the natural varieties. Like so many other things, the clinging to particular combinations of the few basic flavors was a matter of education and nothing else. With

Direct Power to transmute chemicals for him, a man was not tied to cows and a plow.

The plane settled down to its stand beside the house, and they got out and crossed the patio. The carefully tended dwarf pines and cedars in their planters were purple silhouettes against the sky. Kimmensen opened the way into the living room, then slid the glass panel back into place behind them.

The living room was shadowy and almost dark, despite the glass. Kimmensen crossed the softly whispering rug. "Apparently Susanne hasn't come home yet. She told me she was going to a party this afternoon." He took a deep, unhappy breath. "Sit down, Jem—I'll get you a drink while we're waiting." He touched the base of a lamp on an end table, and the room came to life under a soft glow of light. The patio went pitch-black by comparison.

"Scotch and water, Jem?"

Bendix held up a thumb and forefinger pressed together. "Just a pinch, Joe. A little goes a long way with me, you know."

Kimmensen nodded and went into the kitchen.

The cookers were glowing in the dark, pilot lights glinting. He touched the wall switch. The light panels came on, and he took glasses out of the cupboard. Splashing water from the ice-

water tap, he shook his head with resigned impatience.

Susanne should have been home. Putting the dinner in the cookers and setting the timers was not enough, no matter how good the meal might be—and Susanne was an excellent meal planner. She ought to have been home, waiting to greet them. He wouldn't have minded so much, but she'd known Jem was going to be here. If she had to go to the Ennerth girl's party, she could have come home early. She was insulting Jem.

Kimmensen opened the freezer and dropped ice cubes into the glasses. She never enjoyed herself at parties. She always came home downcast and quiet. Yet she went, grim-faced, determined.

He shook his head again, and started to leave the kitchen. He stopped to look inside the cookers, each with its Direct Power unit humming softly, each doing its automatic work perfectly. Once the prepared dishes had been tucked inside and the controls set, they could be left to supervise themselves. One operation followed perfectly upon another, with feedback monitors varying temperatures as a dish began to brown, with thermocouples and humidity detectors always on guard, built into an exactly balanced system and everything done just right.

He touched the temperature controls, resetting them just a trifle to make sure, and went back out into the living room. He took the bottle of carefully compounded Scotch out of the sideboard, filled two shot glasses, and went over to Bendix.

"Here you are, Jem." He sat down jerkily, dropping rather than sinking into the chair.

Dying angered him. He felt no slowdown in his mind—his brain, he was sure, could still chew a fact the way it always had. He felt no drying out in his brain cells, no mental sinews turning into brittle cords.

He'd been lucky, yes. Not many men had come whole out of the fighting years. Now his luck had run out, and that was the end of it. There were plenty of good men long in the ground. Now he'd join them, not having done badly. Nothing to be ashamed of, and a number of grounds for quiet pride, if truth be told. Still, it made him angry.

"Susanne ought to be home any moment," he growled.

Jem smiled. "Take it easy, Joe. You know how these kids are. She probably has to wait 'til somebody else's ready to leave so she can get a lift home."

Kimmensen grunted. "She could have found a way to get home in time. I offered to let her take the plane if she wanted

to. But, no, she said she'd get a ride over."

The puzzled anger he always felt toward Susanne was making his head wag. She'd annoyed him for years about the plane, ever since she was eighteen. Then, when he offered her its occasional use after she'd reached twenty-five, she had made a point of not taking it. He couldn't make head or tail of the girl. She was quick, intelligent, educated—she was potentially everything he'd tried to teach her to be. But she was willful—stubborn. She refused to listen to his advice. The growing coldness between them left them constantly at swords' points. He wondered sometimes if there hadn't been something hidden in Anna's blood—some faint strain that had come to the surface in Susanne and warped her character.

No matter—she was still his daughter. He'd do his duty toward her.

"THIS is really very good, Joe," Jem remarked, sipping his drink. "Excellent."

"Thank you," Kimmensen replied absently. He was glaringly conscious of the break in what should have been a smooth evening's social flow. "Please accept my apologies for Susanne's thoughtlessness."

Jem smiled. "There's nothing

to apologize for, Joe. When the time comes for her to settle down, she'll do it."

"Tell me, Jem—" Kimmensen started awkwardly. But he had to ask. "Do you like Susanne? I think you do, but tell me anyhow."

Jem nodded quietly. "Very much. She's moody and she's headstrong. But that'll change. When it does, I'll ask her."

Kimmensen nodded to himself. Once again, his judgment of Bendix was confirmed. Most young people were full of action. Everything had to be done now. They hadn't lived long enough to understand how many tomorrows there were in even the shortest life.

But Jem was different. He was always willing to wait and let things unfold themselves. He was cautious and solemn beyond his years. He'd make Susanne the best possible husband, and an excellent president for the League.

"It's just as well we've got a little time," Jem was saying. "I was wondering how much you knew about Anse Messerschmidt."

Kimmensen frowned. "Messerschmidt? Nothing. And everything. His kind're all cut out of the same pattern."

Jem frowned with him. "I've seen him once or twice. He's about my age, and we've bumped

into each other at friends' houses. He's one of those swaggering fellows, always ready to start an argument."

"He'll start one too many, one day."

"I hope so."

Kimmensen grunted, and they relapsed into silence. Nevertheless, he felt a peculiar uneasiness. When he heard the other plane settling down outside his house, he gripped his glass tighter. He locked his eyes on the figure of Susanne walking quickly up to the living room wall, and the lean shadow behind her. Then the panel opened, and Susanne and her escort stepped out of the night and into the living room. Kimmensen took a sudden breath. He knew Susanne, and he knew that whatever she did was somehow always the worst possible thing. A deep, pain-ridden shadow crossed his face.

Susanne turned her face to look up at the man standing as quietly as one of Death's outriders beside her.

"Hello, Father," she said calmly. "Hello, Jem. I'd like you both to meet Anse Messerschmidt."

CHAPTER II

IT HAD HAPPENED at almost exactly four o'clock that afternoon.

As he did at least once each

day, Kimmensen had been checking his Direct Power side-arm. The weapon lay on the desk blotter in front of him. The calloused heel of his right palm held it pressed against the blotter while his forefinger pushed the buttplate aside. He moved the safety slide, pulling the focus grid out of the way, and depressed the squeeze triggers with his index and little fingers, holding the weapon securely in his folded-over palm. Inside the butt, the coil began taking power from the mysterious *somewhere* it was aligned on. Old Dubrovic, with his sheaves of notations and encoded symbology, could have told him. But Dubrovic had been killed in one spiteful last gasp of the old regime, for giving the world as much as he had.

The pea-sized tubes flashed into life. Kimmensen released the triggers, slid the buttplate back, and pushed the safety slide down. The side-arm was working—as capable of leveling a mountain as of burning a thread-thin hole in a man.

He put the side-arm back in its holster. Such was the incarnation of freedom. The side-arm did not need to be machined out of metal, or handgripped in oil-finished walnut. These were luxuries. It needed only a few pieces of wire, twisted just so—it was an easy thing to learn—, a few tubes out of an old radio.

And from the moment you had one, you were a free man. You were an army to defend your rights. And when everybody had one—when Direct Power accumulators lighted your house, drove your plane, let you create building materials, food, clothing out of any cheap, plentiful substance; when you needed no Ministry of Supply, no Board of Welfare Supervision, no Bureau of Employment Allocation, no Ministry of the Interior, no National Police—when all these things were as they were, then the world was free.

He smiled to himself. Not very many people thought of it in those technical terms, but it made no difference. They knew how it felt. He remembered talking to an old man, a year after the League was founded.

"Mr. Kimmensen, don't talk no Silas McKinley to me. I ain't never read a book in my life. I remember young fellers comin' around to court my daughter. Every once in a while, they'd get to talkin' politics with me—I gotta admit, my daughter wasn't so much. They'd try and explain about Fascism and Bureaucracy and stuff like that, and they used to get pretty worked up, throwin' those big words around. All I knew was, the government fellers used to come around and take half of my stuff for taxes. One of 'em finally come around

and took my daughter. And I couldn't do nothin' about it. I used to have to work sixteen hours a day just to eat.

"O.K., so now you come around and try and use your kind of big words on me. All I know is, I got me a house, I got me some land, and I got me a wife and some new daughters. And I got me a gun, and ain't nobody gonna take any of 'em away from me." The old man grinned and patted the weapon at his waist. "So, if it's all the same to you, I'll just say anything you say is O.K. by me long's it adds up to me bein' my own boss."

That had been a generation ago. But Kimmensen still remembered it as the best possible proof of the freedom he believed in. He had paid great prices for it in the past. Now that the old regime was as dead as most of the men who remembered it, he would still have been instantly ready to pay them again.

But no one demanded those sacrifices. Twenty-eight years had passed, as uneventful and unbrokenly routine as the first thirty years of his life had been desperate and dangerous. Even the last few traces of administration he represented would soon have withered away, and then his world would be complete. He reached for the next paper in his IN basket.

He felt the thready flutter in his chest and stiffened with surprise. He gripped the edge of his desk, shocked at the way this thing was suddenly upon him.

A bubble effervesced wildly in the cavity under his ribs, like a liquid turned hot in a flash.

He stared blindly. Here it was, in his fifty-ninth year. The knock on the door. He'd never guessed how it would finally come. It hadn't had to take the form of this terrible bubble. It might as easily have been a sudden sharp burst behind his eyes or a slower, subtler gnawing at his vitals. But he'd known it was coming, as every man knows and tries to forget it is coming.

The searing turbulence mounted into his throat. He opened his mouth, strangling. Sudden cords knotted around his chest and, even strangling, he groaned. *Angina pectoris*—pain in the chest—the second-worst pain a man can feel.

The bubble burst and his jaws snapped shut, his teeth mashing together in his lower lip. He swayed in his chair and thought:

That's it. Now I'm an old man.

AFTER A TIME, he carefully mopped his lips and chin with a handkerchief and pushed the bloodied piece of cloth into the bottom of his wastebasket, under the crumpled disposal of his

day's work. He kept his lips compressed until he was sure the cuts had clotted, and decided that, with care, he could speak and perhaps even eat without their being noticed.

Suddenly, there were many things for him to decide quickly. He glanced at the clock on his desk. In an hour, Jem Bendix would be dropping by from his office down the hall. It'd be time to go home, and tonight Jem was invited to come to dinner.

Kimmensen shook his head. He wished he'd invited Jem for some other day. Then he shrugged, thinking: I'm acting as though the world's changed. It hasn't; I have. Some arrangements will have to change, but they will change for the quicker.

He nodded to himself. He'd wanted Susanne and Jem to meet more often. Just as well he'd made the invitation for tonight. Now, more than ever, that might be the solution to one problem. Susanne was twenty-five now; she couldn't help but be losing some of her callow ideas. Give her a husband's firm hand and steadying influence, a baby or two to occupy her time, and she'd be all right. She'd never be what he'd hoped for in a daughter, but it was too late for any more efforts toward changing that. At least she'd be all right.

He looked at his clock again. Fifty-five minutes. Time slipped

away each moment your back was turned.

He hooked his mouth, forgetting the cuts, and winced. He held his palm pressed against his lips and smiled wryly in his mind. Five minutes here, five there, and suddenly twenty-eight years were gone. Twenty-eight years here in this office. He'd never thought it'd take so long to work himself out of a job, and here he wasn't quite finished even yet. When he'd accepted the League presidency, he'd thought he only needed a few years—two or three—before the medical and educational facilities were established well enough to function automatically. Well, they had been. Any League member could go to a hospital or a school and find another League member who'd decided to become a doctor or a teacher.

That much *had* been easy. In some areas, people had learned to expect cooperation from other people, and had stopped expecting some all-powerful Authority to step in and give orders. But then, medicine and education had not quite gotten under the thumb of the State in this part of the world.

The remainder had been hard. He'd expected, in a sort of naive haze, that everyone could instantly make the transition from the old regime to the new freedom. If he'd had any doubts at

all, he'd dismissed them with the thought that this was, after all, mountainous country, and mountaineers were always quick to assert their personal independence. Well, they were. Except for a lingering taint from what was left of the old generation, the youngsters would be taking to freedom as naturally as they drew breath. But it had taken a whole generation. The oldsters still thought of a Leader when they thought of their president. They were accustomed to having an Authority think for them, and they confused the League with a government.

Kimmensen shuffled through the papers on his desk. There they were; requests for food from areas unused to a world where no one issued Agricultural Allocations, letters from people styling themselves Mayors of towns. . . . The old fictions died hard. Crazy old Dubrovic had given men everywhere the weapon of freedom, but only time and patience would give them full understanding of what freedom was.

Well, after all, this area had been drowned for centuries in the blood of rebellious men. It was the ones who gave in easily who'd had the leisure to breed children. He imagined things were different in the Western Hemisphere, where history had not had its tyrannous centuries

to grind away the spirited men. But even here, more and more families were becoming self-contained units, learning to synthesize food and turn farms into parks, abandoning the marketplace towns that should have died with the first MGB man found burned in an alley.

It was coming—the day when all men would be as free of their past as of their fellow men. It seemed, now, that he would never completely see it. That was too bad. He'd hoped for at least some quiet years at home. But that choice had been made twenty-eight years ago.

Sometimes a man had to be a prisoner of his own conscience. He could have stayed home and let someone else do it, but freedom was too precious to consign to someone he didn't fully trust.

Now he'd have to call a League election as soon as possible. Actually, the snowball was well on its way downhill, and all that remained for the next president was the tying up of some loose ends. The business in the outlying districts—the insistence on mistaking inter-family disputes for raids from the northwest — would blow over. A society of armed Freeman families had to go through such a period. Once mutual respect was established—once the penalty for anti-sociability became quite clear—, then the

society would function smoothly.

And as for who would succeed him, there wasn't a better candidate than Jem Bendix. Jem had always thought the way he did, and Jem was intelligent. Furthermore, everyone liked Jem—there'd be no trouble about the election.

So that was settled. He looked at his clock again and saw that he had a half hour more. He pushed his work out of the way, reached into a drawer, and took out a few sheets of paper. He frowned with impatience at himself as his hands fumbled. For a moment, he brooded down at the seamed stumps where the old regime's police wires had cut through his thumbs. Then, holding his pen clamped firmly between his middle and index knuckles, he began writing:

"I, Joseph Ferassi Kimmenssen, being of sound mind and mature years, do make the following Will . . ."

CHAPTER III

MESSERSCHMIDT was tall and bony as a wolfhound. His long face was pale, and his ears were large and prominent. Of his features, the ears were the first to attract a casual glance. Then attention shifted to his mouth, hooked in a permanent sardonic grimace under his blade of a nose. Then his eyes caught,

and held. They were dark and set close together, under shaggy black eyebrows. There was something in them that made Kimmensen's hackles rise.

He tried to analyze it as Messerschmidt bowed slightly from the hips, his hands down at the sides of his dark clothes.

"Mr. President, I'm honored."

"Messerschmidt." Kimmensen acknowledge, out of courtesy. The man turned slightly and bowed to Bendix. "Mr. Secretary."

And now Kimmensen caught it. Toward him, Messerschmidt had been a bit restrained. But his bow to Jem was a shade too deep, and his voice as he delivered Jem's title was too smooth.

It was mockery. Deep, ineradicable, and unveiled, it lurked in the backs of Messerschmidt's eyes. Mockery—and the most colossal ego Kimmensen had ever encountered.

Good God! Kimmensen thought, *I believed we'd killed all your kind!*

"Father, I invited—" Susanne had begun, her face animated for once. Now she looked from Jem to Kimmensen and her face fell and set into a mask. "Never mind," she said flatly. She looked at Kimmensen again, and turned to Messerschmidt. "I'm sorry, Anse. You'll excuse me. I have to see to the dinner."

"Of course, Susanne," Messerschmidt

said. "I hope to see you again."

Susanne nodded—a quick, sharp jerk of her head—and went quickly into the kitchen. Messerschmidt, Jem, and Kimmensen faced each other.

"An awkward situation," Messerschmidt said quietly.

"You made it," Kimmensen answered.

Messerschmidt shrugged. "I'll take the blame. I think we'd best say good night."

"Good night."

"Good night, Mr. President . . . Mr. Secretary."

Messerschmidt bowed to each of them and stepped out of the living room, carefully closing the panel behind him. He walked through the pool of light from the living room and disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the patio. In a minute, Kimmensen heard his plane beat its way into the air, and then he sat down again, clutching his glass. He saw that Bendix was white-lipped and shaking.

"So now I've met him," Kimmensen said, conscious of the strain in his voice.

"That man can't be allowed to stay alive!" Bendix burst out. "If all the things I hate were ever personified, they're in him."

"Yes," Kimmensen said, nodding slowly. "You're right—he's dangerous." But Kimmensen was less ready to let his emotions

carry him away. The days of political killings were over—finished forever. "But I think we can trust the society to pull his teeth."

Kimmensen hunched forward in thought. "We'll talk about it tomorrow, at work. Our personal feelings are unimportant, compared to the steps we have to take as League officers."

That closed the matter for tonight, as he'd hoped it would. He still hoped that somehow tonight's purpose could be salvaged.

IN THAT, he was disappointed. It was an awkward, forced meal, with the three of them silent and pretending nothing had happened, denying the existence of another human being. They were three people attempting to live in a sharply restricted private universe, their conversation limited to comments on the food. At the end of the evening, all their nerves were screaming. Susanne's face was pinched and drawn together, her temples white. When Kimmensen blotted his lips, he found fresh blood on the napkin.

Jem stood up awkwardly. "Well . . . thank you very much for inviting me, Joe." He looked toward Susanne and hesitated. "It was a delicious meal, Sue. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Well . . . I'd better be getting home . . ."

Kimmensen nodded, terribly disappointed. He'd planned to let Susanne fly Jem home.

"Take the plane, Jem," he said finally. "You can pick me up in the morning."

"All right. Thank you. . . . Good night, Sue."

"Good night."

"Joe."

"Good night, Jem." He wanted to somehow restore Bendix's spirits. "We'll have a long talk about that other business in the morning," he reminded him.

"Yes, sir." It did seem to raise his chin a little.

AFTER Jem had left, Kimmensen turned slowly toward Susanne. She sat quietly, her eyes on her empty coffee cup.

Waiting, Kimmensen thought.

She knew, of course, that she'd hurt him badly again. She expected his anger. Well, how could he help but be angry? Hadn't any of the things he'd told her ever made any impression on her?

"Susanne."

She raised her head and he saw the stubborn, angry set to her mouth. "Father, please don't lecture me again." Every word was low, tight, and controlled.

Kimmensen clenched his hands. He'd never been able to understand this kind of defiance.

Where did she get that terribly misplaced hardness in her fiber? What made her so unwilling to listen when someone older and wiser tried to teach her?

If I didn't love her, he thought, this wouldn't matter to me. But in spite of everything, I do love her. So I go on, every day, trying to make her see.

"I can't understand you," he said. "What makes you act this way? Where did it come from? You're nothing like your mother,"—though, just perhaps, even if the thought twisted his heart, she was—"and you're nothing like me."

"I am," she said in a low voice, looking down again. "I'm exactly like you."

When she spoke nonsense like that, it annoyed him more than anything else could have. And where anger could be kept in check, annoyance could not.

"Listen to me," he said.

"Don't lecture me again."

"Susanne! You will keep quiet and listen. Do you realize what you're doing, flirting with a man like Messerschmidt? Do you realize—has anything I've told you ever made an impression on you?—do you realize that except for an accident in time, that man could be one of the butchers who killed your mother?"

"Father, I've heard you say these things before. We've all heard you say them."



Now he'd begun, it was no longer any use not to go on. "Do you realize they oppressed and murdered and shipped to labor camps all the people I loved, all the people who were worthwhile in the world, until we rose up and wiped them out?" His hands folded down whitely on the arms of his chair. "Where are your grandparents buried? Do you know? Do I? Where is my brother? Where are my sisters?"

"I don't know. I never knew them."

"Listen—I was born in a world too terrible for you to believe. I was born to cower. I was born to die in a filthy cell under a police station. Do you know what a police station is, eh? Have I described one often enough? Your mother was born to work from dawn to night, hauling stones to repair the roads the army tanks had ruined. And if she made a mistake—if she raised her head, if she talked about the wrong things, if she thought the wrong thoughts—then she was born to go to a labor camp and strip tree bark for the army's medicines while she stood up to her waist in freezing water.

"I was born in a world where half a billion human beings lived for a generation in worship—in *worship*—of a *man*. I was born in a world where that

one twisted man could tell a lie and send gigantic armies charging into death, screaming that lie. I was born to huddle, to be a cipher in a crowd, to be spied on, to be regulated, to be hammered to meet the standard so the standard lie would fit me. I was born to be nothing."

Slowly, Kimmensen's fingers uncurled. "But now I have freedom. Stepan Dubrovic managed to find freedom for all of us. I remember how the word spread—how it whispered all over the world, almost in one night, it seemed. Take a wire—twist it, so. Take a vacuum tube—the army has radios, there are stores the civil servants use, there are old radios, hidden—make the weapon . . . and you are free. And we rose up, each man like an angel with a sword of fire.

"But if we thought Paradise would come overnight, we were wrong. The armies did not dissolve of themselves. The Systems did not break down.

"You take a child from the age of five; you teach it to love the State, to revere the Leader; you inform it that it is the wave of the future, much cleverer than the decadent past but not quite intelligent enough to rule itself. You teach it that there must be specialists in government—Experts in Economy, Directors of Internal Resources,

Ministers of Labor Utilization. What can you do with a child like that, by the time it is sixteen? By the time it is marching down the road with a pack on its back, with the Leader's song on its lips? With the song written so its phrases correspond to the ideal breathing cycle for the average superman marching into the Future at one hundred centimeters to the pace?"

"Stop it, Father."

"You burn him down. How else can you change him? You burn him down where he marches, you burn his Leaders, you burn the System, you root out—*everything!*"

Kimmensen sighed. "And then you begin to be free." He looked urgently at Susanne. "Now do you understand what Messerschmidt is? If you can't trust my advice, can you at least understand that much? Has what I've always told you finally made some impression?"

Susanne pushed her chair back. "No. I understood it the first time and I saw how important it was. I still understood it the tenth time. But now I've heard it a thousand times. I don't care what the world was like—I don't care what you went through. I never saw it. You. You sit in your office and write the same letters day after day, and you play with your weapon, and you preach your social

theory as though it was a religion and you were its high priest—special, dedicated, above us all, above the flesh. You tell me how to live my life. You try to arrange it to fit your ideas. You even try to cram Jem Bendix down my throat.

"But I won't have you treating me that way. When Anse talks to me, it's about him and me, not about people I never met. I have things I want. I want Anse. I'm telling you and you can tell Bendix. And if you don't stop trying to order me around, I'll move out. That's all."

Clutching his chair, not quite able to believe what he'd heard, knowing that in a moment pain and anger would crush him down, Kimmensen listened to her quick footsteps going away into her room.

CHAPTER IV

HE WAS WAITING out on the patio, in the bright cold of the morning, when Jem Bendix brought the plane down and picked him up. Bendix was pale this morning, and puffy-eyed, as though he'd been a long time getting to sleep and still had not shaken himself completely awake.

"Good morning, Joe," he said heavily as Kimmensen climbed in beside him.

"Good morning, Jem." Kimmensen, too, had stayed awake a long time. This morning, he had washed and dressed and drunk his coffee with Susanne's bedroom door closed and silent, and then he had come out on the patio to wait for Jem, not listening for sounds in the house. "I'm—I'm very sorry for the way things turned out last night." He left it at that. There was no point in telling Jem about Susanne's hysterical outburst.

Jem shook his head as he lifted the plane into the air. "No, Joe. It wasn't your fault. You couldn't help that."

"She's my daughter. I'm responsible for her."

Jem shrugged. "She's headstrong. Messerschmidt paid her some attention, and he became a symbol of rebellion to her. She sees him as someone who isn't bound by your way of life. He's a glamorous figure. But she'll get over it. I spent a long time last night thinking about it. You were right, Joe. At the moment, he's something new and exciting. But he'll wear off. The society'll see through him, and so will Susanne. All we have to do is wait."

Kimmensen brooded over the valleys far below, pale under the early morning mist. "I'm not sure, Jem," he answered slowly. He had spent hours last night

in his chair, hunched over, not so much thinking as steeping his mind in all the things that had happened so suddenly. Finally, he had gotten up and gone into his bedroom, where he lay on his bed until a plan of action slowly formed in his mind and he could, at last, go to sleep.

"It's not the matter of Messerschmidt and Susanne," he explained quickly. "I hope you understand that I'm speaking now as someone responsible to all the families in this area, rather than as the head of any particular one. What concerns me now is that Messerschmidt is bound to have some sort of following among the immature. He's come at a bad time. He's in a good position to exploit this business in the Northwest."

And I'm going to die. Kimmensen had to pause before he went on.

"Yes, in time his bubble will burst. But it's a question of how long that might take. Meanwhile, he is a focus of unrest. If nothing happens to check him now, some people might decide he was right."

Bendix chewed his lower lip. "I see what you mean, Joe. It'll get worse before it gets better. He'll attract more followers. And the ones he has now will believe in him more than ever."

"Yes," Kimmensen said slowly, "that could easily happen."

They flew in silence for a few moments, the plane jouncing in the bumpy air, and then as Bendix slowed the vanes and they began to settle down into the valley where the office building was, Jem asked "Do you have anything in mind?"

Kimmensen nodded. "Yes. It's got to be shown that he doesn't have the population behind him. His followers will be shocked to discover how few of them there are. And the people wavering toward him will realize how little he represents. I'm going to call for an immediate election."

"Do you think that's the answer? Will he run against you?"

"If he refuses to run in an election, that's proof enough he knows he couldn't possibly win. If he runs, he'll lose. It's the best possible move. And, Jem . . . there's another reason." Kimmensen had thought it all out. And it seemed to him that he could resolve all his convergent problems with this one move. He would stop Messerschmidt, he would pass his work on to Jem, and—perhaps this was a trifle more on his mind than he'd been willing to admit—once Messerschmidt had been deflated, Susanne would be bound to see her tragic error, and the three of them could settle down, and he could finish his life quietly.

"Jem, I'm getting old."

Bendix's face turned paler. He licked his lips. "Joe—"

"No, Jem, we've got to face it. Don't try to be polite about it. No matter how much you protest, the fact is I'm almost worn out, and I know it. I'm going to resign."

Bendix's hands jerked on the control wheel.

Kimmensen pretended not to see it. For all his maturity, Jem was still a young man. It was only natural that the thought of stepping up so soon would be a great thrill to him. "I'll nominate you as my successor, and I'll campaign for you. By winning the election, you'll have stopped Messerschmidt, and then everything can go on the way we've always planned." Yes, he thought as the plane bumped down on the weathered plaza. That'll solve everything.

AS KIMMENSEN stepped into his office, he saw Salmaggi sitting beside the desk, waiting for him. The man's broad back was toward him, and Kimmensen could not quite restrain the flicker of distaste that always came at the thought of talking to him. Of all mornings, this was a particularly bad one on which to listen to the man pour out his hysterias.

"Good morning, Tullio," he said as he crossed to his desk.

Salmaggi turned quickly in his chair. "Good morning, Josef." He jumped to his feet and pumped Kimmensen's hand. "How are you?" His bright eyes darted quickly over Kimmensen's face.

"Well, thank you. And you?"

Salmaggi dropped back into his chair. "Worried, Josef. I've been trying to see you about something very important."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry I've been so busy."

"Yes. So I thought if you weren't too busy this morning, you might be able to spare ten minutes."

Kimmensen glanced at him sharply. But Salmaggi's moon of a face was completely clear of sarcasm or any other insinuation. There were only the worried wrinkles over the bridge of his nose and at the corners of his eyes. Kimmensen could not help thinking that Salmaggi looked like a baby confronted by the insuperable problem of deciding whether or not it wanted to go to the bathroom. "I've got a number of important things to attend to this morning, Tullio."

"Ten minutes, Josef."

Kimmensen sighed. "All right." He settled himself patiently in his chair.

"I was up in the northwest part of the area again on this last trip."

"Um-hmm." Kimmensen, sacrificing the ten minutes, busied himself with thinking about Jem's reaction to his decision. Bendix had seemed totally overwhelmed, not saying another word as they walked from the plane into the office building.

"There's been another family burned out."

"So I understand, Tullio." Kimmensen smiled faintly to himself, understanding how Jem must feel today. It had been something of the same with himself when, just before the end of the fighting years, the realization had slowly come to him that it would be he who would have to take the responsibility of stabilizing this area.

"That makes seven in all, Josef. Seven in the past eighteen months."

"It takes time, Tullio. The country toward the northwest is quite rugged. No regime was ever able to send its police up there with any great success. They're individualistic people. It's only natural they'd have an unusual number of feuds." Kimmensen glanced at his clock.

It was a great responsibility, he was thinking to himself. I remember how confused everything was. How surprised we were to discover, after the old regime was smashed, that many of us had been fighting for utterly different things.

That had been the most important thing he'd had to learn; that almost everyone was willing to fight and die to end the old regime, but that once the revolution was won, there were a score of new regimes that had waited, buried in the hearts of suppressed men, to flower out and fill the vacuum. That was when men who had been his friends were suddenly his enemies, and when men whose lives he had saved now tried to burn him down. In many ways, that had been the very worst period of the fighting years.

"Josef, have you gone up there recently?"

Kimmensen shook his head. "I've been very occupied here." His responsibility was to all the families in the area, not to just those in one small section. He could never do his work while dashing from one corner of the area to another.

"Josef, you're not listening!" Kimmensen looked up and was shocked to see that there were actually glints of frustrated moisture in the corners of Salmaggi's eyes.

"Of course I'm listening, Tullio," he said gently.

Salmaggi shook his head angrily, like a man trying to reach his objective in the midst of a thick fog. "Josef, if you don't do something, Messerschmidt's going to take an army up into

the Northwesters' area. And I'm not sure he isn't right. I don't like him—but I'm not sure he isn't right."

Kimmensen smiled. "Tullio, if that's what's on your mind, you can rest easy. I am going to do something. This afternoon, I'm going to make a general broadcast. I'm going to call an election. I'm resigning, and Jem Bendix will run against Messerschmidt. That will be the end of him."

Salmaggi looked at him. "Of who?"

"Of Messerschmidt, of course," Kimmensen answered in annoyance. "Now if you'll excuse me, Tullio, I have to draft my statement."

THAT NIGHT, when he came home, he found Susanne waiting for him in the living room. She looked at him peculiarly as he closed the panel behind him.

"Hello, Father."

"Hello, Susanne." He had been hoping that the passage of a day would dull her emotional state, and at least let the two of them speak to each other like civilized people. But, looking at her, he saw how tense her face was and how red the nervous blotches were in the pale skin at the base of her neck.

What happened between us? he thought sadly. Where did it start? I raised you alone from

the time you were six months old. I stayed up with you at night when your teeth came. I changed your diapers and put powder on your little bottom, and when you were sick I woke up every hour all night for weeks to give you your medicine. I held you and gave you your bottles, and you were warm and soft, and when I tickled you under the chin you laughed up at me. Why can't you smile with me now? Why do you do what you do to me?

"I heard your broadcast, of course," she said tightly.

"I thought you would."

"Just remember something, Father."

"What, Susanne?"

"There are a lot of us old enough to vote, this time."

CHAPTER V

KIMMENSEN shifted in his chair, blinking in the sunshine of the plaza. Messerschmidt sat a few feet away, looking up over the heads of the live audience at the mountains. The crowd was waiting patiently and quietly. It was the quiet that unsettled him a little bit. He hadn't said anything to Jem, but he'd half expected some kind of demonstration against Messerschmidt.

Still, this was only a fraction of the League membership.

There were cameras flying at each corner of the platform, and the bulk of the electorate were watching from their homes. There was no telling what their reaction was, but Kimmensen, on thinking it over, decided that the older, more settled proportion of the League—the people in the comfort of their homes, enjoying the products of their own free labor—would be as outraged at this man as he was.

He turned his head back over his shoulder and looked at Jem.

"We'll be starting in a moment. How do you feel?"

Jem's smile was a dry-lipped grimace. "A little nervous. How about you, Joe?"

Kimmensen smiled back at him. "This is an old story to me, Jem. Besides, I'm not running." He clasped his hands in his lap and faced front again, forcing his fingers to keep still.

The surprisingly heavy crowd here in the plaza was all young people.

In a moment, the light flashed on above the microphone, and Kimmensen stood up and crossed the platform. There was a good amount of applause from the crowd, and Kimmensen smiled down at them. Then he lifted his eyes to the camera that had flown into position in front of and above him.

"Fellow citizens," he began, "as you know, I'm not running

in this election." There was silence from the crowd. He'd half expected some sort of demonstration of disappointment—at least a perfunctory one.

There was none. Well, he'd about conceded this crowd of youngsters to Messerschmidt. It was the people at home who mattered.

"I'm here to introduce the candidate I think should be our next League President—Secretary Jem Bendix."

This time the crowd reacted. As Jem got up and bowed, and the other cameras focussed on him, there was a stir in the plaza, and one young voice broke in: "Why introduce him? Everybody knows him."

"Sure," somebody else replied. "He's a nice guy."

Messerschmidt sat quietly in his chair, his eyes still on the mountains. He made a spare figure in his dark clothes, with his pale face under the shock of black hair.

Kimmensen started to go on as Jem sat down. But then, timed precisely for the second when he was firmly back in his chair, the voice that had shouted the first time added: "But who wants him for President?"

A chorus of laughter exploded out of the crowd. Kimmensen felt his stomach turn icy. That had been pre-arranged. Messer-

schmidt had the crowd packed. He'd have to make the greatest possible effort to offset this. He began speaking again, ignoring the outburst.

"We're here today to decide whom we want for our next president. But in a greater sense, we are here to decide whether we shall keep our freedom or whether we shall fall back into a tyranny as odious as any, as evil as any that crushed us to the ground for so long."

As he spoke, the crowd quieted. He made an impressive appearance on a platform, he knew. This *was* an old story to him, and now he made use of all the experience gathered through the years.

"We are here to decide our future. This is not just an ordinary election. We are here to decide whether we are going to remain as we are, or whether we are going to sink back into the bloody past."

As always, he felt the warmth of expressing himself—of reaffirming the principles by which he lived. "We are here to choose between a life of peace and harmony, a life in which no man is oppressed in any way by any other, a life of fellowship, a life of peaceful trade, a life of shared talents and ideals—or a life of rigid organization, of slavery to a high-sounding phrase and a remorseless system

of government that fits its subjects to itself rather than pattern itself to meet their greatest good."

He spoke to them of freedom—of what life had been like before they were born, of how bitter the struggle had been, and of how Freemen ought to live.

They followed every word attentively, and when he finished he sat down to applause.

He sat back in his chair. Jem, behind him, whispered:

"Joe, that was wonderful! I've never heard it better said. Joe, I . . . I've got to admit that before I heard you today, I was scared—plain scared. I didn't think I was ready. It—it seemed like such a big job, all alone. . . . But now I know you're with me, forever . . ."

MESSERSCHMIDT got up. It seemed to Kimmensen as though the entire crowd inhaled simultaneously.

"Fellow citizens." Messerschmidt delivered the opening flatly, standing easily erect, and then stood waiting. The attention of the crowd fastened on him, and the cameras dipped closer.

"First," Messerschmidt said, "I'd like to pay my respects to President Kimmensen. I can truthfully say I've never heard him deliver that speech more fluently." A ripple of laughter

ran around the crowd. "Then, I'd like to simply ask a few questions." Messerschmidt had gone on without waiting for the laughter to die out. It stopped as though cut by a knife. "I would have liked to hear Candidate Bendix make his own speech, but I'm afraid he did." Messerschmidt turned slightly toward Bendix's chair. In Kimmensen's judgment, he was not using the best tone of voice for a rabble-rouser.

"Yes, Jem Bendix is a nice guy. No one has a bad word for him. Why should they? What's he ever done on any impulse of his own—what's he ever said except 'me, too'?"

Kimmensen's jaws clamped together in incredulous rage. He'd expected Messerschmidt to hit low. But this was worse than low. This was a deliberate, muddy-handed perversion of the campaign speech's purpose.

"I wonder," Messerschmidt went on, "whether Jem Kimmensen—excuse me; Jem *Bendix*—would be here on this platform today if Josef Kimmensen hadn't realized it was time to put a shield between himself and the citizens he calls his fellows. Let's look at the record."

Kimmensen's hands crushed his thighs, and he stared grimly at Messerschmidt's back.

"Let's look at the record. You and I are citizens of the Free-

men's League. Which is a voluntary organization. Now—who founded the League? Josef Kimmensen. Who's been the only League President we've ever had? Who is the League, by the grace of considerable spellbinding powers and an electorate which—by the very act of belonging to the League—is kept so split up that it's rare when a man gets a chance to talk things out with his neighbor?

"I know—we've all got communicators and we've all got planes. But you don't get down to earth over a communicator, and you don't realize the other fellow's got the same gripes you do while you're both flapping around up in the air. When you don't meet your neighbor face to face, and get friendly with him, and see that he's got your problems, you never realize that maybe things aren't the way Josef Kimmensen says they are. You never get together and decide that all of Josef Kimmensen's fine words don't amount to anything.

"But the League's a voluntary organization. We're all in it, and, God help me, I'm running for President of it. Why do we stick with it? Why did we all join up?

"Well, most of us are in it because our fathers were in it. And it was a good thing, then. It still can be. Lord knows, in

those days they needed something to hold things steady, and I guess the habit of belonging grew into us. But why don't we pull out of this voluntary organization now, if we're unhappy about it for some reason? I'll tell you why—because if we do, our kids don't go to school and when they're sick they can't get into the hospital. And do you think Joe Kimmensen didn't think of that?"

The crowd broke into the most sullen roar Kimmensen had heard in twenty-eight years. He blanched, and then raged crashed through him. Messerschmidt was deliberately whipping them up. These youngsters out here didn't have children to worry about. But Messerschmidt was using the contagion of their hysteria to infect the watchers at home.

He saw that suddenly and plainly, and he cursed himself for ever having put this opportunity in Messerschmidt's hands. But who would have believed that Freeman would be fools enough—*stupid* enough—to listen to this man?

Of course, perhaps those at home weren't listening.

"And what about the Northwesters' raids? Josef Kimmensen says there aren't any raids. He says we're settling our unimportant little feuds." This time, Messerschmidt waited for the

baying laughter to fade. "Well, maybe he believes it. Maybe. But suppose you were a man who held this area in the palm of your hand? Suppose you had the people split up into little families, where they couldn't organize to get at you. And now, suppose somebody said, 'We need an army.' What would you do about that? What would you think about having an organized body of fighting men ready to step on you if you got too big for people to stand? Would you say, if you were that man—would you say, 'O.K., we'll have an army,' or would you say, 'It's all a hoax. There aren't any raids. Stay home. Stay split up?' Would you say that, while we were all getting killed?"

The savage roar exploded from the crowd, and in the middle of it Messerschmidt walked quietly back to his chair and sat down.

Jem's fist was hammering down on the back of Kimmensen's chair.

"We should never have let him get on this platform! A man like that can't be treated like a civilized human being! He has to be destroyed, like an animal!"

Heartsick and enraged, Kimmensen stared across the platform at the blade-nosed man.

"Not like an animal," he whispered to himself. "Not like an animal. Like a disease."

STILL SHAKEN, still sick, Kimmensen sat in his office and stared down at his hands. Twenty-eight years of selfless dedication had brought him to this day.

He looked up at the knock on his open door, and felt himself turn rigid.

"May I come in?" Messerschmidt asked quietly, unmoving, waiting for Kimmensen's permission.

Kimmensen tightened his hands. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to apologize for my performance this afternoon." The voice was still quiet, and still steady. The mouth, with its deep line etched at one corner, was grave and a little bit sad.

"Come in," Kimmensen said, wondering what new tactic Messerschmidt would use.

"Thank you." He crossed the office. "May I sit down?"

Kimmensen nodded toward the chair, and Messerschmidt took it. "Mr. President, the way I slanted my speech this afternoon was unjust in many respects. I did it that way knowingly, and I know it must have upset you a great deal." His mouth hooked into its quirk, but his eyes remained grave.

"Then why did you do it?" Kimmensen snapped. He watched Messerschmidt's face carefully, waiting for the trap he knew the man must be spinning.

"I did it because I want to be President. I only hope I did it well enough to win. I didn't have time to lay the groundwork for a careful campaign. I would have used the same facts against you in any case, but I would have preferred not to cloak them in hysterical terms. But there wasn't time. There isn't time—I've got to destroy this society you've created as soon as I can. After tonight's election, I will."

"You *egomaniac*!" Kimmensen whispered incredulously. "You're so convinced of your superiority that you'll even come here—to *me*—and boast about your twisted plans. You've got the gall to come here and tell me what you're going to do—given the chance."

"I came here to apologize, Mr. Kimmensen. And then I answered your question."

Kimmensen heard his voice rising and didn't care. "We'll see who wins the election! We'll see whether a man can ride roughshod over other men because he believes he has a mission to perform!"

"Mr. President," Messerschmidt said in his steady voice, "I have no idea of whether I am supplied with a mission to lead. I doubt it. I don't particularly feel it. But when I speak my opinions, people agree with me. It isn't a question of my

wanting to or not wanting to. People follow me."

"No Freeman in his right mind will follow you!"

"But they will. What it comes down to is that I speak for more of them than you. There's no Utopia with room for men like you and me, and yet we're here. We're constantly being born. So there's a choice—kill us, burn us down, or smash your Utopia. And you can't kill more than one generation of us."

Messerschmidt's eyes were brooding. His mouth twisted deeper into sadness. "I don't like doing this to you, Mr. President, because I understand you. I think you're wrong, but I understand you. So I came here to apologize."

"I'm a leader. People follow me. If they follow me, I have to lead them. It's a closed circle. What else can I do? Kill myself and leave them leaderless? Someday, when I'm in your position and another man's in mine, events may very well move in that direction. But until the man who'll displace me is born and matures, I have to be what I am, just as you do. I have to do something about the Northwesters. I have to get these people back together again so they're a whole, instead of an aggregate of isolated pockets. I have to give them places to live together. Not all of us, Mr.

President, were born to live in eagle rooks on mountaintops. So I've got to hurt you, because that's what the people need."

Kimmensen shook in reaction to the man's consummate arrogance. He remembered Bausch, when they finally burst into his office, and the way the great fat hulk of the man had protested: "Why are you doing this? I was working for *your* good—for the good of this nation—why are you doing *this*?"

"That's enough of you and your kind's hypocrisy, Messerschmidt!" he choked out. "I've got nothing further I want to hear from you. You're everything I despise and everything I fought to destroy. I've killed men like you. After the election tonight, you'll see just how few followers you have. I trust you'll understand it as a clear warning to get out of this area before we kill one more."

Messerschmidt stood up quietly. "I doubt if you'll find the election coming out in quite that way," he said, his voice still as calm as it had been throughout. "It might have been different if you hadn't so long persisted in fighting for the last generation's revolution."

KIMMENSEN sat stiffly in Jem Bendix's office.

"Where's he now?" Bendix demanded, seething.

"I don't know. He'll have left the building."

Bendix looked at Kimmensen worriedly. "Joe—*can* he win the election?"

Kimmensen looked at Jem for a long time. All his rage was trickling away like sand pouring through the bottom of a rotted sack. "I think so." There was only a sick, chilling fear left in him.

Bendix slapped his desk with his hand. "But he *can't*! He just *can't*! He's bulldozed the electorate, he hasn't promised one single thing except an army, he doesn't have a constructive platform at all—no, by God, he can't take that away from me, too!—Joe, what're we going to *do*?"

He turned his pale and frightened face toward Kimmensen. "Joe—tonight, when the returns come in—let's be here in this building. Let's be right there in the room with the tabulating recorder. We've got to make sure it's an honest count."

CHAPTER VI

THERE was only one bare overhead bulb in the tabulator room. Bendix had brought in two plain chairs from the offices upstairs, and now Kimmensen sat side by side with him, looking at the gray bulk of the machine. The room was

far down under the building. The walls and floor were cement, and white rime bloomed dankly in the impressions left by form panels that had been set there long ago.

The tabulating recorder was keyed into every League communicator, and every key was cross-indexed into the census files. It would accept one vote from each mature member of every League family. It flashed running totals on the general broadcast wavelength.

"It seems odd," Bendix said in a husky voice. "An election without Salmaggi running."

Kimmensen nodded. The flat walls distorted voices until they sounded like the whispers of grave-robbers in a tomb.

"Did you ask him why he wasn't?" he asked because silence was worse.

"He said he didn't know whose ticket to run on."

Kimmensen absorbed it as one more fact and let it go.

"The first votes ought to be coming in." Bendix was looking at his watch. "It's time."

Kimmensen nodded.

"It's ironic," Bendix said. "We have a society that trusts itself enough to leave this machine unguarded, and now the machine's recording an election that's a meaningless farce. Give the electorate one more day and it'd have time to think about

Messerschmidt's hate-mongering. As it is, half the people'll be voting for him with their emotions instead of their intelligence."

"It'll be a close election," Kimmensen said. He was past pretending.

"It won't *be* an election!" Bendix burst out, slamming his hand on his knee. "One vote for Bendix. Two votes for Mob Stupidity." He looked down at the floor. "It couldn't be worse if Messerschmidt were down here himself, tampering with the tabulator circuits."

Kimmensen asked in a dry voice: "Is it that easy?"

"Throwing the machine off? Yes, once you have access to it. Each candidate has an assigned storage circuit where his votes accumulate. A counter electrode switches back and forth from circuit to circuit as the votes come in. With a piece of insulation to keep it from making contact, and a jumper wire to throw the charge over into the opposing memory cells, a vote for one candidate can be registered for the other. A screwdriver'll give you access to the assembly involved. I . . . studied up on it—to make sure Messerschmidt didn't try it."

"I see," Kimmensen said.

They sat in silence for a time. Then the machine began to click. "Votes, coming in," Bendix said.

He reached in his blouse pocket. "I brought a communications receiver to listen on."

They sat without speaking again for almost a half hour, listening. Then Kimmensen looked at Bendix. "Those'll be his immediate followers, voting early," he said. "It'll even out, probably, when most of the families finish supper." His voice sounded unreal to himself.

Bendix paced back and forth, perspiration shining wetly on his face in the light from the overhead bulb. "It's not fair," he said huskily. "It's not a true election. It doesn't represent anything." He looked at Kimmensen desperately. "It's not *fair*, Joe!"

Kimmensen sighed. "All right, Jem. I assume you brought the necessary equipment—the screwdriver, the insulation, and so forth?"

AFTER another half hour, Bendix looked across the room at Kimmensen. The removed panel lay on the floor at his feet, its screws rocking back and forth inside its curvature. "Joe, it's still not enough."

Kimmensen nodded, listening to the totals on the receiver.

"How many are you switching now?" he asked.

"One out of every three Messerschmidt votes is registering for me."

"Make it one out of two," Kimmensen said harshly.

THEY BARELY caught up with Messerschmidt's total. It was a close election. Closer than any Kimmensen had ever been in before. Bendix replaced the panel. They put out the room light and climbed back up to the ground level offices, bringing the chairs with them.

"Well, Joe, it's done." Bendix whispered though there was no one listening.

"Yes, it is."

"A thing like this creeps over you," Jem said in a wondering voice. "You begin by telling yourself you're only rectifying a mistake people would never make if they had time to think. You set a figure—one out of five. One person out of five, you say to yourself, would switch his own vote, given the chance. Then you wonder if it might not be one out of four—and then three. . . . Joe, I swear when I first suggested we go down there tonight, I hadn't a thought of doing—what we did. Even when I put the insulation and wire in my pocket, I never thought I'd—"

"Didn't you?" Kimmensen said. He felt disinterested. They'd had to do it, and they'd done it. Now the thing was to forget about it. "Good night, Bendix."

He left him and walked slowly through the corridors left over from another time. He went down the front steps and out into the plaza.

He found Messerschmidt waiting for him. He was standing in the shadow of the plane's cabin, and the plaza lights barely showed his face. Kimmensen stopped still.

Messerschmidt's features were a pale ghost of himself in the darkness. "Didn't you think I'd make spot-checks?" he asked with pity in his voice. "I had people voting at timed intervals, with witnesses, while I checked the running total."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Messerschmidt nodded slowly. "Mr. Kimmensen, if I'd thought for a minute you'd do something like that, I'd have had some of my men in that building with you." His hands moved in the only unsure gesture Kimmensen had ever seen him make. "I had a good idea of how the vote would go. When it started right, and suddenly began petering out, I had to start checking. Mr. Kimmensen, did you really think you could get away with it?"

"Get away with what? Are you going to claim fraud—repudiate the election? Is that it?"

"Wait — wait, now — Mr.

Kimmensen, didn't you rig the vote?"

"Are you insane?"

Messerschmidt's voice changed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kimmensen. Once more, I have to apologize. I ought to have known better. Bendix must have done it by himself. I should have known—"

"No. No," Kimmensen sighed, "forget it, Messerschmidt. We did it together."

Messerschmidt waited a long moment. "I see." His voice was dead. "Well. You asked me if I was going to repudiate the election."

"Are you?"

"I don't know, yet. I'll have to think. I'll have to do something, won't I?"

Kimmensen nodded in the darkness. "Somehow, you've won and I've lost." Suddenly, it was all welling up inside him. "Somehow, you've arranged to win no matter what decent men do!"

"All right, Mr. Kimmensen. Have it your way."

"Whatever you plan to do now, I'll be home. If you should need me for a firing squad or some similar purpose."

Messerschmidt made an annoyed sound. "Mr. Kimmensen, you're notorious for your dramatics, but I think that's going too far." He walked away into the darkness.

Kimmensen climbed into his plane, sick at the night that covered him, and furious at Messerschmidt's ruthlessly sharp mind.

THERE was no one at home. He walked methodically through the house, doggedly opening Susanne's empty closets. Then he sat down in the living room with the lights off, staring out into the starlit, moonless night. He nodded sharply to himself.

"Of course," he said in the dark. "She'd be one of his timed voters." Then he sat for a long time, eyes straight ahead and focussed on nothing, every fold of his clothing rigidly in place, as though he were his own statue.

CHAPTER VII

UNTIL, hours later, orange flowers burst in the valley below. He came erect, not understanding them for a moment, and then he ran out to the patio, leaning over the parapet. On the faint wind, he heard the distant sound of earth and houses bursting into vapor. In the valleys, fire swirled in flashes through the dark, and against the glare of burning trees he saw bobbing silhouettes of planes. Men were far too small to be seen at this distance, but as firing stabbed down from the planes other

weapons answered from the ground.

Suddenly, he heard the flogging of a plane in the air directly overhead. He jumped back, reaching for his weapon, before he recognized Jem Bendix's sportster. It careened down to his landing stage, landing with a violent jar, and Bendix thrust his head out of the cabin. "Joe!"

"What's happening?"

"Messerschmidt—he's taking over, in spite of the election! I was home when I saw it start up. He and his followers're cutting down everybody who won't stand for it. Come on!"

"What are you going to do?"

Bendix's face was red with rage. "I'm going to go down there and kill him! I should have done it long ago. Are you coming with me?"

Why not? Kimmensen grimaced. *Why wait to die here?*

He clambered into the plane and buckled his seat belt. Bendix flung them up into the air. His hands on the wheel were white and shaking as he pointed the plane along the mountain slope and sent them screaming downward. "They're concentrated around the office building, from the looks of it," he shouted over the whine of air. "I should have known he'd do this! Well, I'm League President, by God, and I'm going to settle for him right now!"

If you don't kill us first, Kimmensen thought, trying to check over his weapon. Bendix was bent over the wheel, crouched forward as though he wanted to crash directly into the plaza where Kimmensen could see running men.

They pulled out of the dive almost too late. The plane smashed down through the undergrowth behind the office building. Bendix flung his door open and jumped out while the plane rocked violently.

Kimmensen climbed out more carefully. Even here, in the building's shadow, the fires around the plaza were bright enough to let him see. He pushed through the tangled shrubbery, hearing Bendix breaking forward ahead of him. Bendix cleared the corner of the building. "I see him, Joe!"

Kimmensen turned the corner, holding his weapon ready.

He could see Messerschmidt standing in a knot of men behind the wreckage of a crashed plane. They were looking toward the opposite slope, where goutts of fire were winking up and down the mountainside. Kimmensen could faintly hear a snatch of what Messerschmidt was shouting: "Damn it, Toni, we'll pull back when I—" but he lost the rest. Then he saw Bendix lurch out of the bushes ten feet behind them.

"You! Messerschmidt! Turn around!"

Messerschmidt whirled away from the rest of the men, instinctively, like a great cat, before he saw who it was. Then he lowered the weapon in his hand, his mouth jerking in disgust. "Oh—it's you. Put that thing down, or point it somewhere else. Maybe you can do some good around here."

"Never mind that! I've had enough of you."

Messerschmidt moved toward him in quick strides. "Listen, I haven't got time to play games." He cuffed the weapon out of Bendix's hand, rammed him back with an impatient push against his chest, and turned back to his men. "Hey, Toni, can you tell if those Northwesters're moving down here yet?"

Kimmensen's cheeks sucked in. He stepped out into the plaza, noticing Bendix out of the corners of his eyes, standing frozen where Messerschmidt had pushed him.

KIMMENSEN came up to Messerschmidt and the man turned again. His eyes widened. "Well, Mr. Kimmensen?"

"What's going on?"

Messerschmidt grunted. He pointed up the mountain. "There they are. I suppose they knew they had to move fast once I repudiated the election. They

began airdropping men about a half hour ago. They're thick as flies up there, and they'll be coming down here as soon as they're through mopping up. That ought to be in a few minutes."

"Northwesters."

"That's right, Mr. Kimmensen."

"Well."

Messerschmidt smiled thinly. "I suppose you've guessed Susie's at my house?"

"Will she be all right?"

Messerschmidt nodded. "It's fortified. That's our next holding point when we fall back from here." His face was grave.

"Isn't there any chance of stopping them?"

Messerschmidt shook his head. "None. They're military specialists, Mr. Kimmensen. We don't have any trained men."

"I see."

Messerschmidt looked at him without any perceptible triumph in his eyes. "It seems, Mr. Kimmensen, that they have men like us in the Northwest, too. Unfortunately, theirs seem to have moved faster."

"What're you going to do?"

Messerschmidt looked up the mountain and shrugged. "Nothing. We got some of them in the air, but the rest are down. We may have weapons as good as theirs, but they know how to use them in units. It's quite

simple. We'll try to hold and kill as many as we can when they come at us. We'll keep retreating and holding as long as we can, and when we reach the sea, if we get that far, we'll drown."

Kimmensen frowned. "Their men are concentrated on that mountain?"

"Yes."

"And you're just going to stand still and let the League be wiped out?"

"Just what, Mr. Kimmensen, would you like me to do?" Messerschmidt looked at him in fury. "I don't have time to train an army of our own. They've got us cold."

"Messerschmidt, I see eight men here with weapons."

"As far as anything we can accomplish goes, we might as well use them to toast sandwiches."

"We can scour that mountainside. Down to bare rock."

Messerschmidt blanched. "You're joking."

"I am *not*!"

"There are people of ours up there."

"There are people of ours all through this area. When the Northwesters are finished up there, they'll fan out and burn them all down, a little bit at a time."

Messerschmidt looked at Kimmensen incredulously. "I can't

do it. There's a chance some of our people up there'll be able to slip out."

"By that time, the Northwesters'll be down here and dispersed."

Messerschmidt started to answer, and stopped.

"Messerschmidt, if you're going to do anything, you'd best do it immediately."

Messerschmidt was shaking his head. "I can't do it. It's murder."

"Something much more important than human life is being murdered on that mountain at this moment."

"All right, Kimmensen," Messerschmidt exploded, "if you're so hot for it, *you* give the order! There're something like a hundred League families up there. Half of them're still alive, I'd say. If the election's void, you're still president. You take the responsibility, if you can."

"I can."

"Just like that."

"Messerschmidt, the defense of freedom is instantaneous and automatic."

"All right, Mr. Kimmensen," Messerschmidt sighed. He turned to his men. "You heard him. It's his order. Aim at the mountain." He bared his teeth in a

distorted laugh. "In freedom's name—fire!"

KIMMENSEN watched it happen. He kept his face motionless, and he thought that, in a way, it was just as well he hadn't long to live.

But it was done, and, in a way, his old dream was still alive. In a way, Messerschmidt's hands were tied now, for in the end the Freeman defeated the trained armies and no one could forget the lesson in this generation.

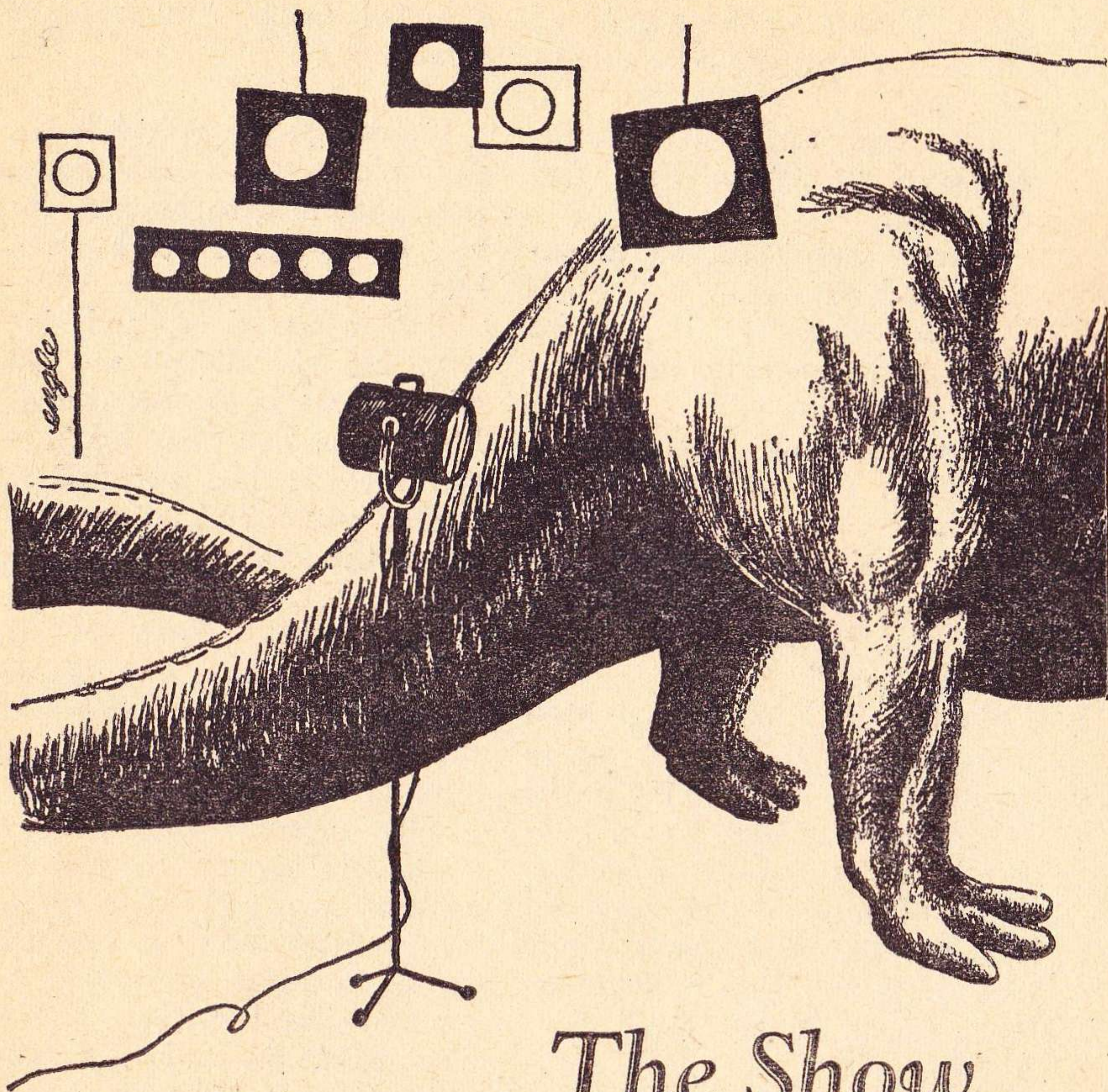
He looked down at the ground. And in a way, Messerschmidt had won, because Kimmensen was dying and Messerschmidt had years.

That seemed to be the way of it. And Messerschmidt would someday die, and other revolutions would come, as surely as the Earth turned on its axis and drifted around the sun. But no Messerschmidt—and no Kimmensen—ever quite shook free of the past, and no revolution could help but borrow from the one before.

Well, Bausch, Kimmensen thought to himself as the face of the mountain slowly cooled and lost color, I wonder what we'll have to say to each other?

∞ ∞ ∞

The next *Infinity* goes on sale JUNE 18!

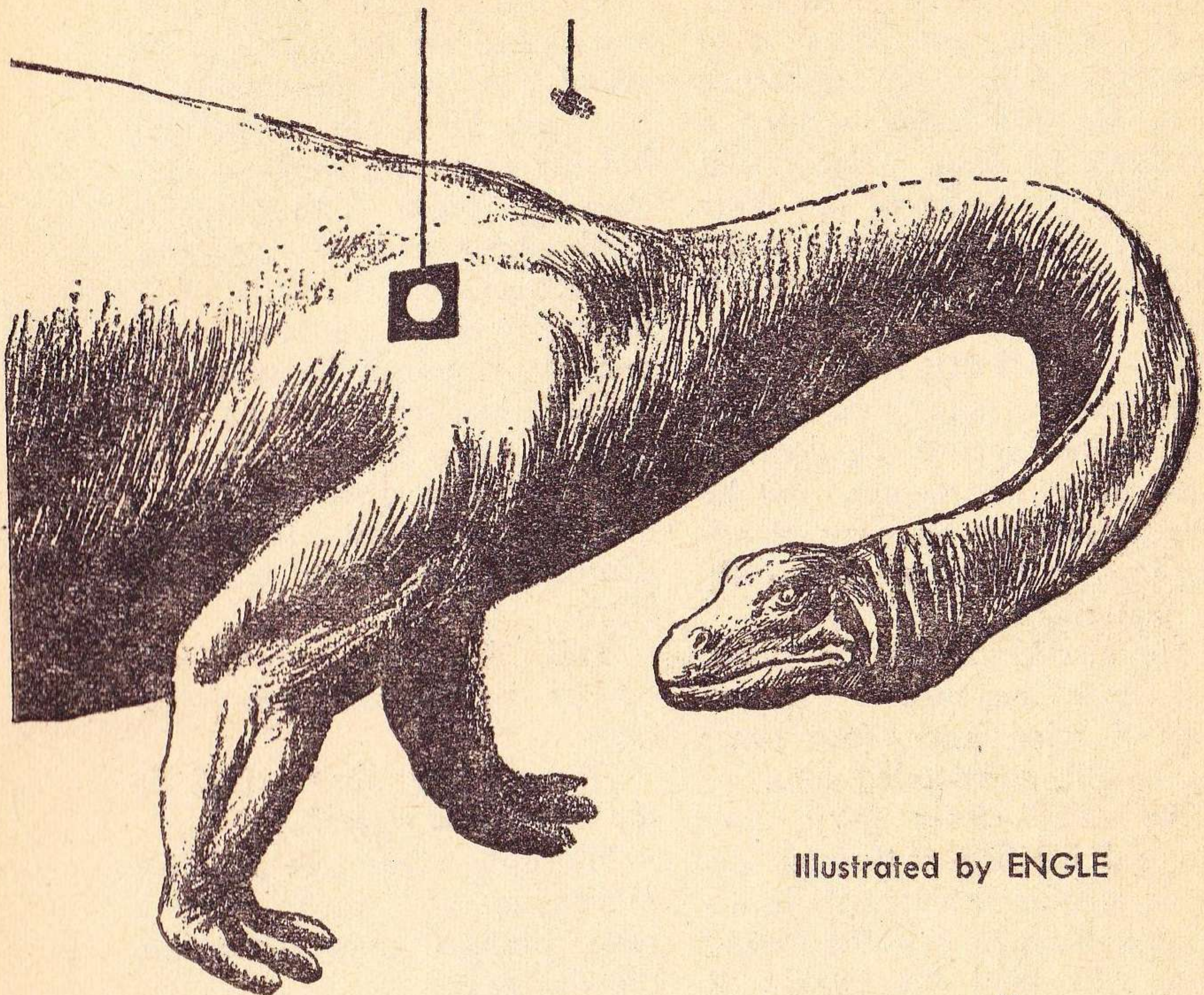


by HENRY SLESAR

The Show Must Go On



Actors wanted: experience
unnecessary, salary excellent,
life expectancy brief . . .

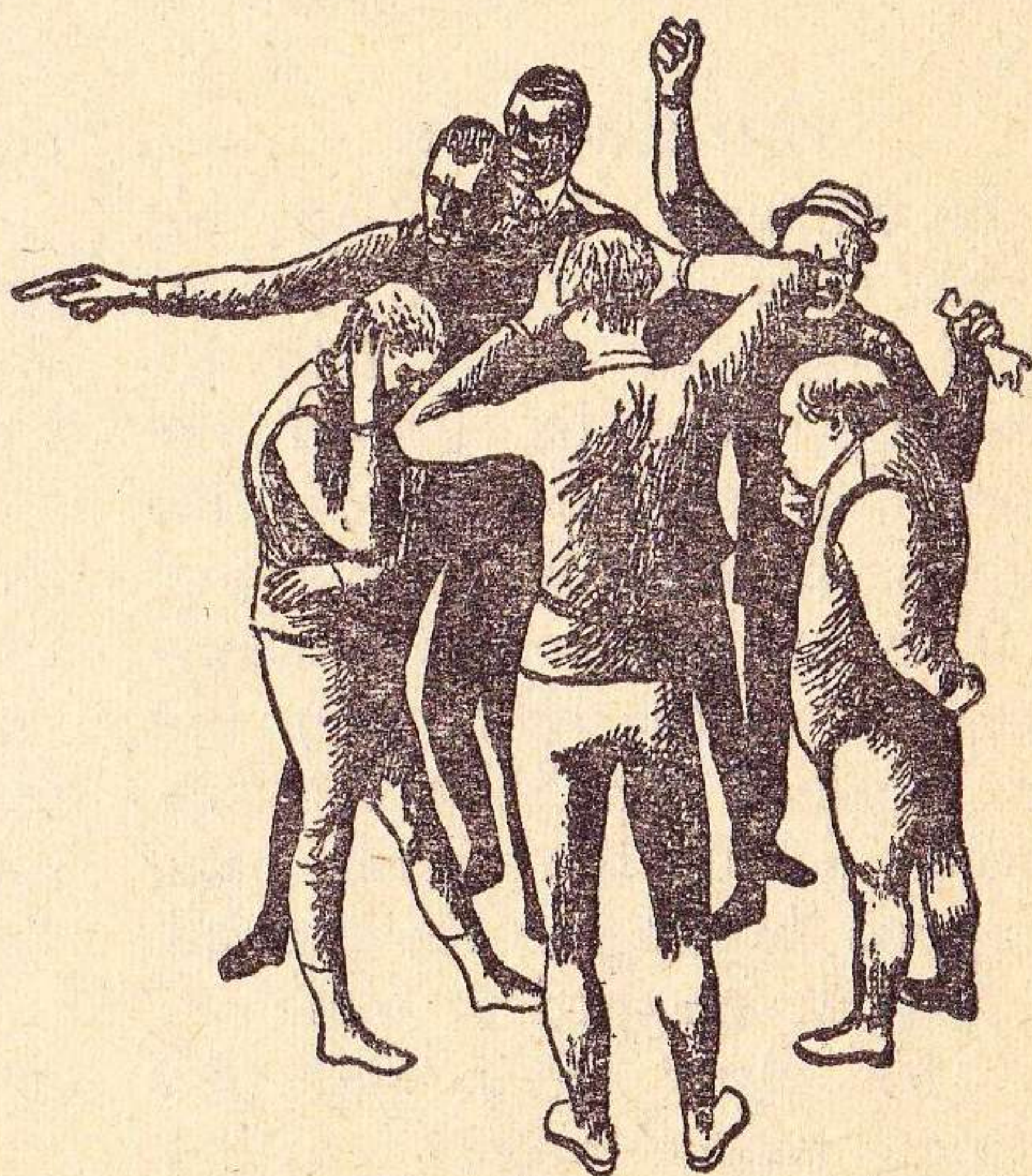


Illustrated by ENGLE

HE AWOKE in darkness, trembling with the thought of escape.

His hands groped around the floor, trying its solidity. Then he crawled forward with agonizing slowness until his fingertips found a wall. He raised himself to his feet, his cheek scraping the cool surface of the enclosure.

An idea came to him, and he slapped at the pocket of his shirt. His palm struck the



outline of something. Matches!

He lit one, and raised it to the level of his wide, frightened eyes. He was facing a door, a barricade of steel, without sign of latch or doorknob. But there was a sign, and he read it in the flicker of the matchflame. It said:

PUSH

He made a noise in his throat, and shoved against the door. It gave in to his weight, and he was outside the building, standing in a courtyard washed softly by moonlight.

He circled where he stood, and knew he was a prisoner still. A wire fence, four times his height, surrounded him.

He came closer to it, and plunged his fingers through the mesh, rattling it helplessly in his misery. Then he saw the second sign, and held his breath. It read:

YOU CAN DO IT

Encouraged, he began his climb. The toes of his rubber-soled shoes fit neatly into the openings, and he gained the summit of the fence quickly. He swayed uncertainly at the top, and almost dropped the twenty-five feet to the other side. But he regained his balance, clambered down the mesh, and dropped panting to the ground.

A voice boomed at him.

"All right, let's go! We haven't got all night!"

He forced himself to his feet, and looked for the source of the sound with wild movements of his head. He could see nothing but the menacing shadows of a crowded forest. With a frightened glance over his shoulder, he plunged into the thick of it, hoping to find a pathway to the unknown freedom he sought.

He thrashed through the tangled vines for a small eternity, and then gave up with a sob. He fell against a tree trunk, dampening the bark with his tears.

This time, the voice was quieter, but its tone was impatient.

"Keep going, keep going! To the right. The right!"

He clung to the tree as if for protection, and then, with a gasp, plunged once more into the darkness.

He found the clearing, to the right.

It was like an arena, with spectator trees, and with bright eyes winking at him through the leaves.

There was a log to the left of the cleared green circle, and a frail young girl in torn clothing sat on it, huddled with either fear or cold. She was clutching something like an infant to her chest.

He came closer and saw that it was a broadsword. He paused.

"Who are you?" he said.

She looked up at him, her expression savage.

"You're here!" she said.

He took a step forward, and the voice spoke once more.

"Kill her and you go free."

"No!" he shouted.

"Kill him and go free," said the voice.

The girl put her head in her arms. Her shoulders shook.

He walked towards her and she screamed.

"No, please!" he said painfully. "I won't hurt you. Why should I hurt you?"

She looked at him narrowly. Her hand tightened around the handle of the sword. *"You know why,"* she accused.

"You must trust me," he said. He put his hand out gently to her. She backed away from his touch, and leaped off the log. She moved away cautiously, gripping the weapon with both hands.

"Use the sword," said the voice. *"Strike, and go free."*

She trembled, and lifted the sword from the ground. The man whirled, eyes penetrating the forest for an escape route. He backed up, and fell over a trailing root.

"Now," said the voice. *"Strike!"*

The girl moved towards him hypnotically.

"I hate you.... I hate you...." she moaned. She lifted the blade

high, and the man lashed out with his foot as she towered over him. The broadsword flew from her grasp.

"Now kill her," said the voice. *"And you can go free."*

"I WON'T!" he shouted again. He scrambled to his feet and made a dive for the weapon. He took it in his hand and waved it threateningly at the surrounding woods.

"Come out! Come out!" he screamed. The eyes of the forest blinked back at him in silence.

He flung the sword from his hand, as if in loathing. Then he crashed into the forest once more.

THE PRODUCER gurgled through his hookahmatic. Frick, his assistant, recognized this symptom of official disgust, and jumped to his feet.

"Turn it off!" the Producer said, gesturing towards the fidelivision screen. Frick turned it off. "No, leave it on," the Producer moaned, peeping at the white oblong through his chubby fingers. "Let's see what Manford does in *this* pickle." Frick turned it on.

"He'll probably drop in the dinosaur film," he said.

"If he does, I get a new Director," the Producer answered in a rumbling voice. "He's used that spot three times in the past month."

The fidelivision flashed. A screaming red title dripped bloodily across the screen. "MAN AGAINST DINOSAUR!" it said. The Producer's angry cry almost drowned out the horrific roar of the live-prop brontosaurus that appeared.

"Meeting, meeting!" he cried. "We're going to have a staff meeting—right after the show!"

"A *live* meeting?" Frick gasped.

"A live one," the Producer said. "Everybody here—right here—in person! This is an emergency!"

"Gosh, T.D.—" Frick frowned disapprovingly. "That's kind of rough, isn't it? I mean, a phonescreen session would be a lot simpler. It'll take hours for Manford and the rest of 'em to get through the Jam."

"I don't care," the Producer said petulantly. "This kind of bumbling inefficiency has gone far enough. It'll do 'em good to get crushed in the Traffic for a change—"

Frick paled, obviously disturbed by the severity of the punishment the Producer was meting out. Only the lowest ranks of employees, the non-executives, the factory people, were forced to suffer the indignities of the Jam.

"I'm sure they'll get that fellow," Frick said. "After all, T.D.—how far can he get?

When he gets out of the forest, he'll reach the Studio Barrier, and he'll be stopped. Simple as that."

"And what if he finds the exit?"

Frick scoffed. "Well, the odds on that—"

"Odds? Don't talk to me about odds, Frick!" The Producer winced as man and brontosaurus came together on the screen. There was a closeup of the man's face, and his expression wasn't pretty when he saw the imitation beast. But of course, he couldn't know it was harmless—

"The letters!" the Producer groaned. "The complaints! I can see 'em now—"

The office door opened. A pretty redhead with vacant eyes and a frozen smile poked her head inside.

"What is it, Miss Stitch?"

"Will you take a call from Mr. Manford? Phonescreen Seven."

"You bet I will," the Producer said menacingly.

Frick lowered the fidelivision sound and flicked on P.S. 7 with a few efficient motions. The face of Joe Manford, the Director of the night's *Thrill Show*, was haggard, despite the jovial smile.

"Hi, T.D.," he said. "Been watching the show?"

"Yes, Joseph," the Producer said gravely.

"Oh." The smile faded, but only for a moment. "Well, nothing to worry about. Our boys will have that fellow rounded up in a few minutes. Can't imagine how that got fouled up. But that's the *Thrill Show* for you. Full of surprises."

"Is that a fact?" said the Producer. He picked up the butt of his hookahmatic and sipped smoke calmly. "I presume this fellow was fully authorized before you put him on?"

"Oh, yes," Manford said hastily. "He passed the routine FCC physical, and had the usual adrenalin and hypnomecholy dose. I mean, you saw the girl didn't you? She was *fine*, wasn't she?" He beamed.

"Yes," said the Producer. "She certainly was fine." Frick stirred uncomfortably behind him.

"Anyway," the Director continued, "we're dropping in the dinosaur film—that's always good for a few shivers—and we've sent a crew into the Studio to get that man out of there—"

The Producer nodded his head toward his assistant. "Frick," he said, eyes on Manford. "You tell him."

Frick stepped into range. He cleared his throat and looked at the floor. "There'll be a meeting after the show," he mumbled.

"Meeting?" Manford said. "What for?" He blinked, and

looked at Frick's bowed head. Then he looked dazed. "You don't mean a—a *live* meeting?"

Frick nodded. The Producer puffed contentedly on his hookahmatic. He blew a smoke ring, and it puffed itself to pieces against the phonescreen.

THE MAN raised himself from the ground. His limbs felt weak, and he had to force the breaths through his lungs.

He got to his feet, feeling somewhat stronger. The forest seemed as impenetrable as ever, but he faced its challenge now with more confidence.

That girl! he thought. My God—she was really going to kill him! He shook his head bewilderedly. Such a young, pretty girl! What had he done to her? What made her want to do it?

He moved through the forest slowly, ducking branches, trailing the sources of dim lights in the distance. But as he approached, they proved to be illusory, odd reflections of moonlight among the trees.

She didn't *want* to kill him, not really. He could sense that. It was something more. She was *compelled* to do it—that was it. Someone had put her up to it. But who? Who hated him enough?

The speculation made his head ache. He blanked out his

thoughts and decided to concentrate on his predicament. There had to be a way out. The girl had entered the forest at some point. But where?

He heard the sound of voices, and he stopped breathing.

"Manford means business," one of them said.

"He's plenty worried. T.D. was watching tonight—"

"The sponsors kick T.D., T.D. kicks Manford, and Manford kicks us. Who do we kick?"

"I don't know about you. I got an old dog home—"

"Okay. Let's separate and find this bird."

"Right. Hey, Lou! Let's have some tracer lights!"

He concealed himself in the brush as a burst of light exploded over the treetops. He watched the men parade past; ordinary-looking men, executive types, with white collars and knit ties and flannel suits. Strangely enough, they seemed quite at home in this wilderness.

He waited until they passed his hiding place. Then he started on a nimble run in the direction from which they had come.

THE PRODUCER fitted himself snugly into Executive position: desk, swivel-chair, and man welded into one solid, efficient unit. He sighed a comfortable sigh, and glanced up at the wall

clock. Ten-thirty. The *Thrill Show* would be over in half an hour; the dinosaur film would wind it up neatly. He'd probably have some explaining to do to the sponsors tomorrow, but he was all prepared to give the usual "popular demand" argument.

He regretted the live meeting he had called. It would be two hours at least before the Staff plowed through the Traffic Jam. That meant he couldn't leave the office until after one-thirty.

He looked at the hopeless tower of papers on his desk blotter. Most of them were letters, and his secretary had never quite gotten the hang of weeding out the chaff. Once he found a letter from an FBC Vice-President in the Discard File; since then, he ordered all mail to his desk. He wished he could get a better secretary than Miss Stitch, but the shortage of A1-rated secretaries (A for "Attractiveness," 1 for Efficiency) was acute.

He skimmed through the top of the pile quickly.

"Dear Mr. Donnelly . . . Certainly enjoyed 'Death in the Ring' . . . one of the best *Thrill Shows* I've ever seen . . . wonder if you would consider a football thriller I have in mind called 'Murder Kicks Off' . . ."

"Dear Mr. Donnelly . . . Let's have more shows like 'Snake Pit'

. . . that Mother and Baby idea was the greatest . . . I really thought that woman would go nuts when she saw her kid with the cobra . . . A shocker all the way . . .

"Dear Mr. Donnelly . . . If 'Kiss of Death' was your idea of entertainment, you ought to retire . . . sort of sex shmaltz went out with television . . . give us real gutsy stuff and never mind the mush . . . I'm only eleven years old, but I'll bet I could write a better scenario than that . . . I have this idea for a show called . . ."

"Dear Mr. Donnelly . . ."

The Producer sighed again. He reached into his pill drawer and took an ulcer capsule. Then he went back to his correspondence.

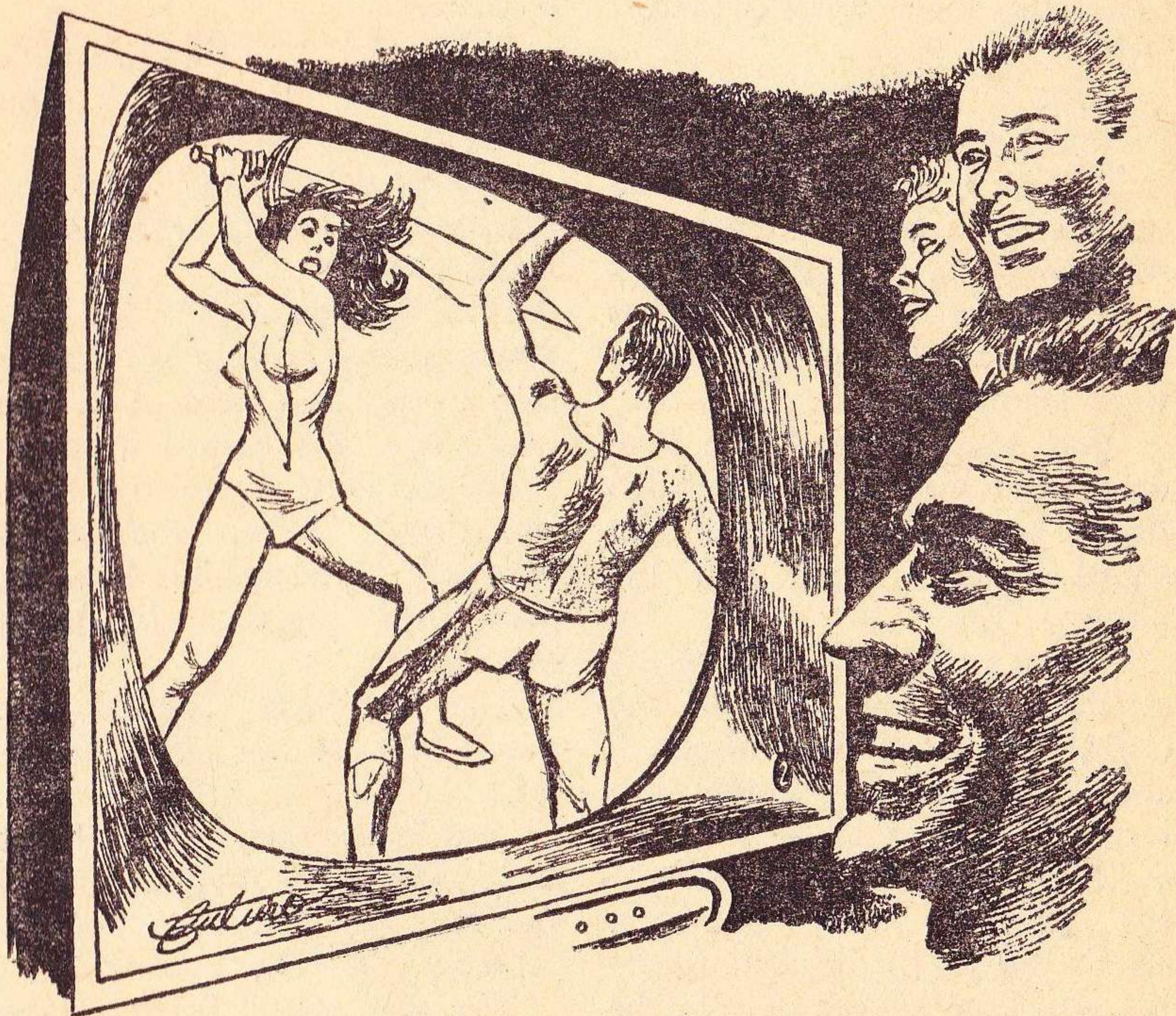
When the man entered his office, he didn't even glance up.

"That you, Frick?" he said, eyes on a letter of praise from a Yonkers housewife.

When the man didn't answer, the Producer looked up.

He gasped. "Hey!" he said.

"Shut up!" the man said harshly. He moved swiftly towards the desk and lifted a



bronze ashtray in a lightning motion. He raised the object threateningly over the fat man's head.

"Keep quiet!" he said.

"What is this?" The Producer's voice quavered. Then he recognized the face. "You're the one from the Show—"

The man blinked. His face relaxed, and he lowered the impromptu weapon. "I—I'm sorry. . . ."

The Producer came around the side of the desk. He took the ashtray from his hand, and helped him into the interview chair. The man collapsed limply at his touch.

"How'd you get here?" the Producer said.

"I don't know," the man mumbled. "I found a door . . . back there . . ." He buried his chin on his chest. His clothes were shredded, and his hands were trembling.

"Just take it easy," the Producer told him. He stabbed his finger on a desk button. The signal brought Frick into the office.

"What's up, T.D.?" Then the assistant saw the man in the chair. "My God," he whispered, swallowing hard. "Gosh, I'm terribly sorry, T.D.—"

"Never mind being sorry," the Producer said gratingly. "Let's just be thankful he found his way here instead of into the

street. If he'd been picked up by the Police—"

The assistant mopped his brow. "That would have been terrible. They'd surely recognize him from the show. If the FCC saw him in this condition—"

"Yes," the Producer said grimly. "If they saw him in this condition, their medical office would slap an injunction on us so fast—we'd *all* be out in the Jam. Do you realize that?"

Frick blanched. "I'll get Dr. Stark in here right away. We'll get him an anti-dope shot immediately—"

"That girl . . ." the man said.

"It's okay, fella," Frick said. "You're okay now."

"Never mind him," said the Producer. "Get Spier in here. Right away!"

Frick hurried out. The Producer poured a slug of brandy into a cup and held it to the man's lips. He gulped it gratefully, and then exploded a rasping cough. When the cough subsided, he buried his head on his chest again, breathing heavily.

The Producer studied the man's face. It was oddly familiar.

"Say," he said. He put his hand under the chin and lifted the face up. The eyes opened. "Aren't you Jerry Spizer?"

The man stared blankly. The

Producer grunted. "Huh. Guess you don't know *who* you are right now, fella. But you're Jerry Spizer, all right. Imagine that!" T.D. shook his head. "The great Spizer. In a *Thrill Show!*" He chuckled dryly.

The doctor bustled into the office, a small cyclone, trailing the nervous assistant behind him like a flurrying dust cloud.

"Roll up his sleeve," he told the Producer commandingly. He removed the hypodermic spray-gun from his bag and carefully filled it with a dozen cc's of the anti-dope. He dabbed the man's arm with a shred of cotton, and pressed the spray against his flesh. "Good thing I hung around tonight," the doctor grumbled. "If this man ever got away in this condition—"

"We know, we know," the Producer said testily. "Fix him up and cut the chatter—"

"I saw that show," the doctor said. "Somebody sure fouled up. Probably gave him an overdose."

"We'll get to that later," the Producer promised. "Just do your job, Doc."

"I'm through," Stark said crisply. "Put him on that couch over there and raise his legs. He'll come to his senses in about ten minutes—I hope."

Frick and the Producer helped the man to the sofa. He sprawled on it full-length, fingers trailing on the carpet.

"Do you know who he is?" T.D. said. "He's Jerry Spizer."

"Who?"

"Spizer. The big TV star. You remember."

The doctor halted in the process of clasping his bag, and came over to the sofa. He looked at the man's relaxed face. "By God," he said. "You're right. Now what the hell is Spizer doing on a *Thrill Show?*"

The Producer shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't heard anything about him for the past eight or ten years."

"He must have had it tough," Frick said musingly. "I mean, a big star like that on a program like this—"

"What do you mean, 'a program like this?'" The Producer looked displeased. "If the Staff had a nickel's worth of imagination, they would have played this up big—"

"Gosh," said Frick. "That's true. We could have used a credit card—"

"I'll bet he wouldn't have permitted it," the doctor said. "You know what Spizer thought of the *Thrill Show?*"

"Yeah?" The Producer's face reddened. "Well, we proved how wrong he was, didn't we? The public was just sick and tired of that namby-pamby stuff. There *had* to be a *Thrill Show!*"

"Sponsors demanded it," Frick said loyally.

"And besides," T.D. added, "if he doesn't like us, what the hell did he sign up for?"

The doctor pursed his lips. "Maybe he was hungry."

Frick said: "He's still not coming around, Doc."

"He'd better," Stark said warningly. "If the anti-dope doesn't work, it could mean a lot of trouble for the *Thrill Show*, Mr. Donnelly—"

The Producer looked frightened. "That's ridiculous. It's got to work. It's *always* worked—"

"You better call your Staff," the doctor said. "Find out what dosage they gave this man. Check his FCC medical authorization. And do it fast, Mr. Donnelly. This is just the kind of thing the FCC can hang you on."

"Thank God I called that meeting!" the Producer said.

"HERE'S the straight poop."

Manford, the *Thrill Show* director, looked briskly around the room. They had gathered around the table in the conference room, the Staff members still hollow-cheeked and shaken by their experience in the Jam.

"This fellow came into the office last week and signed up for a spot in the *Thrill Show*. We needed somebody for the 'Battle of the Sexes' show, and he was a pretty nice-looking guy. A little seedy, maybe. But

all right. He gave his right name—here's his record—but nobody on the interviewing staff recognized him. Guess they're all a little too young to remember Jerry Spizer very well—"

"All right," the Producer prodded. "So what happened?"

"Well, just the routine things. The FCC medical officer gave him the standard physical. His psych check wasn't the best we've ever had, but that's always a debatable business. When he showed up for work yesterday, we gave him the regular dose of ten cc's of adrenalin and four cc's of hypnomecholy. That's s.o.p. for an Anger-Emotion Show, of course."

The Producer looked at Stark. "Did you give him the shot?"

"No." The doctor shuffled the papers in his hands. "That new fellow, Grayson. Do you want to see him?"

"He's gone home," Manford said. "It'll take an hour to get him here. Why not phonescreen him?"

They took the Director's suggestion. In a few minutes, the image of Dr. Phil Grayson appeared on Phonescreen Four. He was a young man, with a high, balding forehead and a rabbit mustache. He looked worried when his home screen brought him the picture of the intense group around the conference table.

"What is it?" he said.

"Just checking back on some records, Doctor," T.D. said smoothly. "Remember the man you injected today? This fellow Spizer, for the 'Battle of the Sexes' Show?"

The doctor nodded. "Of course."

"Was there anything unusual about the dosage?"

Grayson looked puzzled. "Naturally not. I gave him the prescribed dosage, just like Dr. Stark told me. Ten cc's of nor-adrenalin, forty-four cc's of that—what d'you call it—hypnomecholy. Why?"

Dr. Stark paled. "I told you that?" he said. The color rushed back into his cheeks a bright crimson. "I told you *adrenalin*, you fool. Not nor-adrenalin! And *four* cc's of hypnomecholy." He looked wildly at the men around the table. "I swear I told him!" he said.

"You didn't!" the young doctor gasped. "You told me forty-four—"

Stark jumped to his feet, his face livid. He started towards the phonescreen as if to throttle the two-dimensional image on the glass.

"You're a liar!" he cried. "You knew it was an Anger-Emotion Show! You knew what was required—"

"I *didn't* know," Grayson answered, his mustache twitch-

ing. "You didn't tell me that. I just assumed—"

"You assumed!" The Producer stood up, looking thunderclouds at Dr. Stark. "You knew what kind of show it was, Stark. Why didn't you tell him? We needed an Anger reaction—not Fear! That's what loused up the whole show!"

Manford groaned. "What does *that* matter now? Forty-four cc's of hypnomecholy! What kind of a doctor *are* you, Grayson? Don't you know you could *kill* a man that way?"

"I—I didn't know. I never worked with these mecholy drugs. I studied antibiotics—"

"Better if it had killed him," the Producer said darkly. "We might have covered *that* up. But we can never get him past the FCC examining officer now—"

"I swear he told me forty-four! I swear it!"

Dr. Stark made a rush at the phonescreen. Grayson backed away in terror, despite the many miles that were between him and Stark's intended violence. With a snarl, the older doctor reached up and turned off the instrument.

"Now we're in for it," he told the others.

"Maybe he'll be all right," Manford said. "Maybe he'll snap out of it. A little more anti-dope—"

"Nonsense," Stark snapped.

"If it hasn't worked by now, it'll never work. The overdose has permanently affected his nervous system. He's an amnesiac for good—an amnesiac with a permanent case of the jitters—"

Frick shivered. "God! What a fate!"

The Producer looked wise. "Yes," he said solemnly. "He'd be better off dead, wouldn't he?"

The Staff stared at him.

"You know what I'm talking about," T.D. said. "He'd be better off dead. Better for him, for the *Thrill Show*, for us."

"Well," Manford said feebly.

"Well, nothing!" The Producer's voice was harsh. "Do you get the significance of all this? Do you know what happens when the FCC medical officer wants to re-check Spizer? An injunction! A court battle! Then Spizer goes on the stand as Exhibit A, and we lose. No more *Thrill Show*." He looked at their faces individually. "No more jobs. Bankruptcy. Poverty. The Jam."

This time, the shiver was collective.

"We can't let that happen!" Manford licked his lips. "What about the sponsors? They got pull, don't they? They need us, don't they? I mean, nothing else will give 'em the kind of ratings they get from the *Thrill Show*—"

"Their hands will be tied," T.D. said. "One slip is all the Federal boys have been waiting for. And with all that foreign criticism our State Department's been getting—"

"They still buy our films abroad," another Staff man said glumly.

"That won't matter." The Producer sat down heavily, and put the cold end of his hookah-matic in his mouth. "The *Thrill Show* is doomed. Let's face it."

The group dropped their eyes to the table.

"Of course," the Producer said quietly. "There's one way out."

They looked up at him hopefully.

"Remember Juan Esprenzo?" he said.

They stared at him.

"That was a troublesome situation, too. But we came out of that one, didn't we?"

They gaped, silently.

"Juan Esprenzo was killed on the 'Angry City' *Thrill Show* of November 19th, 1985. It was purely an accident, of course. He wandered out of the guideways in the studio and was struck by a falling prop. Nobody could have foreseen it, and nobody could have prevented it. His family received \$50,000 in insurance. The FCC investigation described the incident as unfortunate, and there was a spe-

cial Juan Esprenzo Memorial Show held on January 3rd. But these things happen—just as they once did in boxing, football, racing. Nothing unusual. Nothing to ban a program about.”

They turned their eyes to the outer room, where Jerry Spizer lay in a coma on the studio sofa.

“Do you get what I mean?” the Producer said. “Don’t you think we could pass another investigation *a la* Esprenzo—better than we could pass the one we’re facing right now?”

They looked hopeful and frightened in turn.

“You mean—deliberately *kill* him, T.D.?”

“*Cause* an accident?”

“Kill him right on the program?”

“Exactly,” the Producer said, with a satisfied smile. “Put him on again tomorrow night. Make it a set-up. Have something go wrong. Then keep the cameras trained on him while we rush out of the Studio Control Room to find out if he’s all right. The whole country will see it was an accident—only an accident.”

He turned to Wilson, the head script-writer.

“Wilson,” he said. “You’ve got an assignment.”

HE AWOKE in darkness, trembling with the thought of escape.

His hands groped around the floor, trying its solidity. When his fingertips found a wall, he raised himself with agonizing slowness, his nails scraping along the ridges in the damp stone.

He pressed his hot cheek against the cool surface, and sobbed pitifully.

When his eyes adjusted to the feeble light, he measured the strength of his prison, and felt the added terror of hopelessness. He turned his eyes to the pool of darkness in the center of the dungeon, and ventured forth a cautious foot.

He had taken only three steps before he heard the voice.

“*Look out!*” it said.

Then he saw the Pit.

He looked with the horror at the writhing beasts inside.

He sank to his knees, and stared in terrible fascination at their swaying bodies. Then he buried his face in his hands.

He looked up when he heard the *swish!* above him.

Gleaming, swinging, evoking a memory in an impossibly distant past—it was a pendulum, of razor-sharp steel.

And it was descending.

He screamed, and lifted his arms above his head. The pendulum ground to a halt, the mechanism groaning and screeching in protest. There was a second of silence, and then the

blade fell to earth with the suddenness of an avenging sword. This time, the scream was cut off in his throat, and the giant weapon flattened him sickeningly against the edge of the precipice.

Vaguely, as in a dream, he heard the sound of speech, and running footsteps.

"My God! It broke! The pendulum broke!"

"Somebody get the doctor!"

"Look out for that Pit! It's a forty-foot drop!"

"Come on!"

A hand touched his shoulder, and a ring of anxious faces floated like pink balloons over his head.

"I think he's still alive!"

"*What?*"

"He can't be! That thing weighs a ton!"

"Well, he looks pretty bad, but I can see his eyes moving and he seems to be—"

"Get that blade off him!"

He knew that the great weight had been removed from his body, but he could feel no difference. He was looking with almost objective interest into the face of a fat man, a familiar face with wide eyes and an open, bow-lipped mouth. The face was covered with a film of nervous perspiration, and there was a strange sort of anxiety in the man's movements.

"He's got to be! He's got to

be!" The fat man was whispering intently.

"But T.D.—"

"Shut up! When you lift him up, I want you to—"

He heard nothing more, but his eyes remained open, fixing the face of the fat man. Then he felt arms around his shoulders once more, and he felt himself slipping, slipping back towards the edge.

With a spurt of strength, with a flash of sudden intelligence, he raised his left arm, and the fingers caught the collar surrounding fat man's neck in loose folds. He held on grimly, until the fat man screamed with satisfying terror.

"Look out, T.D.!" somebody shrieked.

"He's dragging me with him!" The fat man flailed out helplessly. "He's pulling me over the edge!"

Somebody else leaped to his aid, but the dying man's grip was tenacious, his purpose certain.

"*We're going over!*"

They did: the fat man and his victim, and Cameras Three, Four, and Five caught the action beautifully.

MISS STITCH slipped her compact back into her purse, and straightened the corners of the stack of mail on her desk blotter. She looked towards the

empty office of the Producer, and smiled with secretive pleasure. Then she slit open the envelopes in front of her, and leisurely read the morning mail.

"Dear Mr. Donnelly . . . Boy, oh boy! What a thriller you gave us the other night! I thought 'Pit and the Pendulum' was one of the best *Thrill Shows* yet . . . I sure was disappointed when I saw the title card and thought you were going to re-hash that old Poe bit, but that new ending

of yours really knocked me cold . . . I sure got a kick out of seeing that fat old guy going over the edge of the Pit. What a terrific wind-up! . . . I wonder if you would be interested in a really great story idea? . . . You see, there's this crazy old guy who has a secret laboratory on a mountain-top. . . . Well, one night it's raining and lightning like mad. . . . And this beautiful blonde comes along in a classy convertible . . ."

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TALES FOR TOMORROW

The next issue of INFINITY will feature what we sincerely believe to be the best story Damon Knight has ever written. It's a short novel, and the title is simply "Dio," which is also the name of the leading character. Dio is unusual; he is the one dying man in a world of immortals. He is also one of the most compellingly real people, we think, ever to appear in a science-fiction story—and you're going to find yourself deeply involved with him, and terribly concerned over what happens to him. Dio is a story filled with genuine and exciting scientific concepts. It is a simple story, and in many ways a tragic one, but it is also (no other word will fit) a beautiful story. We're proud to be able to present it to you.

Nor is that all. The issue will also contain *three* short-short stories by Arthur C. Clarke, the first half of a set of six related tales of the first space stations called "The Other Side of the Sky." The complete set will be presented in two consecutive issues, and we know you'll rate it with the best work Clarke has done. It gets the *Infinity-plus* designation reserved for outstanding and unusual features—and we're sure you'll give it accolades!

The September issue will contain several other fine stories as well, and will be on sale June 18.

THE MEN RETURN

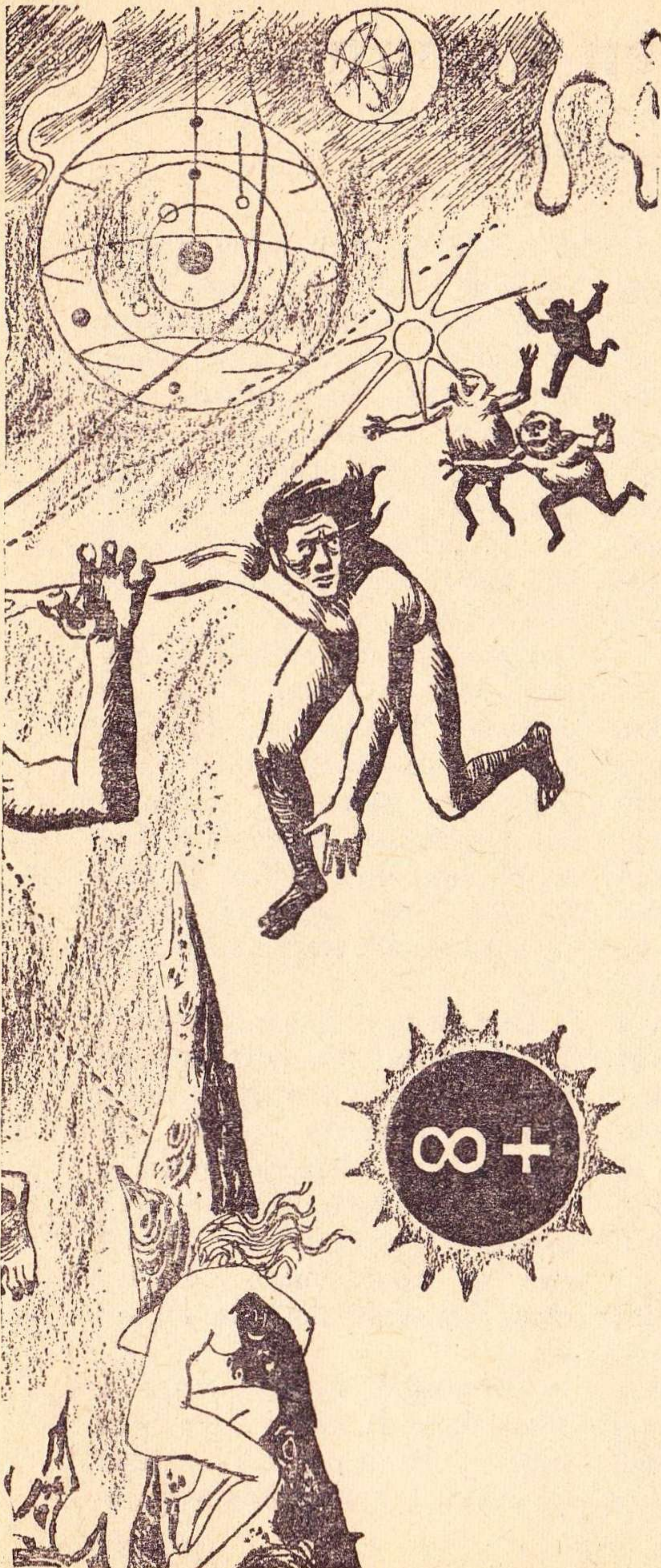
them together...

a rock, kneaded

globe of blue liquid,

handful of air, a

Alpha caught a



by JACK VANCE

Illustrated by ENGLE

ONLY RARELY will the Infinity-plus symbol—INFINITY's award of unusual merit—appear on an individual story. (For a typical example of the way it will be used, see "Tales of Tomorrow" elsewhere in this issue.) The Men Return is an exception by virtue of being one of the most unusual stories ever written. We do not guarantee that you will like it, but we are sure that you will either like it tremendously or hate it violently. And we're very anxious to learn your reactions!

The Men Return

by Jack Vance

THE RELICT came furtively down the crag, a shambling gaunt creature with tortured eyes. He moved in a series of quick dashes, using panels of dark air for concealment, running behind each passing shadow, at times crawling on all fours, head low to the ground. Arriving at the final low outcrop of rock, he halted and peered across the plain.

Far away rose low hills, blurring into the sky, which was mottled and sallow like poor milk-glass. The intervening plain spread like rotten velvet, black-green and wrinkled, streaked with ocher and rust. A fountain of liquid rock jetted high in the air, branched out into black coral. In the middle distance a family of gray objects evolved with a sense of purposeful destiny: spheres melted into pyramids, became domes, tufts of white spires, sky-piercing poles; then, as a final *tour de force*, tesseract.

The Relict cared nothing for this; he needed food and out on the plain were plants. They would suffice in lieu of anything better. They grew in the ground, or sometimes on a floating lump

of water, or surrounding a core of hard black gas. There were dank black flaps of leaf, clumps of haggard thorn, pale green bulbs, stalks with leaves and contorted flowers. There were no recognizable species, and the Relict had no means of knowing if the leaves and tendrils he had eaten yesterday would poison him today.

He tested the surface of the plain with his foot. The glassy surface (though it likewise seemed a construction of red and gray-green pyramids) accepted his weight, then suddenly sucked at his leg. In a frenzy he tore himself free, jumped back, squatted on the temporarily solid rock.

Hunger rasped at his stomach. He must eat. He contemplated the plain. Not too far away a pair of Organisms played—sliding, diving, dancing, striking flamboyant poses. Should they approach he would try to kill one of them. They resembled men, and so should make a good meal.

He waited. A long time? A short time? It might have been either; duration had neither quantitative nor qualitative real-

ity. The sun had vanished, and there was no standard cycle or recurrence. Time was a word blank of meaning.

MATTERS had not always been so. The Relict retained a few tattered recollections of the old days, before system and logic had been rendered obsolete. Man had dominated Earth by virtue of a single assumption: that an effect could be traced to a cause, itself the effect of a previous cause.

Manipulation of this basic law yielded rich results; there seemed no need for any other tool or instrumentality. Man congratulated himself on his generalized structure. He could live on desert, on plain or ice, in forest or in city; Nature had not shaped him to a special environment.

He was unaware of his vulnerability. Logic was the special environment; the brain was the special tool.

Then came the terrible hour when Earth swam into a pocket of non-causality, and all the ordered tensions of cause-effect dissolved. The special tool was useless; it had no purchase on reality. From the two billions of men, only a few survived—the mad. They were now the Organisms, lords of the era, their discords so exactly equivalent to the vagaries of the land as to constitute a peculiar wild

wisdom. Or perhaps the disorganized matter of the world, loose from the old organization, was peculiarly sensitive to psycho-kinesis.

A handful of others, the Relicts, managed to exist, but only through a delicate set of circumstances. They were the ones most strongly charged with the old causal dynamic. It persisted sufficiently to control the metabolism of their bodies, but could extend no further. They were fast dying out, for sanity provided no leverage against the environment. Sometimes their own minds sputtered and jangled, and they would go raving and leaping out across the plain.

The Organisms observed with neither surprise nor curiosity; how could surprise exist? The mad Relict might pause by an Organism, and try to duplicate the creature's existence. The Organism ate a mouthful of plant; so did the Relict. The Organism rubbed his feet with crushed water; so did the Relict. Presently the Relict would die of poison or rent bowels or skin lesions, while the Organism relaxed in the dank black grass. Or the Organism might seek to eat the Relict; and the Relict would run off in terror, unable to abide any part of the world—running, bounding, breasting the thick air; eyes wide, mouth open, calling and gasping until finally he

foundered in a pool of black iron or blundered into a vacuum pocket, to bat around like a fly in a bottle.

The Relicts now numbered very few. Finn, he who crouched on the rock overlooking the plain, lived with four others. Two of these were old men and soon would die. Finn likewise would die unless he found food.

OUT ON THE PLAIN one of the Organisms, Alpha, sat down, caught a handful of air, a globe of blue liquid, a rock, kneaded them together, pulled the mixture like taffy, gave it a great heave. It uncoiled from his hand like rope. The Relict crouched low. No telling what deviltry would occur to the creature. He and all the rest of them—unpredictable! The Relict valued their flesh as food; but they also would eat him if opportunity offered. In the competition he was at a great disadvantage. Their random acts baffled him. If, seeking to escape, he ran, the worst terror would begin. The direction he set his face was seldom the direction the varying frictions of the ground let him move. But the Organisms were as random and uncommitted as the environment, and the double set of vagaries sometimes compounded, sometimes canceled each other. In the latter case the Organisms might catch him. . . .

It was inexplicable. But then, what was not? The word "explanation" had no meaning.

They were moving toward him; had they seen him? He flattened himself against the sullen yellow rock.

The two Organisms paused not far away. He could hear their sounds, and crouched, sick from conflicting pangs of hunger and fear.

Alpha sank to his knees, lay flat on his back, arms and legs flung out at random, addressing the sky in a series of musical cries, sibilants, guttural groans. It was a personal language he had only now improvised, but Beta understood him well.

"A vision," cried Alpha. "I see past the sky. I see knots, spinning circles. They tighten into hard points; they will never come undone."

Beta perched on a pyramid, glanced over his shoulder at the mottled sky.

"An intuition," chanted Alpha, "a picture out of the other time. It is hard, merciless, inflexible."

Beta poised on the pyramid, dove through the glassy surface, swam under Alpha, emerged, lay flat beside him.

"Observe the Relict on the hillside. In his blood is the whole of the old race—the narrow men with minds like cracks. He has exuded the intuition.

Clumsy thing—a blunderer,” said Alpha.

“They are all dead, all of them,” said Beta. “Although three or four remain.” (When *past*, *present* and *future* are no more than ideas left over from another era, like boats on a dry lake—then the completion of a process can never be defined.)

Alpha said, “This is the vision. I see the Relicts swarming the Earth; then whisking off to nowhere, like gnats in the wind. This is behind us.”

The Organisms lay quiet, considering the vision.

A rock, or perhaps a meteor, fell from the sky, struck into the surface of the pond. It left a circular hole which slowly closed. From another part of the pool a gout of fluid splashed into the air, floated away.

Alpha spoke: “Again—the intuition comes strong! There will be lights in the sky.”

The fever died in him. He hooked a finger into the air, hoisted himself to his feet.

Beta lay quiet. Slugs, ants, flies, beetles were crawling on him, boring, breeding. Alpha knew that Beta could arise, shake off the insects, stride off. But Beta seemed to prefer passivity. That was well enough. He could produce another Beta should he choose, or a dozen of him. Sometimes the world swarmed with Organisms, all sorts, all colors,

tall as steeples, short and squat as flower-pots.

“I feel a lack,” said Alpha. “I will eat the Relict.” He set forth, and sheer chance brought him near to the ledge of yellow rock. Finn the Relict sprang to his feet in panic.

ALPHA tried to communicate, so that Finn might pause while Alpha ate. But Finn had no grasp for the many-valued overtones of Alpha’s voice. He seized a rock, hurled it at Alpha. The rock puffed into a cloud of dust, blew back into the Relict’s face.

Alpha moved closer, extended his long arms. The Relict kicked. His feet went out from under him, and he slid out on the plain. Alpha ambled complacently behind him. Finn began to crawl away. Alpha moved off to the right—one direction was as good as another. He collided with Beta, and began to eat Beta instead of the Relict. The Relict hesitated; then approached and, joining Alpha, pushed chunks of pink flesh into his mouth.

Alpha said to the Relict, “I was about to communicate an intuition to him whom we dine upon. I will speak to you.”

Finn could not understand Alpha’s personal language. He ate as rapidly as possible.

Alpha spoke on. “There will be lights in the sky. The great lights.”

Finn rose to his feet and, warily watching Alpha, seized Beta's legs, began to pull him toward the hill. Alpha watched with quizzical unconcern.

It was hard work for the spindly Relict. Sometimes Beta floated; sometimes he wafted off on the air; sometimes he adhered to the terrain. At last he sank into a knob of granite which froze around him. Finn tried to jerk Beta loose, and then to pry him up with a stick, without success.

He ran back and forth in an agony of indecision. Beta began to collapse, wither, like a jellyfish on hot sand. The Relict abandoned the hulk. Too late, too late! Food going to waste! The world was a hideous place of frustration!

TEMPORARILY his belly was full. He started back up the crag, and presently found the camp, where the four other Relicts waited—two ancient males, two females. The females, Gisa and Reak, like Finn, had been out foraging. Gisa had brought in a slab of lichen; Reak a bit of nameless carrion.

The old men, Boad and Tagart, sat quietly waiting either for food or for death.

The women greeted Finn sullenly. "Where is the food you went forth to find?"

"I had a whole carcass," said

Finn. "I could not carry it."

Boad had slyly stolen the slab of lichen and was cramming it into his mouth. It came alive, quivered and exuded a red ichor which was poison, and the old man died.

"Now there is food," said Finn. "Let us eat."

But the poison created a putrescence; the body seethed with blue foam, flowed away of its own energy.

The women turned to look at the other old man, who said in a quavering voice, "Eat me if you must—but why not choose Reak, who is younger than I?"

Reak, the younger of the women, gnawing on the bit of carrion, made no reply.

Finn said hollowly, "Why do we worry ourselves? Food is ever more difficult, and we are the last of all men."

"No, no," spoke Reak. "Not the last. We saw others on the green mound."

"That was long ago," said Gisa. "Now they are surely dead."

"Perhaps they have found a source of food," suggested Reak.

Finn rose to his feet, looked across the plain. "Who knows? Perhaps there is a more pleasant land beyond the horizon."

"There is nothing anywhere but waste and evil creatures," snapped Gisa.

"What could be worse than

here?" Finn argued calmly.

No one could find grounds for disagreement.

"Here is what I propose," said Finn. "Notice this tall peak. Notice the layers of hard air. They bump into the peak, they bounce off, they float in and out and disappear past the edge of sight. Let us all climb this peak, and when a sufficiently large bank of air passes, we will throw ourselves on top, and allow it to carry us to the beautiful regions which may exist just out of sight."

There was argument. The old man Tagart protested his feebleness; the women derided the possibility of the bountiful regions Finn envisioned, but presently, grumbling and arguing, they began to clamber up the pinnacle.

IT TOOK a long time; the obsidian was soft as jelly, and Tagart several times professed himself at the limit of his endurance. But still they climbed, and at last reached the pinnacle. There was barely room to stand. They could see in all directions, far out over the landscape, till vision was lost in the watery gray.

The women bickered and pointed in various directions, but there was small sign of happier territory. In one direction blue-green hills shivered like bladders

full of oil. In another direction lay a streak of black—a gorge or a lake of clay. In another direction were blue-green hills—the same they had seen in the first direction; somehow there had been a shift. Below was the plain, gleaming like an iridescent beetle, here and there pocked with black velvet spots, overgrown with questionable vegetation.

They saw Organisms, a dozen shapes loitering by ponds, munching vegetable pods or small rocks or insects. There came Alpha. He moved slowly, still awed by his vision, ignoring the other Organisms. Their play went on, but presently they stood quiet, sharing the oppression.

On the obsidian peak, Finn caught hold of a passing filament of air, drew it in. "Now—all on, and we sail away to the Land of Plenty."

"No," protested Gisa, "there is no room, and who knows if it will fly in the right direction?"

"Where is the right direction?" asked Finn. "Does anyone know?"

No one knew, but the women still refused to climb aboard the filament. Finn turned to Tagart. "Here, old one, show these women how it is; climb on!"

"No, no," he cried. "I fear the air; this is not for me."

"Climb on, old man, then we follow."

Wheezing and fearful, clenching his hands deep into the spongy mass, Tagart pulled himself out onto the air, spindly shanks hanging over into nothing. "Now," spoke Finn, "who next?"

The women still refused. "You go then, yourself," cried Gisa.

"And leave you, my last guarantee against hunger? Aboard now!"

"No. The air is too small; let the old one go and we will follow on a larger."

"Very well." Finn released his grip. The air floated off over the plain, Tagart straddling and clutching for dear life.

They watched him curiously. "Observe," said Finn, "how fast and easily moves the air. Above the Organisms, over all the slime and uncertainty."

But the air itself was uncertain, and the old man's raft dissolved. Clutching at the departing wisps, Tagart sought to hold his cushion together. It fled from under him, and he fell.

ON THE PEAK the three watched the spindly shape flap and twist on its way to earth far below.

"Now," Reak exclaimed vexatiously, "we even have no more meat."

"None," said Gisa, "except the visionary Finn himself."

They surveyed Finn. Together they would more than outmatch him.

"Careful," cried Finn. "I am the last of the Men. You are my women, subject to my orders."

They ignored him, muttering to each other, looking at him from the side of their faces. "Careful!" cried Finn. "I will throw you both from this peak."

"That is what we plan for you," said Gisa.

They advanced with sinister caution.

"Stop! I am the last Man!"

"We are better off without you."

"One moment! Look at the Organisms!"

The women looked. The Organisms stood in a knot, staring at the sky.

"Look at the sky!"

The women looked; the frosted glass was cracking, breaking, curling aside.

"The blue! The blue sky of old times!"

A terribly bright light burnt down, seared their eyes. The rays warmed their naked backs.

"The sun," they said in awed voices. "The sun has come back to Earth."

The shrouded sky was gone; the sun rode proud and bright in a sea of blue. The ground below churned, cracked, heaved, solidified. They felt the obsidian harden under their feet; its color

shifted to glossy black. The Earth, the sun, the galaxy, had departed the region of freedom; the other time with its restrictions and logic was once more with them.

"This is Old Earth," cried Finn. "We are Men of Old Earth! The land is once again ours!"

"And what of the Organisms?"

"If this is the Earth of old, then let the Organisms beware!"

The Organisms stood on a low rise of ground beside a runnel of water that was rapidly becoming a river flowing out onto the plain.

Alpha cried, "Here is my intuition! It is exactly as I knew. The freedom is gone; the tightness, the constriction are back!"

"How will we defeat it?" asked another Organism.

"Easily," said a third. "Each must fight a part of the battle. I plan to hurl myself at the sun, and blot it from existence." And he crouched, threw himself into the air. He fell on his back and broke his neck.

"The fault," said Alpha, "is in the air; because the air surrounds all things."

Six Organisms ran off in search of air and, stumbling into the river, drowned.

"In any event," said Alpha, "I am hungry." He looked

around for suitable food. He seized an insect which stung him. He dropped it. "My hunger remains."

He spied Finn and the two women descending from the crag. "I will eat one of the Relicts," he said. "Come, let us all eat."

Three of them started off—as usual in random directions. By chance Alpha came face to face with Finn. He prepared to eat, but Finn picked up a rock. The rock remained a rock, hard, sharp, heavy. Finn swung it down, taking joy in the inertia. Alpha died with a crushed skull. One of the other Organisms attempted to step across a crevasse twenty feet wide and disappeared into it; the other sat down, swallowed rocks to assuage his hunger, and presently went into convulsions.

Finn pointed here and there around the fresh new land. "In that quarter, the new city, like that of the legends. Over here the farms, the cattle."

"We have none of these," protested Gisa.

"No," said Finn. "Not now. But once more the sun rises and sets, once more rock has weight and air has none. Once more water falls as rain and flows to the sea." He stepped forward over the fallen Organism. "Let us make plans."

SWEET DREAMS

O'Reilly and the La'anahan

both wanted the same

thing, really: a square

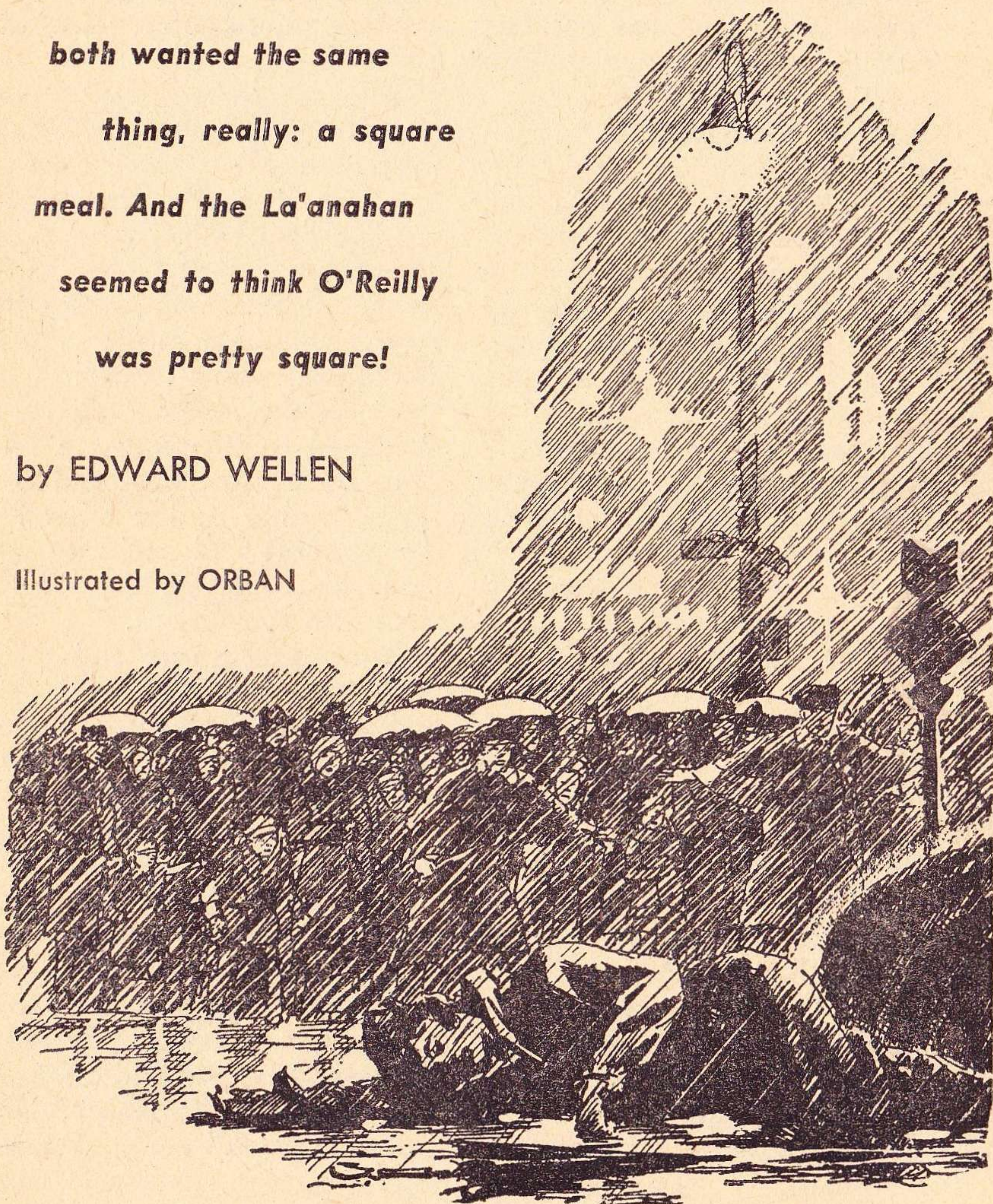
meal. And the La'anahan

seemed to think O'Reilly

was pretty square!

by EDWARD WELLEN

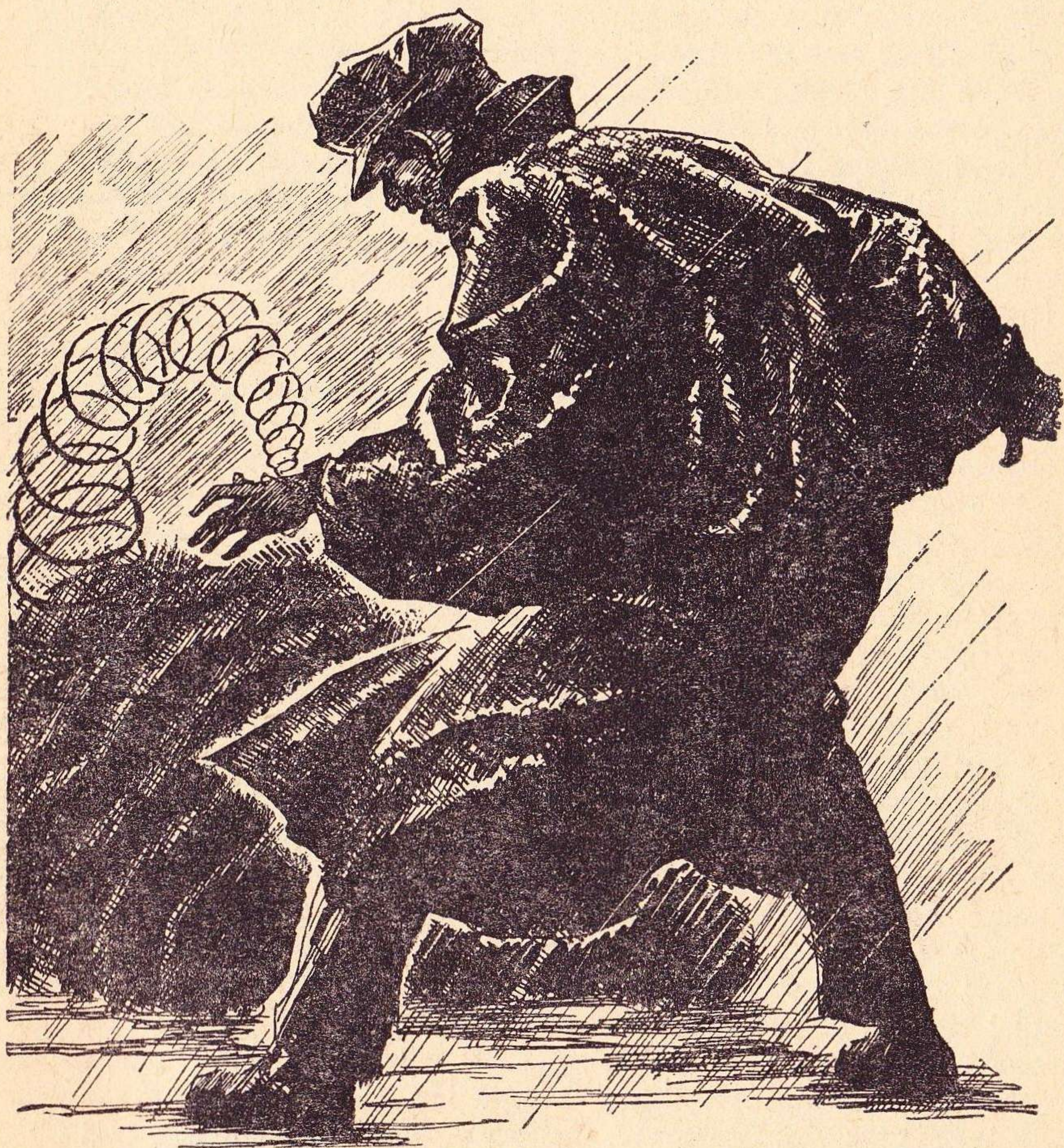
Illustrated by ORBAN



THE NIGHTMARISH thing floated down out of space and landed smack in the middle of 50th Street between Madison Square Garden and Polyclinic Hospital. It landed just as the huge stage door of the Garden opened—calliopened, you might

say, if you wanted to play on the way the gay circus din tootled out.

First a team of six ponies pulling a miniature fire engine jumping with midget firefighters, then a dozen scantily mahouted elephants painted



pink, came out of arc light and sawdust into neon glow and mirroring asphalt. And it seemed, to those few who were looking on, that the thing, which none of them had seen land, was merely swinging into line.

Having played three weeks at the Garden, the ponies and the elephants could have recited the route. Turn right at the corner of 50th Street and 8th Avenue, go down the block, turn right again at the corner of 49th and 8th, to the stage door on that side of the Garden, to be ready for the next time of entering the arena.

Only when the thing following them turned the wrong way—going up 8th Avenue instead of down—did anyone really pay it any mind.

Ptl. Roger O'Reilly, gloomily humming *Moritat*, saw the procession coming and set about funneling into one lane the southbound traffic, shoving it away from the southwest corner of 50th and 8th to let the procession clipclop, clink-clank, and ponder past. How much more of this? His raincoat sheathed him clammily and cracked like thunder with every move he made. It was a miserable evening. Intermittently, hail, a myriad rosaries of hail, pattered down. A gaudy neon haze veiled the avenue, blurring everything with a satanic Midas touch.

Even wiping with the cuff of his glove the weeping crystal of his wristwatch, O'Reilly had a devil of a job making out the time. 7:14. Damn!

Usually he loved the noise and the rush. Both of them were catching. Both of them were invigorating signs of life going on about its business of living. But now, at this moment, he was longing to breathe air free of carbon monoxide, longing to get out of the sleet, longing to get away from *baaabaabbbaabaaaa-baaabbba!* the mad hornblowing that always went with bad weather. The warm smells streaming out of the cafeterias lining 8th made his belly growl more savagely. He could go for bacon and eggs and buttered toast and coffee black, right now. And, to tell the truth, on top of that he would soon have to go to the john. Damn!

The warm smells were really hitting him. Funny, he'd begun thinking more and more about food ever since he and Maria had failed to hit it off. More than merely thinking about it. One hand was directing traffic; with the other he patted his belly. Yep, even through the raincoat he could tell. Have to work some of that off.

Speaking of bulges, he had the bulge on traffic now, and he swept his gaze around as the clipclopping, clink-clanking, and

pondering grew louder. He grimaced as the dark mass of the Garden passed his eyes. The building loomed as a monumental reminder of his guilt.

But what, after all, had he done that was such a crime? All he had done was spend part of his precious forty-eight-off in taking Billy to the circus this morning. And when a seven-year-old went to a real live circus for the first time in his life it meant he had to have all that went with it—cotton candy, ice cream, pink lemonade, hot dogs, soda pop, peanuts, crackerjack, popcorn, the works.

So what if the kid had a little bellyache? All kids have to go through that kind of thing more than once before they learn when enough is enough. So what if a long-standing rule had gone smash? Going to a real live circus for the first time only happens once in a lifetime. There was no reason for Maria to go Tibetan. Yakkety-yak. "You know what the dentist said about feeding Billy sweets. You're not making that much gold you have to turn Billy's teeth into little Fort Knoxes." "All right, all right. Lay off." "If you'll inlay off." "Am I supposed to laugh?"

She always made him feel such a fool with her biting wit. And that always drove him into making some foolish retort, then

left him furious with himself for making it, and finally wreathed him in fuming silence. Of course, she never threw it up to him that she had been a schoolteacher; he had to give her that much. But then, when they first went together he had spoken of wanting to study law and so she hadn't felt, as some he might name had—her mother he was thinking of—she was marrying out of her circle. But that was before Billy came and Maria was so terribly sick. And what with one thing and another he had given up his dream. Yet, though she never said anything about it, he knew she still thought he could do it if he'd only put his mind to it.

Put his mind to it! Easy to say. He shook his head impatiently. Better put his mind to the flow of traffic, here and now. And it wouldn't hurt to keep an eye out for his sergeant's patrol car and for the flat, beet-red face that would be leaning out and shouting something at him. The guy was more G.I. than O'Reilly's top-kick in the Army. There were many times with both of them when O'Reilly had to force himself, nails in palms, to remain silent.

CLIPCLOP. The procession began rounding the corner. O'Reilly smiled at the ponies and the elephants and nodded

at the firefighters and the mahouts. Billy had gone for them all in a big way. His smile faded. Poor kid! When O'Reilly left to report for duty the kid was just beginning to double up in pain. And Maria was running around, soothing the kid with one voice and chewing out O'Reilly with another.

O'Reilly brought himself up sharply into full consciousness as a black mass detached itself from the rear of the procession and marched up 8th.

Ptl. Roger O'Reilly blew his whistle indignantly.

But the thing kept wedging its way up 8th, driving upstream through rapidly jamming lines of cars, crushing grilles and fenders, a juggernaut.

The happening had caught Ptl. O'Reilly flatfooted but he quickly recovered. Fumbling to unhook the thong of his nightstick from his breast shield, he hurried in the thing's deliberate wake and overtook it. He rapped on the thing with his nightstick. "Hey, you!"

O'Reilly was too angry just then to give himself over to wondering what the "you" might be. Vaguely he was thinking it was a small vehicle of some kind, though he could see no wheels. For that matter, he could see very little distinctly in the all-blurring neon haze. It seemed to him the thing was a sort

of carapace with an engine under it driving it and he had a dim vision of a midget inside working it. Though as he could see no opening for eyes to peer out it was no wonder the thing was going blindly amuck.

No wonder, but no excuse. O'Reilly rapped again. The thing did not slacken its pace. It kept on undeviatingly, ramming through the stalled and piling up ranks, through a jungle of clashing gears and cursing drivers and bleating horns.

O'Reilly trotted after it and rapped again, this time much harder. "Hey, you!"

He was going to add, "You in there, stop the damn thing!" But the words tangled in his vocal cords. A wave of shock shot along the nerves of his arm and his hand waived possession of the nightstick. Under his raincoat a downpour of sweat drenched him. It was due to something more than the electrifying pain. A thought arrested him. What in the name of heaven *was* this thing bulling its way through cars twice its size?

He had a strange feeling the thing had nothing to do with the circus. It wasn't simply that he knew it had never during his tour of duty rounded the corner with the regular procession or that he couldn't remember seeing it in the performance he and

Billy had attended only that morning, for it might easily be a newly-dreamed-up prop in a clown bit and there was always so much going on in the arena that he could easily have missed noticing it. He was simply sure now that it wasn't part of the circus.

He stared at it hard. It was no vehicle. There was no midget inside. And no engine. Yet something more than the neon haze was blurring its contours. The thing was quivering with an unearthly energy of its own. It was alive.

MECHANICALLY, O'Reilly retrieved his nightstick and picked up his pursuit of the thing once more. In the short time it had taken the thing to near 51st Street the screeching of brakes and the crashing of chrome had drawn a crowd. Pedestrians were converging, like iron filings around the north pole of a bar magnet, and adding to the noise and confusion.

O'Reilly swore aloud and couldn't hear himself, and that made him swear again and louder. He ranged his eyes across the cars cobblestoning the avenue ahead. He knew it. The one time he would have welcomed seeing his sergeant's patrol car it was nowhere in view.

It was up to him alone. What could he do? He certainly

couldn't go on playing tag with something that refused to be *it*.

For the first time the thing slowed. O'Reilly took heart. The thing stalled at the crossing of 51st and 8th, as if the burden of assessing the cardinal points of the compass weighed it down.

A sudden pushing from behind propelled a young man from the crowd on the northeast corner into the street.

O'Reilly sensed a rippling of the thing toward the young man, a menacing tropism, and he yelled, "Get back on the curb."

The young man hesitated in a momentary show of bravado. But something—O'Reilly's tone or the rippling of the mass or both—reached him and he turned and tried to shove his way back into the safety of numbers. "I can't," he said despairingly.

The rippling lapped out all at once, like a wave from the body of the sea. Its tip whipped blindly around in a narrowing cone, feeling. It touched the young man.

He went pale. Not daring to look around, he said, "Help me!" wildly, and tried again to break through the adamant wall of the crowd. A woman screamed and beat him back with her umbrella.

O'Reilly ripped open his raincoat and wrapped his fist around the pearl handle of his

Colt .38. The feeler was flowing back into the black mass and, writhing, the young man with it. It had him by a padded shoulder and was towing him to itself relentlessly. O'Reilly took careful aim at the core of the mass.

"Let go of him," he said, not even hoping the thing would understand, or would heed if it understood, but complying with his feeling of what was fitting. He waited one moment. Then, as the towing went right on, he held his breath and squeezed the trigger.

With the first shot the mob lost its temporary paralysis and moved out and away like a shock wave. With the last shot, with the last empty click, the feeler stopped moving.

But it seemed to O'Reilly, who had seen no sign of impact, the feeler stopped moving not because the thing was riddled, was suffering from damaging hits, but because the thing was puzzled, was trying to grasp a new factor in these strange surroundings. The feeler stopped moving, but did not loosen its grip.

The pause, however, gave the young man a chance to shuck his jacket, leave it dangling from the end of the feeler, and take off through the evaporating crowd.

It took the thing a while to weigh the jacket and find it

wanting. During that while, O'Reilly shooed the few remaining souls into shelter. And then he was standing surveying the abandoned cars, the tidal wrack of hats, umbrellas, bundles, purses, shoes, the faces peering out of hiding. He was alone with the thing. It let the jacket fall and rippled tentatively toward him.

He backed slowly. There was no thought in his mind save to keep the thing in this one spot somehow until help came. The shots and the congestion and phone calls from frightened citizenry should surely bring that help soon. In the meanwhile he would keep the thing following him in this constricted space, trying to let it get neither near enough to seize him nor far enough to lose track of him.

The wavering tip, striking out at where he had been or would have been, was coming closer each time it lashed out, and O'Reilly had no moments to spare for watching out for the help that should be arriving. But when he caught a movement outside the rim of seeing he gave a sigh a child might give when an adult relieves it of a burden too much for it to bear. And he turned his head a fraction to take in the figure stealing across the margin of his vision.

It was a woman. The veins at

his temples strained apoplectically. The woman was bending to recover her umbrella.

O'Reilly shot his gaze back to the thing. The presence of the woman was causing it to veer away from him. The woman took hold of the umbrella and began to straighten. Then she saw the thing rippling in her direction and she dropped the umbrella, her body a frozen tilted Z. The tip of the feeler waved about, searching.

"Beat it, you damn fool," O'Reilly yelled furiously.

But with a tightening of her mouth the woman bent again and took up the umbrella. She was straightening again when the feeler reached her.

FEVERISHLY O'Reilly reloaded his .38 with bullets from his belt. He fired into the mass and, when that had no effect, fired at the feeler, with the same lack of effect. He reholstered his useless .38. Hanging again from his shield, his nightstick thumped his raincoat as he ran.

The thing had learned to reject clothing. The feeler went for flesh. It wrapped itself around an arm of the woman and reeled her in.

O'Reilly caught the woman by her other arm and about her waist and dug in his heels or tried to on the slick pavement. The woman had fainted and

there was no screaming in pain at the tug of war. But it was impossible to free her of the remorseless reeling in without tearing her in two. And O'Reilly had to give ground and in the end had to let go and look on, raging impotently.

Wavelike, another feeler emerged. It had less reach but much more breadth. It shrouded the woman. Then, as if it were spitting out a pit, it unshrouded her and rolled her out in one motion.

She lay on the gleaming asphalt, a shriveled husk, as if the thing had sucked her of her being, gutted her of the vital energy that had kept her body going and given it meaning. In the neon blur her flesh seemed already to have the glow of putrescence.

O'Reilly learned too late he had taken his mind from the thing too long.

As if the savoring of her being had only whetted its appetite, the thing suddenly flicked its long feeler at O'Reilly. It had new power, new speed, and O'Reilly was not quick enough or strong enough to get away. The cablelike end of the feeler took several turns around O'Reilly's bare wrist, making him fast.

"So this is it," O'Reilly thought wonderingly. His calmness astonished him, but aston-

ished him calmly too. "So this is how it ends. So long, Maria. So long, Bill—"

But to hell with philosophical acceptance of the inevitable. There was fight in him. He would not let the thing wither him without struggling to the last for the possession of his soul. And he fought vainly but grimly.

But it was not the short broad shrouding feeler that emerged as he neared the body of the mass. It was a third feeler, wire-fine.

It thinned to almost microscopic fineness and, while the long feeler held his arm immobile, thrust painlessly into his skin. He felt nothing. But another sense, one he became aware of for the first time, told him the feeler was racing along the nerves of his arm to his brain and that it was forking, branching, twigging out in his brain.

The probing invisible ends touched memories to life—not so much resurrecting them as throwing him back into the time of their happening. . . .

"Moon," said his mother's voice in the darkness. "Moon." And wondering he looked up from the pale blur that was her face to the pale blur that was her hand pointing to a bright roundness or a round brightness

a little higher up in the darkness. She said, her voice too seeming a blur to his sleepy hearing, "See, baby? Moon." But the round brightness or the bright roundness was not at all like the brown-and-white thing he remembered seeing moving slowly in and against the green-and-blue space. The brown-and-white thing was Moo. Maybe Moon was another thing?

His uncle puffed on the pipe, but only a dead smell came out. His uncle felt around in the pockets of the vest. "Damn! I'm all out of matches," his uncle said, looking at him as at a fellow-sufferer. "I know where," he said, his words falling all over themselves in their hurry to get out, "in the chicken." "In the chicken?" his uncle said, raising a heavy eyebrow. "Oh, yes, in the chicken. Go get them, Roger boy. You'll find some on the chicken table where your mother is stuffing the kitchen for dinner." "Don't tease the child, Frank," his aunt said, half-laughing, half-angry. "No, that's right," his uncle said, puffing out more of the dead smell. "Sure, you go in the chicken and look on the chicken table where your mother is stuffing the kitchen for dinner."

He was chanting "Cheese and crackers got all muddy!" and all

at once the old priest he hadn't seen or heard coming had him by the ear and it hurt. "Blasphemy, blasphemy, blasphemy!" the old priest said, boxing the other ear each time he said the word. "Beware the dead-a-ly sin, O'Reilly. Beware the dead-a-ly sin."

THE THING was giving him an eerie impression of being in a listening attitude, as if it were wiretapping his mind. That was the first thing that struck him when he knew he yet lived. And it suddenly struck him the discrete memories—of his mother, his uncle, the priest who had collared him—had one thing in common. They had to do with the use of words. Was the thing threading its way through the labyrinth of his mind trying to reach the speech center of his brain? Was it trying to find a way to communicate?

That seemed to be so, for as if it were aware he was glimpsing something of its want, he had or rather received a feeling of satisfaction. The sense he was newly conscious of was telling him that the thing was probing for order, for a filing system, for a frame of reference. The sense was telling him that the thing was responding with a feeling of well-being when it found, a feeling of misgiving when it failed to find, a framework con-

forming to its own sense of order.

This awakening avenue of perception of his appeared to be functioning on the deepest level—sub-electronic?—of his being, following the flow of traffic, not able—yet?—to control the flow. At one point he sensed a feeling of horror as a branching probe pulled back from the gaping abyss of the great longitudinal fissure, then a bit later a feeling of relief as it found the great band of fibers bridging the gulf between the hemispheres of his brain and crossed safely.

Suddenly he could see again. His mind's eye had so taken up his attention that he was not aware until now that he had been blind to the outer world. But now he was looking at the outer world again and the long-familiar seemed unfamiliar. He found it hard to bring the world into view. There were too many blocks. In all directions it was as if he were trying to see around corners. And it seemed to him it was because he was seeing his world not only through the sieve of his own mind but also through the sieve of another's mind. For it now looked to him as if he were the thing's eyes.

Now when he turned his gaze upon the thing itself he saw its appearance had changed. It was not a solid mass but a lattice-

work of fibers, pulsating rapidly. He saw it rather clearly now; there was no blurring of contours. Yet his new sense—sub-electronic? It seemed to whisper yes—was telling him he still did not see the thing as it really was, but saw it filteringly, saw it as it saw itself as he saw it.

The world seemed almost as though he were looking through his grandmother's glasses. They were shiny and made her eyes seem very large. When he was still too young to frame his wants in words he would reach up for the glasses. But he had to sit quietly on his grandmother's lap and let her hold the glasses to his eyes. And then didn't the world turn strange! But then one time he snatched them from his grandmother's face and they nearly broke and his father slapped his hands and said Roger was a bad bad boy and could not look through grandmother's glasses any more. But even after that his grandmother sometimes let him look through them, though he had to nod his head first that he would not grab and would sit very still on grandmother's lap while she held the glasses to his eyes.

He and the thing were moving, having come to some understanding on a level he hadn't yet transposed to consciousness. They had begun moving east on

51st. Going the wrong way on a one-way street, O'Reilly thought in crazy outrage. He mounted the sidewalk. The black mass went along with him as a man might humor a dog on a leash.

A sound like a slow leak. O'Reilly looked around. He saw a form in blue. It was hissing to gain his attention. He squinted. "Sgt. Vitello?"

"Yes. Listen, O'Reilly," as though whispering made any difference—"you got it?"

"No. It has me."

"Oh. What the hell is it?"

"I don't know."

"Where the hell you going?"

"I don't know." No, that was wrong because he suddenly knew where they were heading. "The Public Library."

"The Library? What the hell for?"

"I don't know." He knew, but it would take too long to explain.

"You don't know? You sound funny, O'Reilly. Has it got you hypnotized?"

"No." No?

"Well, you try to stall it, whatever it is. We'll clear the way."

"I'll try."

Sgt. Vitello blurred away.

THE THING seemed to be in no hurry—or at least had not yet mastered the earthly sense

of time. Slowly they moved east along 51st. When they crossed Broadway O'Reilly saw his sergeant's patrol car coming alongside. It cruised slightly ahead of them. His face palely strange, Sgt. Vitello was whispering into his mike, nodding earnestly to add weight to his words.

O'Reilly sensed the entire city marking time, holding its monstrous breath, waiting, listening. The sound of his feet on the pavement seemed to him deafening. Close about him an eerie silence pulsed, and at the rim of it he heard sirens waxing and waning. He seemed to be moving in a limbo, feeling his way through fog up a slippery slope while a dark sea was eating away the sand under his heels.

At 5th Avenue they turned right. Ahead of him O'Reilly saw his sergeant's patrol car and on either hand he caught glimpses of blue cordoning off the cross streets, giving shape to amorphous crowds. On the wet gleaming avenue all was vague and blurred, like a scene on the floor of the sea where creatures grow their own lamps.

They moved down 5th to 42nd Street. O'Reilly and the thing turned in at the main entrance of the Public Library, passing between the flanking twin stone lions the Little Flower had named Patience and Fortitude, the thing flowing up

the steps, its own escalator.

Through echoing emptiness they made for the reference room and, once there, for a table where an unabridged dictionary broodingly spread its heavy wings. Needing no prompting, O'Reilly turned to page one and skimmed his eyes down each of the three columns in turn. He flipped the pages at a pace that seemed to suit the thing. In thirty minutes he went through the entire volume. That done, he picked up an English grammar he spied nearby and scanned his way through that in the same fleeting manner. When he had shot the back cover to with an index finger he straightened.

During all this time he hadn't thought to sit but had bent over the books; and now when he straightened he creaked and with a smile of pain said, "Ouch!"

WORDS ribboned out across a mental screen. Before he grasped the meaning of the words he grasped the meaning of the writing. The thing was talking to him.

It seemed as if the thing had registered the whole of the unabridged and of the grammar, together with images the words had struck off like sparks in O'Reilly's mind without his knowing at the time, and to con-

vey its message it lightnined to the right pages and lines and brought out in italics the words it wanted.

That vibration was in your speech range, the thing strung out. What were you saying?

O'Reilly required a moment to think back. Then he remembered the smile-producing pain of straightening and, on a mad impulse, visualized a comic strip balloon encircling the legend *Ouch!*

At once the filing system of the thing whirred and came up with a definition. *Ouch, noun.* [ME *nouch* ("a *nouch*" being mistaken for "an *ouch*") < OF *nouche*, necklace, collar < OHG *nuscja*.] *A brooch or clasp; a setting of a jewel.* The definition did not satisfy it. O'Reilly sensed a feeling of bewilderment, which the thing quickly put into words. *I fail to understand. What called that object to your mind?*

O'Reilly felt a secret sense of joy in every cell of his being. He wondered—and wondered if his wondering showed—if he could keep the thing off balance. If it could make mistakes, it was vulnerable. How vulnerable would hang on how effectively it could rectify its errors. All right now, what called that "object" to his mind? Very well, then; he pictured himself straightening and grimacing.

A feeling of impatience. *I caught that sensation of pain at the time, as well as your remembering of it. Explain what that has to do with a brooch or clasp or a setting of a jewel.*

The word ouch is a homonym. The entry following the one you quoted is the one applying in this context. Ouch, interjection. A crying out expressing pain. What surprised him was that his total recall did not surprise him. He would work on that later. If there was a later.

Meanwhile the thing had been working on what he had sent and was now responding. A feeling of pain, and then a comic strip balloon containing the legend *Ouch!*

Yes, O'Reilly confirmed.

A feeling of crossness. Brick by brick it laid out the course of its thinking. *I was not questioning the validity of the meaning just then. I was crying out to express pain.*

My, my. Might one ask why? *Why?*

We do not have what you term homonyms and I find the concept excruciatingly painful.

Tell us more.

Outside my own world I have only a tenuous hold on reality. I cannot tolerate ambiguity.

"'Oh, really?'" Ptl. O'Reilly thought wryly. And then, more sanely, seeing an opening, *Where is your world?*

It considered a moment and then, *I come from a planet of La'anah, the dark companion of the star Algol.*

Per se, the wording had no emotional coloring, but O'Reilly sensed pain too intense for *ouch!*—a telescoped reliving of the La'anahan's long journey in the vessel of its own form, across deeps of space and time, through bombardings of energy and matter.

Why did you leave your home and come here?

I do not know why I left. What happened must have been exceedingly unpleasant, for though I remember the frightening journey I have forgotten everything about the circumstances of my leaving except that I have forgotten about the circumstances of my leaving.

Come again?

I am here for one thing. I have been hunting for this thing for a long time. I landed where I sensed it at its most and strongest.

O'Reilly put off asking what the La'anahan was hunting. Instead, telling himself to be persuasive, he thought, *No one here wants to harm you if you come in peace. Do you mean well?*

Of course.

Good. O'Reilly found he had been perspiring.

But what is well for me may not be well for you.

A cold trickling. O'Reilly remembered the woman. Knowing he would not like the answer, he asked, *What are you looking to find here?*

A feeding ground.

Persevering, O'Reilly asked what he dreaded to ask, *What do you feed on?*

Life energy.

What is that?

You do not know?

No. He was afraid he did know.

Really, you ought to know. You have it. It is what differentiates organic from inorganic matter, to use your crude definition.

O'Reilly felt sick. He was again remembering the woman, before and after. He nerved himself. *How often do you have a craving for this life energy?*

Not often. But as soon as the La'anahan had raised hope with those words it beat hope down with its next word, *Always.*

NOT GOOD, O'Reilly, not good at all. He wondered if the thing got a charge out of playing cat-and-mouse with him. But he astonished himself by being quite calm, as if knowing the worst tranquillized. Still, he hesitated before putting his next question. Perhaps it wasn't in the best—should he say?—taste. Then too it might give the thing ideas. He drew in breath. Here

went. Then why haven't you drained me of my life energy as you drained that woman of hers?

What I drained before was not at all satisfying. It was flat, insipid. There was something lacking. Life energy on Earth struck me as being very disappointing, hardly worth the bother of obtaining.

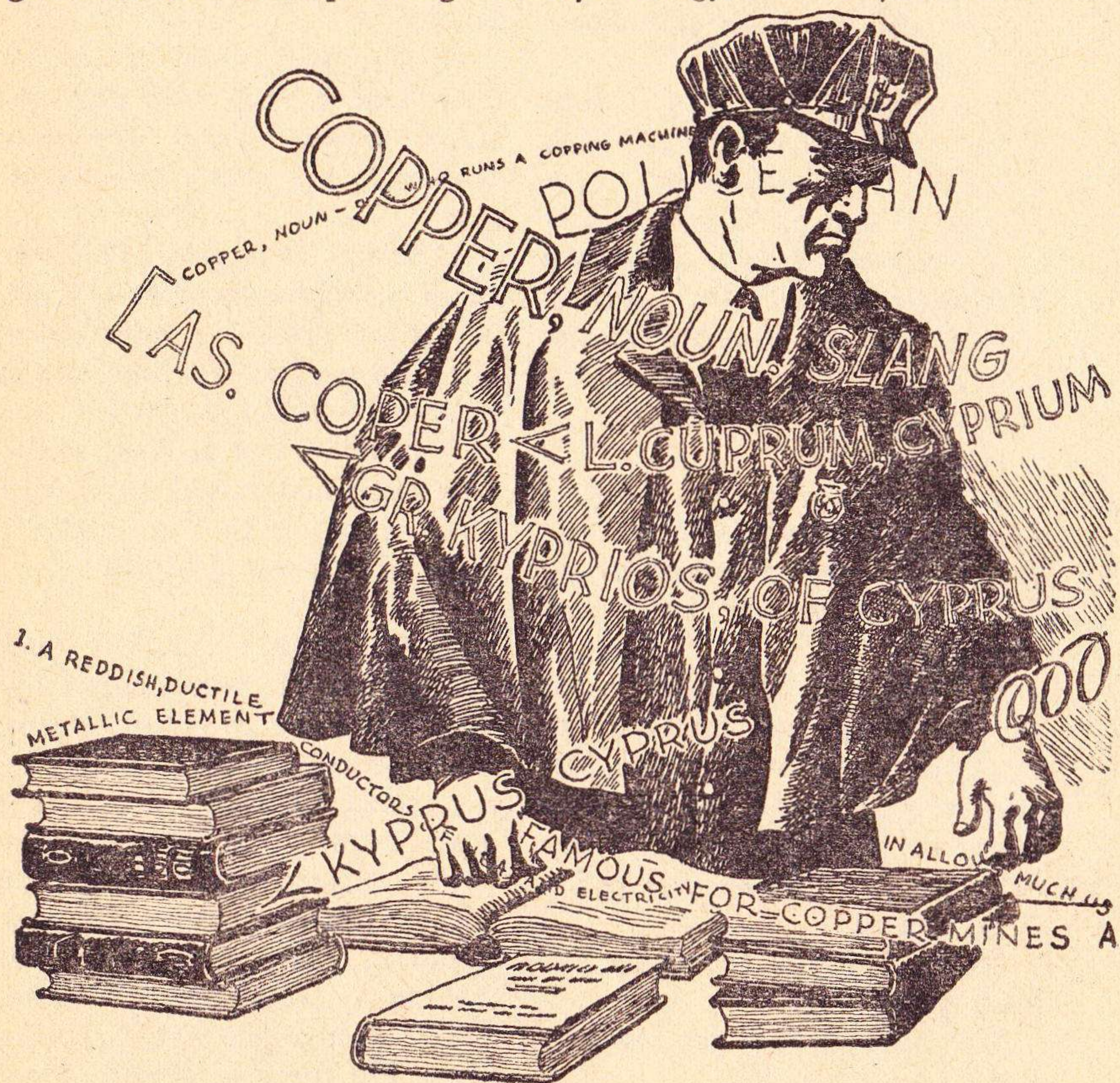
Very good, O'Reilly, very good indeed. An upwelling of

relief showed him he had not been quite so calm as he had imagined. Then you won't be wanting any more?

On the contrary. The encounter sharpened my appetite for the real thing.

Take a giant step backward, O'Reilly, back to not good at all.

But before I can fully digest and enjoy the essence of Earthly life energy, I must find out as



much about your way of life as I can.

Why must—

A lap dissolved. The La'anahan overrode O'Reilly's thought, into, *I will ask the questions.*

Let's not get nasty.

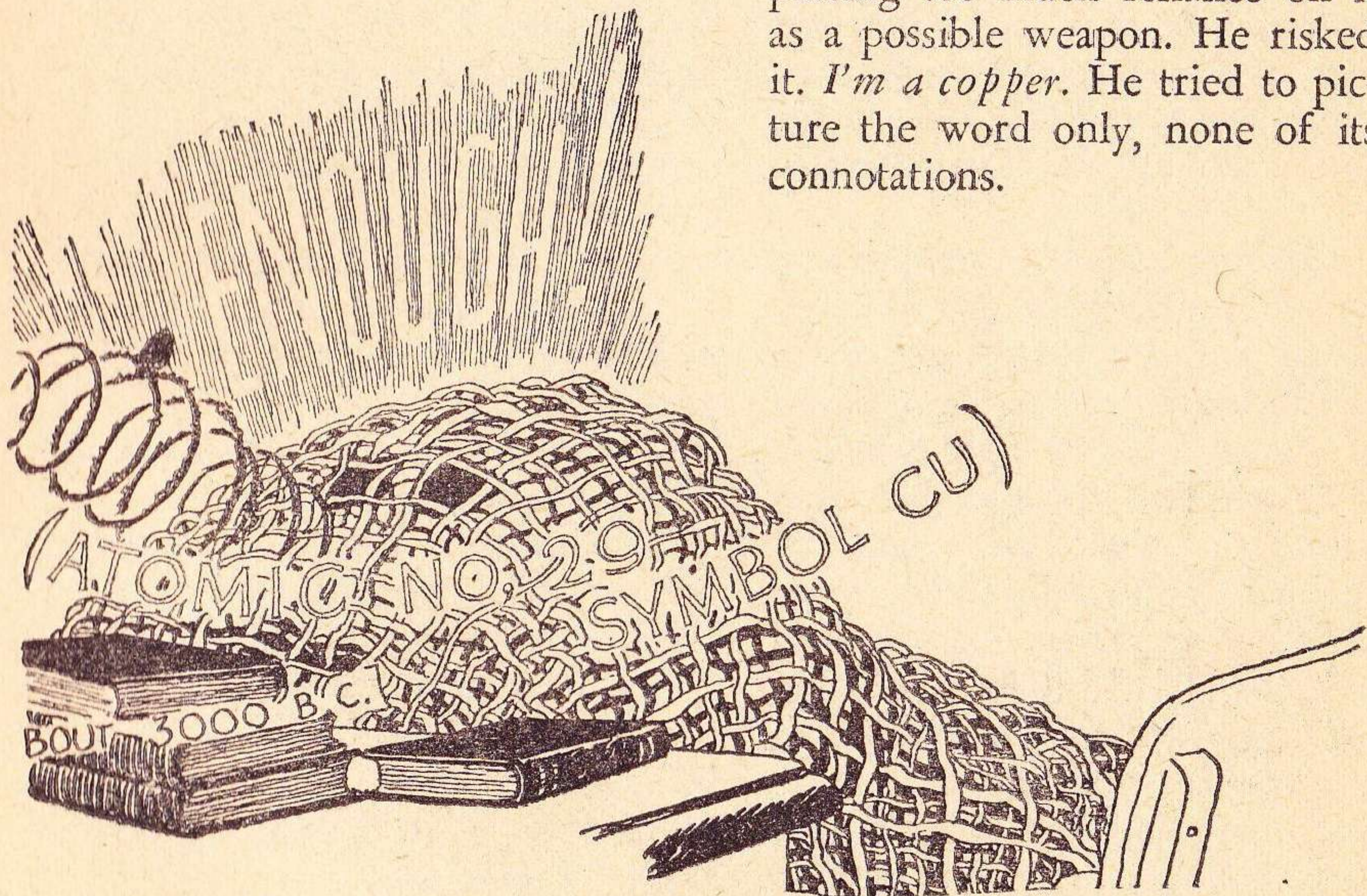
What sort of job do you have?

"I personify the superego in the mind-body politic." Now where the hell did that come from? That had never been his kind of language. The shock of the thing intruding in his mind seemed to have jolted him into a new perspective of his world and of himself in his world, a perspective that covered more ground and took in what lay

beneath the surface. That was all right for him to know but he had to keep the La'anahan off balance. The longer he could keep it from grasping the way of life on Earth the better for that way of life.

I am waiting patiently, the La'anahan conveyed impatiently. *It is important for me to know, for your social status, what you do for a living, these things color your outlook.*

I'm a— He started to think policeman. He stopped. He wondered—and again wondered if his wondering showed—if he could get away with the thought that had just come to him. Even if he could, maybe he was making too big a thing out of it, placing too much reliance on it as a possible weapon. He risked it. *I'm a copper.* He tried to picture the word only, none of its connotations.



Ab. Copper, noun. One who runs a copping machine.

Secret joy. No.

He sensed a feeling of foreboding. No?

No. Copper, noun. Slang. A policeman.

Utter revulsion. *There is more than one copper? Yes, I see—*
copper, noun. [AS. coper < L. cuprum, cyprum < Gr. Kyprios, of Cyprus < Kyprus, Cyprus, famous for copper mines about 3000 B.C.] 1. A reddish, ductile metallic element (Atomic No. 29, Symbol Cu), found native and in ores, one of the best conductors of heat and electricity, in the pure state and in alloys much used in the arts.

2. . . . Enough! Excruciating pain. The La'anahan was really suffering. It shut itself off from him, as a hurt animal might seek to be alone, and left him to his own thoughts for the moment.

COPPER brought to mind one who was all copper. Sgt. Vitello. What was he doing out there in the neon mist? He thought of his dislike of Sgt. Vitello's G.I.-ness and for the first time found it ironic that one Ptl. Roger O'Reilly who went in for policing of others should hate policing of himself. Policing. Policing the area. Field-stripping a cigarette—splitting the paper and scattering the tobacco and then balling the paper into an

infinitesimal wad—made policing the area easier later. Come back, O'Reilly. No buts. You can't escape by retreating into the past. Right now you'd better find a way of field-stripping this thing that latched on to you—and that's cutting in again.

O'Reilly sensed an expending of energy had taken place. But the La'anahan had regained its composure in the main and the sending came through impersonally as a news bulletin flashing around the Times Tower. *I begin to win an insight into the distinctions you make, into your abstracting from the totality of reality.*

Then go away. Don't you see you're only a bad dream?

If your world-view is no more chaotic than I have had this far to endure I believe I can manage to absorb life energy here with some degree of efficiency and satisfaction after all.

Better hurry to sanctuary. In a moment the dreamer will waken—and then where will you be?

But I need to learn more. Now, what are your wants?

The most immediate one? To get off the hook. Damn it, the La'anahan's smug assuming that O'Reilly would collaborate in the destroying of his kind was infuriating. Now look here, Jack, enough is enough. *Why should I tell you?*

He sensed astonishment. *Because you can do nothing to hinder me. You do not give in to the inevitable?*

Grim blankness was O'Reilly's answer.

If you are unwilling, however, I may find others more amenable. Something like a sigh. You are putting me to a lot of trouble.

Too damn bad, Jack.

Shrinking like withering tendrils, the probes began to withdraw from the folds of O'Reilly's brain.

Hold on. O'Reilly gave in. It would not do to lose contact. Not only would he most likely lose his life energy to the La'anahan once it had no more use for him as a seeing eye, but he would only make way for another victim.

The La'anahan held on.

All right, roper, get on with your polling. *Now what was it you were asking?*

What are your wants?

Oh, yes. Well— Well, what? *Bacon and eggs and buttered toast and coffee black.* Let's see you make like a genie and serve them up.

Food? Ah, I see. What life energy is to me. But that is only to keep you going; that is of the flesh. What is the aim of your going; what of the spirit?

Hey, Jack, you mean to say you have a spirit? No matter, let

me think. This was a thing he had never verbalized. *What I want out of life is to realize my potential, to live productively for myself and for those I love.*

Love? The La'anahan winced at the concept but came back gamely. *Go on.*

G'wan, yourself. *What more do you want to know?*

Who are those you love?

My family.

Family? The La'anahan winced once more.

O'Reilly hesitated and then brought out a Yes. Then, since their images had flashed across his mind, he added reluctantly, *My wife and my son.*

Where are they?

He hesitated a bit longer this time. *Home.* He tried to keep from picturing where home was.

He must have succeeded, for the next query was, *Where is home?*

Persistent bastard. He visualized the cross-hatching of Manhattan and pinpointed a building on the lower East Side. Underground in his mind at the same time, without his really realizing it, he schematized the subway that shuttled him between home and precinct.

Lead me to your home.

Not so fast, Jack. *What for?*

These relationships—love and family—are new to me. I want to know more about their functioning. I want to see through

the eyes of your wife and your son.

Those are big wants, Jack. *Would you promise not to harm them?*

Promise? I do not have to bargain with you.

Then I can't promise to lead you to my home.

Never mind. I know the way.

Now was the moment for wakening. And if that failed, now was the moment for falling into the deeper fantasy of madness.

The moment slipped away and he found himself in the iron grip of unrelenting reality. He was moving with the La'anahan into the vast empty hall, trying to think of a way out. And then they were leaving the Library, passing the stony pride of Patience and Fortitude, and he had no notion of what he might do to forestall the meeting with his wife and son.

O'REILLY turned right, expecting to move down 5th.

No. The tethering coils implemented the no. The map of Manhattan flashed across O'Reilly's mind, the subway a fiery tracing. *Lead me to the subway entrance.*

He had planned on going by shoe leather express. *You don't want to go by subway.* Stall for time.

The La'anahan didn't bother

to argue. They turned left, then moved east, toward Grand Central.

It had darkened out and the neon haze had thickened and O'Reilly was at first not certain the detached shadows following them were real. Then he heard voices and the shadows edged nearer.

Hissing.

"Sgt. Vitello?"

Something inaudible.

"Sgt. Vitello?"

"I said yeah. You all right, O'Reilly?"

"So far. Listen, it wants to—"

"What the hell you do in the Library?"

"Read."

"Oh. What the hell for?"

"It was learning to communicate."

"Oh."

The shadows pacing O'Reilly and the La'anahan had ventured nearer and O'Reilly made out the familiar heft of Sgt. Vitello and, taller, leaner, an unfamiliar figure in snappy military uniform.

"Let me, sergeant." A brisk brushing-aside voice.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Lieut. Wayne, U. S. Army." Far as O'Reilly could make out, the lieutenant seemed a personable though somewhat eager-beaverish young man, gravely enjoying the urgency of the emergency. "Sgt.—?"

"Vitello, sir."

"Sgt. Vitello and I are a liaison team. Now, this thing has already killed one person, besides doing thousands of dollars damage. Our job is to stop it before it kills anyone else and before it does any more damage. Now, you've been with it nearly two hours, officer. What can you tell us? What is it?"

"It's a being from another world."

"Hmm. You sure of that? Sure it isn't a Commie trick?"

"I'm sure. Listen, get my—"

"What does it want?"

"It wants to feed on humans."

"It what?"

"Wants to feed on humans. It needs a source of what it calls life energy."

"Well, you tell it the Army means business. Unless it surrenders unconditionally we'll wipe it out, hear? Even if it takes an atomic warhead to do it. I'll wait if you have to translate that."

"It understands."

"Fine. Then if you'll steer it to the command car around the corner—" His mouth flapped open as O'Reilly and the La'anan continued on toward Grand Central. "See here, where are you going?"

"To the subway. Listen, get my—"

But the lieutenant was speaking into a walkie-talkie that

O'Reilly only now noticed. "The alien is disregarding the warning. It is proceeding east, toward the subway entrance at Grand Central. . . . I'll find out, sir." To O'Reilly he said, "Why the subway?"

"We're heading home."

"Hmm. And that's downtown, I suppose." O'Reilly nodded. "It would be. If we could only get it, say, out in the wilds of the east Bronx—"

"That wouldn't do any good."

The lieutenant was insultingly forbearing. "We could run it down with tanks, you see, or lob shells at it."

"That still wouldn't do any good."

"And why not?"

This was like discussing ways and means of dispelling a ghost—with the ghost in question listening in.

"It crossed space in its own body."

"So?"

"So it can soar above any try at running it down, it can ward off any bombarding."

"Hmmm." Into the mouthpiece, "Did you get that, sir? . . . Well—"

While the lieutenant was talking Sgt. Vitello seized the opportunity to say, "O'Reilly, what you been trying to tell us?"

Blessings on that flat, beet-red face. "Get my wife and son—" That was all that streamed out;

the La'anahan had turned the tap.

"What about your wife and son?"

Get my wife and son away.

"What's wrong, O'Reilly? What you trying to say?"

Get my wife and son away.

"Why'n't you answer?"

Get my wife and son away.

"Your wife and son—you afraid of what it might do to them? That it?"

O'Reilly couldn't answer by speaking. But if he didn't telegraph it there might be another way of answering. He closed his eyes so the La'anahan would not see the streetscape bobbing—and nodded.

"Aha. And you want us to get your family away?"

His head was a balloon trying to contain too much pain. The La'anahan was thinking blow after blow in blind frenzy. The pain would end if he opened his eyes. He held them shut and nodded again.

"Watch it, O'Reilly."

His shoulder struck something hard, something real as you could want, and his eyes flew open. They were nearing the crossing of Madison Avenue and he had run into the light standard at the corner. He would have reeled but for the La'anahan's hold. As it was, the throwing awry of his weight wrenched his arm.

The slight pause brought the detached shadows closer yet. Too close.

A blending of anger and hunger, and it was O'Reilly's turn to call out. *Watch it.*

But the words did not sphere out in the air and the detached shadows did not get the message of danger.

THE LIEUTENANT was looking at him and saying into the box, "No, sir, the poor guy still can't speak." There was an absent kindness in his gaze, as if he had written off O'Reilly. "You're getting his home address from Centre Street? . . . Hmm. That will be quite some job, sir, to evacuate the whole housing development." He squinted, consulting his wrist. "I have 2105 hours, sir." And he began to say something else when the box shot from his grasp like wet soap as the La'anahan whipped-wrapped his arm.

At the same moment the La'anahan paid out another part of its form to entangle Sgt. Vitello. It fed the lieutenant to the shrouding projection and in the following moment he was a discarded husk. O'Reilly sensed a feeling of pleasure that evoked in him a feeling of horror. The La'anahan was beginning to rope in Sgt. Vitello.

Without thinking it out,

O'Reilly thought to the La'anahan, *Wait. You want to see through the eyes of my wife and son, don't you?*

Yes. I am more than ever anxious to gain insight into human relationships. I absorbed more life energy this time. Earth seems very promising.

Damn you. Damn Sgt. Vitello, too. What was he getting his family into on that book-of-rules bastard's account? *Then let him go and I'll tell him to countermand the warning.*

The La'anahan released Sgt. Vitello, as someone with a sweet tooth might forgo an éclair now for a torte later.

If the sergeant had moved far enough away, instead of dazedly remaining within reach of the La'anahan, O'Reilly would have broken his word. But since things stood as they did he said bitterly, "Listen, I got it to let you go by promising you'd see my wife and child remain home. Don't warn them. Leave it for me to handle when we get there."

Sgt. Vitello, too shaken to show it just yet, mechanically picked up the walkie-talkie, rattled it tentatively, and spoke into it. "Hello? . . . No, sir, this is Sgt. Vitello. The thing got the lieutenant the same as that woman. . . . No, O'Reilly's still okay. He's able to talk again. Says not to warn his wife, he'll take care

of that when they get there. I don't know if he's got something in mind and he's speaking for himself—or if the thing's making him say that."

Have you something in mind, O'Reilly? Going to bring the thing home, O'Reilly? Even after seeing and sensing what happened to the lieutenant? It may not be too late to try to scream out a countermanding of the countermanding.

They left the sergeant behind and O'Reilly did not try to cry out.

HE WAS not aware of the rest of the way. One minute of consciousness he was at the corner of 42nd and Madison, the next minute of consciousness he was at the subway entrance.

In between, if the La'anahan was tuning in and not rubbernecking at the misty buildings in the neon haze, it was receiving confused musings. Who was O'Reilly to take it on himself to shape fate? Leave it to the big brains who would be working on this right now. Who was O'Reilly to rebel against the writing off of Ptl. Roger O'Reilly? Who was O'Reilly to jeopardize his family with a mad scheme? At that point the in-between ended.

They descended. The change booth was empty. A spilling of tokens glinted. The labyrinth

was empty and silent. They passed through a gate instead of through a turnstile and it seemed to O'Reilly they were passing through another sort of gate, winding through a horn, for he sensed the banshee keening of sirens on either side of silence.

As he descended, the La'anahan cascading beside him, he kept his eyes on his shoes. He did not look toward the tracks. Trying to shield what he intended, he willed himself not to perceive the fact that the platform ended abruptly and that there was a drop to the tracks. He willed himself to perceive that the platform continued on. He wharfed it out in his mind.

Just before he turned his head toward the edge of the platform he closed his eyes and visualized it as extending some three feet further. He kept his eyes closed, still holding the image.

If the La'anahan kept moving, the unreal platform would betray it. It would fall and strike the third rail.

The belaying would take O'Reilly too. That was the hard part, not thinking of the searing flash that would kill him too.

The La'anahan kept moving. They went over the edge.

IT MIGHT have been an abyss. Surprisingly, he had time to feel himself one with all—not only

with Maria and Billy but with the frightened young man who had escaped, the tight-mouthed woman who had not, the plodding Sgt. Vitello, the patronizing lieutenant. The love of the first two and the bravado and stubbornness and stickling and vanity of the others were his—and changing circumstances made them petty or noble, foolish or wise, changing reality. His flesh was shrinking from the reality of impact, just as he had always felt his spirit rebelling against the demeaning label average. He knew now he was uncommon, unique, like everyone a wondrous combining of atoms such as never was in all the time and space that had gone before, such as was not otherwise elsewhere existing now, such as never would be again in all the time and space to come. Unique—but, like everything unique, expendable in the sight of eternity. Something you can write off—but unique. And even as he felt himself relinquishing his selfhood, felt his individual temporal oneness merging in the fullest communion with the host of onenesses in an eternal flow, he thought triumphantly, *That's who I am!* and made ready to receive the searing flash.

There was no searing flash. He was still living. His heart seemed to be congealing, but he was still living. The La'ana-

han fell, its form spilling across the third rail, but nothing flowed through it to O'Reilly, who had landed sprawling atop it, but its own pulsating. The La'anahan might have been made of insulating material.

After a moment the La'anahan floated up from the tracks and back upon the real platform, bearing O'Reilly with it. *Interesting. I imagine I will do a certain amount of blundering until I perceive your world clearly.* Playing cat-and-mouse?

A rumbling. Gaudy lights burning deep in darkness. O'Reilly somehow got to his feet and stood unsteadily. Thundering and screeching, a train pulled in. The first car was empty save for the motorman and two soldiers with bazookas. The second car was empty, the third and the fourth.

The train was moving and they were on it. The disappointing outcome had taken all the starch out of O'Reilly. He sat numbly, swaying like some bit of homeostatic equipment. After a time of blankness he caught himself humming *Moritat* and wondered vaguely at the perseveration. He had gambled and lost. The paying up and the knowing what he had staked would not bear thinking of.

Not too surprisingly it was easier to take in happenings on a larger and remoter scale. He

found himself envisioning, though he could not tell whether it was through his own imagining or through some sensing of the La'anahan's planning, all Earth one breeding pen for a living embodiment of Minotaur-Cetus-Orc-Dragon. And he pursued this vein of thinking until it too would not bear thinking of.

His awareness went outward and he realized the train was not only snailing along but was making the most of the local stops. Although the doors did not slide open and although there was never anyone waiting on the platforms the train idled a good five minutes at each stop. What were they readying at the other end? What *could* they do?

HIS STATION.

Hissing. Almost automatically he looked around for Sgt. Vitello, knowing as he did so he was being foolish and that it was the doors reluctantly hissing open.

He needed an effort of will to overcome inertia and get going, to cross the abyss between threshold and platform. And then, abstractedly hearing his steps ringing on the concrete, not connecting the sound with himself, he was covering the block between exit and home.

Street lamps were swinging two monstrous shadows back and forth. Glistening pavement

was washing along two monstrous reflections, washing them along waveringly, with the moiré effect of one screen overlapping another.

His mind crossed the walk ahead at a run, disappeared from his field of vision, shot to a sixth story window where a light would be marking Billy's room. Poor kid. The window to the right of Billy's was his and Maria's. Maria. Was she there?

If the man in charge had disregarded what O'Reilly told Sgt. Vitello—to let Maria and Billy be—and had informed her of approaching danger and had not evacuated her with the others but had left it up to her, would she stay on to be with O'Reilly in his bad time? And, if she stayed on, would she keep Billy there or send him away? He didn't know.

He didn't know her any more. She was baffling, a stranger. Then did it follow she no longer knew him? These two had come together, had their moment, then had gone on, tracing in their crossing an X, the unknown.

The diverging had begun with the cumulative exasperations of living a soul-stifling life, with him taking out on her his anger at his sergeant—which anger in turn now seemed a surrogate for anger at himself. Then quarreling, then quarreling and not bothering to make up, so that

all that remained was not even bothering to quarrel—and then they would be stonily apart as the lions Patience and Fortitude.

And now he was at the housing development and gazing wonderingly at the grim disposition of helmeted and green-denimed troops armed with flame-throwers, bazookas, and mortars.

A circus, really. They might have been clowns waiting in the wings to go on, waiting to go into the kind of sad slapstick that makes you laugh. He looked up. There should be trapeze artists. Sure enough, police helicopters whirled under the Big Top.

He felt the twinings of the feeler tighten about his wrist and he turned on the La'anahan more in futile rage and outrage at its perseity, at its daring to be, than in fear. For in the blurred world in which he was moving he was on the verge of convincing himself it was all remote, unreal, a dream—and the La'anahan had ended his dream abruptly as a hangman's noose an ejaculation.

He wakened to the cloying smells of gas, oil, rubber. And familiar home seemed all at once a nightmare shape thrusting through fire and brimstone.

As he passed into the central court his eye fell upon a group standing off to one side, some of

them personages he knew from pictures in the papers—the mayor, the police and fire commissioners—, the others a constellation of top military brass. A few nodded at him encouragingly. And that set him to pendulating between believing and despairing. He had a feeling they were watching him with that absent kindness as if they too had written him off. He couldn't blame them. Hadn't he in effect written off Maria and Billy?

Maria and Billy. He felt suddenly lost.

Once you were in the circle of buildings there was nothing to distinguish one from the others. Without the numbers over the entrances you were lost in a maze, if you got turned around. It wasn't that, however, that gave him the lost feeling. It was the surrounding troops with their unavailing flame-throwers and bazookas and mortars. If that was the best they could do—

His gaze shot to a sixth story widow. Light burned through a cut-out rectangle. But that didn't have to mean anything. Almost every window in the development blazed, and he could tell by the vacant blazing, the lack of human shadows, that the tenants had gone. So that one light didn't have to mean Maria and Billy were still home.

SWEET DREAMS

He looked back at the VIP group, almost lost now in shadows. They gave him no sign, or at least he was unable to read any.

He made for the building in which that all-important light burned.

The wet runs streaks of green down the building and across the walk. The green comes from the oxidizing of the copper flashing. Funny, a copper leaf turns green—that ashtray in the shape of an oak leaf he had made in school during shop period as a Father's Day gift for a father who had not lived to receive it—and a green leaf turns copper. Had Billy been working secretly on something to give *him* this coming Father's Day?

Poor kid, a sickly green tinging the high color of his face. Was that the last memory O'Reilly would have of him?

AT THE ENTRANCE O'Reilly glanced up at the night sky. The moon was a pale, almost invisible blur in the neon mist. In the offing a tug was mooing. Somewhere out there La'anahan was making Algol wink at some cosmic jest.

Entering, he thought of the six tiring flights. Would the La'anahan fit into the elevator? No harm in trying. It was a tight squeeze. He pressed the button. The inner door did not

slide to. He looked to see if something of the La'anahan was wedging the door open. No. He stared impatiently at the flight of buttons—and realized with a start that he had pressed not the sixth floor button but the first. He pressed 6 and the door slid to and they rose.

He was angry with himself until he realized something more. The La'anahan had not corrected him. He sensed it had been unaware of the slip. What did that prove? That because O'Reilly thought he had pressed the right button the La'anahan thought the same? If so, was that a weakness of the La'anahan's, an inability to discern the real workings of the human mind, to know when the unconscious was bossing the conscious?

No time now for wondering about that. As the elevator rose so did his fear. His heart sank as the elevator reached 6.

As they moved down the corridor he vaguely noted through open doors signs of hasty flight. His own door was closed.

His door key was in his right hand pants pocket. Because of the La'anahan's restraining hold he had to reach around with his left hand, like a contortionist, and fumble under his crackling raincoat to get at it. At last he had it and he unlocked and opened the door.

Silence. The only light was

that overflowing from Billy's room into the hall.

Unwillingly O'Reilly moved along the hall toward the light. The room this side of it was his and Maria's. He peered in.

Even before his eyes began adapting to the gloom, even before his ears caught the almost inaudible breathing, he knew.

Maria.

On the bed in the darkness lay the still form. He wondered angrily how she could be sleeping so calmly.

He had been hoping against hope, hoping whoever was running the show had evacuated Maria and Billy with the others. But the man in charge had left them to be goats staked out for a tiger.

Billy moaned.

The moaning seemed to have wakened Maria as the noise and confusion of evacuation had not. The pale blur of her face rose and the pale blur of her hand moved out and turned on the bedlamp.

IN THE sudden light there seemed to O'Reilly something strange about the room, but at the moment he had eyes only for Maria. He edged forward to shield from her eyes as much of the La'anahan as he possibly could.

When they were making out and she cared enough she could

be something to see; right now she was a sight. She sat up, threw back the covers, and swung her feet to the floor. Fretful, sleepy, untidy, she knuckled the dark half-moons under her eyes.

He found himself thinking, "I never noticed before; her hair is beginning to gray." A wave of sadness and tenderness washed over him and he had an impulse to reach out and touch the gray gently.

It took a moment for her eyes to accommodate to him in the doorway and in that moment her eyes seemed to be returning from some region far beyond the four walls, as though they had been out seeking escape from drab reality. And he was suddenly seeing her rebelling against cramping rooms, against the squeezing of bills, bills, bills. By the time he paid out his allotments and dues of all kinds she had to do some stretching to make their \$66 monthly rent.

She glanced briefly at the bedside clock. Her eyebrows semaphored surprise. Roger was early. "Something wrong?" She stood up, her toes feeling for her slippers, finding them, squirming in. Then she saw the La'anahan. "What's that?"

"Now, be calm," he said, trying to be calm. "Whatever you do, stay quiet."

She stared at the thing. "What is it?"

"It's—well, it's a being from another planet."

A long pause. "Oh? Just what planet is your friend from? Maybe I know someone there."

He told her.

"No, I'm afraid I don't know anyone there," she said after giving it some thought. She threw on her robe. "No, really, what is it?"

"What I told you. A being from another planet."

"Chuckle, chuckle." All at once the flippancy flopped. She belted her robe savagely. "Damn it, O'Reilly, I'm in no mood for games. Billy's moaning."

If he knew her at all, she was ready to fling past them out of the room. He said, desperately, "Wait." She waited, her fingers restless on her hip. "Listen to me, will you? This is no persiflage."

"A being from another planet?" she said. He remained silent and she said, still more disbelievingly, "A being from another planet?"

That didn't sound right. The words came stumblingly. She was an actress going up in her lines. She was acting a part. She had known the thing was coming and she had stayed. Why?

Now he knew what had been troubling him since entering the apartment—slight, scarcely per-

ceptible shiftings of the furnishings. They had bugged the place. This was their first chance to study the La'anahan. And no doubt they had asked her to kindly play for time.

And now that he knew, the La'anahan knew. Wasn't it about due to become impatient? Or was it so sure of its invulnerability that it was willingly—gloatingly—playing along?

"Okay," he said wearily. "You can stop acting. Why in the name of heaven," he said with more spirit, "didn't you leave? They told you I was bringing danger, didn't they?"

"Why didn't I leave?" she echoed dumbly. "Yes, a colonel came and said there was some kind of danger, he couldn't say or wouldn't say exactly what. I wanted to grab Billy and run. The colonel told me I could if I wanted to. But he said that *you* said for us to stay. I figured you knew what you were doing."

That's a laugh. O'Reilly know what he's doing? Don't you remember? O'Reilly doesn't know enough to curb a seven-year-old's gluttony.

IT MIGHT have been the thought of gluttony that made the La'anahan choose to take over at this point.

Love and family appear to involve basically simple relation-

ships. Simple, but exceedingly energy-dissipating. I am afraid I shall have to frown on them for all but breeding purposes. And without transition, I have done with you for now.

And like lightning in reverse all the probing ends withdrew and the feeler unwound. Before he could warn Maria he saw the La'anahan bracelet her wrist and plunge the probe into her arm like an intravenous tube.

Then Maria was gazing at him as if she were seeing him for the first time—and in a sense she was, for through her eyes the La'anahan received its first glimpse of him. O'Reilly stood rooted in horror, imagining the terrifying sensations Maria must be experiencing.

A mad thought came to him. His Colt .38. If he were to turn it on Maria, Billy, and himself he would at least cheat the La'anahan of their life energy. Perhaps if every about-to-be victim did the like—or had it done—the La'anahan would give up and go away.

He never knew if he really would have carried out this mad thought. For even as it was coming before his board of censors Maria was free and the La'anahan was moving along the hall toward the spill of light and there was one over-riding thought.

Billy.

O'Reilly and Maria acted as one—uprooted themselves, ran after the La'anahan.

The bedside lamp—a grinning panda—was glowing. Billy had an unreasoning fear of the dark. Billy stirred and frowned in his sleep, as if the noise of their entering had set an unpleasant chain of thought to rattling. A plaintive whimpering.

Billy. Billicum.

The La'anahan groped, found Billy's wrist, and attached itself.

O'Reilly turned Maria's face away. He gripped her shoulders hard. In an intense whisper he said, "Go. Leave the building. They'll take care of you downstairs."

She heard him but made no move to go. It would be useless to say it again. He held her more tightly.

He gazed over her head at the make-believe characters cavorting on the wallpaper. Then a lack of movement where movement had been forced his attention back to the bed. The La'anahan seemed to have settled for a good long look through Billy's eyes. Either that, or some form of paralysis had frozen it, stopped its pulsating.

It remained that way for a chilling moment, then with blinding suddenness it broke contact.

Whoosh! It shot through the

ceiling, through the roof, with a velocity that left a clean edge to the hole it made. It disappeared so swiftly that save for the hole O'Reilly could have convinced himself it had never really been.

LOOKING UP as if from the bottom of a well at the stars, he breathed deeply, almost rolling the air on his tongue in delight. He turned quickly to gaze at Maria, who seemed lost in wonder, too. Then he took off his raincoat and tented it over the bedposts at the head of the bed to shield Billy from the mist that blew down.

"I'll move him," he said, "as soon as I get hold of myself." He showed her his hands. They were shaking.

She said, echoing her first words after giving birth to Billy, "Is he—all right?"

As if on cue, Billy moaned.

Gently, O'Reilly turned the boy slightly and the moaning stopped. "He's all right."

Hissing.

O'Reilly closed his eyes and grinned—wryly. "Sgt. Vitello." He opened his eyes and there was the beet-red face peering around the jamb.

"What happened? Something flew up too fast for us to tell what it was. They sent me to find out was that the thing."

"It was."

"Is it gone for good?"

"So I believe." O'Reilly smiled as Sgt. Vitello emerged and crossed himself. "If it ever gets back to its home planet it will forget all about Earth except that Earth is an unpleasant place for it to stay."

"Why'd it go?"

Why *had* it gone? O'Reilly's new sense of awareness came to his aid. "Well, Sergeant, I believe it went through an exceedingly terrifying physiognomic experience. Here it had begun to orient itself toward objects in the external world semantically, perceiving without affective overtones other than the particular cultural coloring of a language—"

"Cut the double-talk. What happened?"

"—and then, suddenly, just when it thought itself on solid ground, it plunged into the metaphorical abyss of a dream world—and what was even more dizzying, of a child's dream world. The crucial point, Sergeant, was that it didn't know the child was dreaming. It thought what it was seeing was real."

"All right, wise guy. See how far that kind of talk will get you when you fill out your report." Sgt. Vitello seemed a bit dazed, as if he didn't quite know what to do now. He fidgeted, getting madder in the face. An

inspiration. He barked, "Well, what are you waiting for?" O'Reilly looked blank. "It's all moonshine over the lake now. C'mon, you still have an hour to put in at the Garden." In the moment of silence that followed, Sgt. Vitello seemed to be hearing the echo of his words. His face turned beetier and he said hastily, "Ah, forget it." And he turned to leave. He turned again in the doorway without pausing and nodded at them without quite meeting their eyes. "See you."

Cu. Copper. Why, the ductile, malleable old softy. He had to work hard at being rough and tough to keep from mother-henning all over the place.

O'Reilly and Maria exchanged smiles. Then O'Reilly, trying not to disturb Billy's sleep, transferred him to the bed in their room. Maria softly pushed back the hair sticking to Billy's damp forehead. She kissed him lightly and moved back.

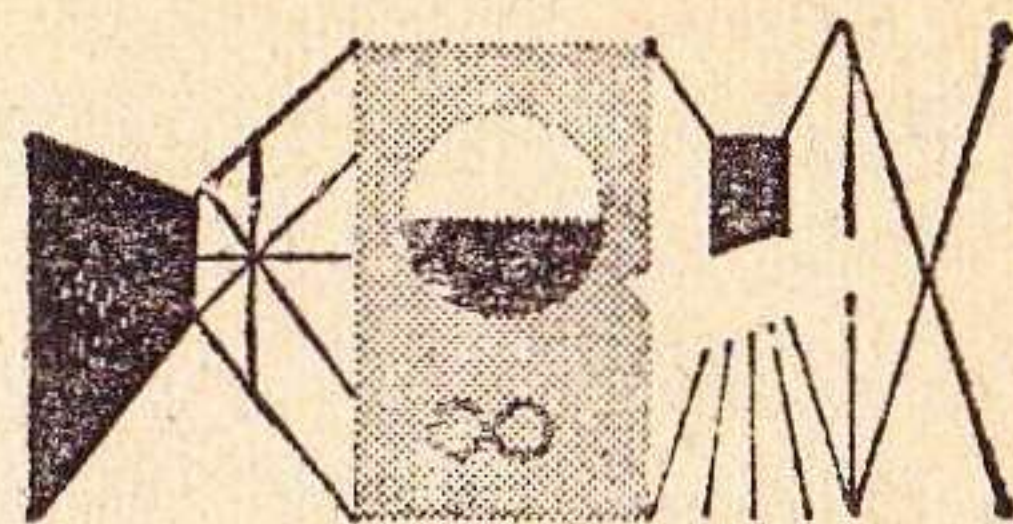
The mirror caught her eye. She went pale. "Oh, how terrible!"

"What?" O'Reilly asked, scared. He turned to the window, thinking the mirror was reflecting something outside. Had the La'anahan, cat-and-mousing, returned after all?

He saw nothing but misty night and swung back to Maria.

(Continued on page 109)

Infinity's Choice



by DAMON KNIGHT

THE SHORES OF SPACE, by Richard Matheson. Bantam, 35¢.

Richard Matheson is a prim young man whose talent is usually submerged in an indiscriminate creative gush. Like most of his generation (as Algis Budrys points out in a recent article), he has no sense of plot; in each story he puts together a situation, carries it around in circles until he gets tired, then introduces some small variation and hopefully carries it around some more, like a man bemused in a revolving door. His stories sometimes reach their goal by this process, but only, as a rule, when there is no other possible direction for the story to take; more often they wind up nowhere, and Matheson has to patch on irrelevant endings to get rid of them. "Blood Son," "Trespass" and "The Curious Child" are botches of this kind. Other, slighter stories such as "The Funeral," "Clothes Make the Man" and "The Doll That Does Everything" are almost as weak, but are saved by Matheson's impudence.

Except for whimsy, Matheson's dramas are all domestic, not to say banal, and their hero is almost always Matheson himself. He has a profound interest in the trivia of his daily life and in his own uninspired conversation, which he reproduces without irony. (" 'Oh, my *God*, it's hot.' . . . It's your imagination . . . It's not hot . . . It's cool. As a cucumber.' 'Ha . . . What a month for driving . . . I'm done on one side. Turn me,' " and so on, and so on.) At its best, by sheer honesty and intensity of emotion, this kind of thing turns into art, as in "The Test," Matheson's harrowing story of an old man losing his grip on life. "Steel," although it is built on a creaking sports-pulp plot and an even creakier set of robots, achieves tragic stature.

At its worst, Matheson's bare natural style, with its corner-drugstore vocabulary and inflections, is thin and dull. Apparently realizing this, he makes frequent efforts to jazz it up; I would lay odds that he owns and uses a thesaurus. He cultivates George Meredith's

"he said" avoidances: "the little man asided," "Marian sotto voiced," "he dulceted." He has a sure touch for the gaudy sol-ecism ("Another right concaved his stomach"; "The Count bi-carbonated"), for the unnecessary word ("unwanted garbage"), and for unconscious anatomical humor:

Across her face, the hot wind fanned bluntly, ruffling the short blonde hair. (Page 1.)

He blinked away the waves of blackness lapping at his ankles. (Page 3.)

His coarse guttural (sic) tongue sounded unnatural in his frail body. (Page 83.)

As for the science in his stories, the less said about it by Matheson the better. When he sticks to one implicit assumption (euthanasia in "The Test," or the one survivor of atomic war in "Pattern For Survival"), his work is often compact and witty. The Earth is apparently about to be destroyed by collision with a flaming comet in "The Last Day," but Matheson never articulated this nonsense, he merely shows you the red horror in the sky; with hardly any effort you can forget it and concentrate on the astonishingly effective prig's-eye view of doomed humanity.

When, on the other hand, he feels obliged to expound the

science background of a story, the results are pitiful. ("That clinches it!" he said. 'Mars has two-fifths the gravity of Earth. They'd need a double heart to drive their blood or whatever it is they have in their veins.'")

Like many another talented writer, Matheson got into this field more or less by accident, found that it paid, and never bothered to learn its basic techniques. It's hard to know whether to be more grateful to him for minor masterpieces like "The Test" and "The Last Day," or more annoyed by the piles of trash he has left us to wade in.

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TALES FROM THE WHITE HART, by Arthur C. Clarke. Ballantine, 35¢.

The writer of these tall tales appears in his familiar book-jacket photo as a grim and terrifyingly intelligent gnome, all spectacles, complicated wrist-watch and intent eyes. In person, he is a large pink man, downy-thatched, with the friendly and diffident air of a new chick. The real Clarke is doubtless more complex than either, but there is more of Mr. Peepers in him than of Odd John. These stories, ingenious and amiable, are the schoolmasterish jokes of a man whose first thought is to instruct; his second is to apologize for presuming.

All fifteen of the stories are

loosely framed as anecdotes told over tepid beer, usually by a British Munchhausen named Harry Purvis, in "the White Hart"—really the White Horse, the London pub where for a number of years British sf writers and their satellites gathered. Clarke's focus is almost always on the gadget rather than on the people: a process for extracting uranium from sea water, suitable for use on billionaires' pleasure craft; a phony iceberg off the coast of Florida; a Hollywood zap gun that really works. There's a touch of Wodehouse in some of the stories, others are reminiscent of Dunsany or of John Collier; but in spite of their wry endings (a physicist falls out of an interesting anti-gravity field and becomes a meteor; a wife who talks incessantly is defenestrated, i.e. pushed out of a window), the dominant effect is one of good-humored mildness. The stories are all minor by intention; some of them are entirely too flimsy, but most of them are good fun.

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THE HUMAN ANGLE, by William Tenn. Ballantine, 35¢.

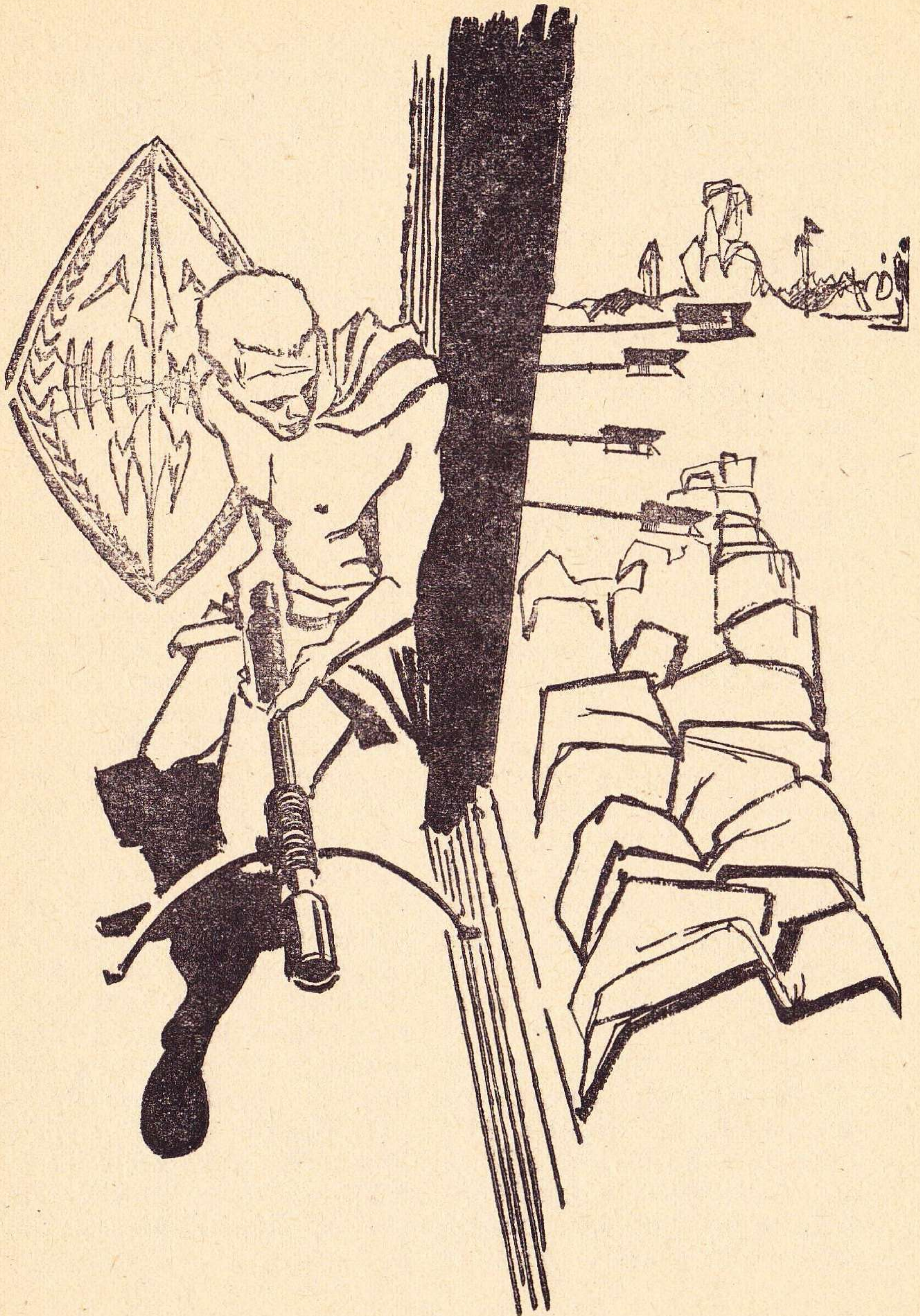
William Tenn is a brilliant and jittery writer, whose Machiavellian subtlety with himself seldom allows him to get close

enough to his subject to let his real talent show. The products of compromises with compromises, most of these eight stories are almost desperately commercial—bright and harsh, full of tense mannerisms, verbal tics, posturings, lampshades on the head. Only when he relaxes occasionally does Tenn produce a genuinely funny story like "The Discovery of Morniel Mathaway"—a bitingly good-humored satire about time-travel, fame, and fifth-rate Village painters.

"The Flat-Eyed Monster" is an agreeably bitter parody of the old boy-girl-bug-eyed-monster triangle. It's made up entirely of comic-book cartoon images, but this visual element is uncommonly vivid for Tenn.

"Project Hush" and "Wednesday's Child" are perfunctory pot-boilers; neither has a single believable character in it; neither has "The Servant Problem," which stretches one good gimmick almost interminably. "Party of the Two Parts" turns a nice ribald idea into a heavy-handed burlesque in the *Galaxy* manner. The last two stories, "The Human Angle" and "A Man of Family" are slick attempts—a corny vampire yarn, and a hideous woman's-slick tearjerker.

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**When on Pru'ut, you
must do as the natives
do—and that includes
dying as they do!**

Rockabye, Grady

by **DAVID MASON**

Illustrated by **TEMPLE**

ON THE CHARTS, it's P-1345-AZ, and a thin blue line marked with cryptic letters indicates that a Mallor Lines cargo ship stops three times in each local year. The Guide will tell you a little more; that it's a small hot planet, covered with fern forests and swamps, and inhabited by one of the innumerable primate-human species of the universe. It was also inhabited, for a while, by one Terran, James Grady.

The natives call it Pru'ut, which, freely translated, means "the world." They refer to themselves as Kya, which means "people." James Grady, being a realist, called it the Mudhole, and added a descriptive adjective or two; but he did not find it nearly as unpleasant a place as a few others in which he had been in the course of forty years of wandering.

Pru'ut has no inclination, and only one season, which is rather like a rainy August on Earth. When Grady arrived, he stepped from the landing stage of the Mallor Lines' *Berenice* into six inches of gluey mud; the sun was seldom out long enough to harden the surface of Pru'ut.

"It's not an easy place," the departing agent, Jansen, told Grady. "Rain, and heat, and getting along with the locals."

"Anything the matter with 'em?" Grady asked. He was watching the tall, yellow-pale shapes of natives loading bales into the *Berenice's* cargo slings.

"Nothing much," Jansen said. "Sane as any primitives. All kinds of complicated rules and taboos, and naturally they'll get as mad as hell at you if you scratch a single rule. Most of the data on that is in the agent's notebooks. You add anything to the record that seems to be worth putting down, the way the rest of us have."

"And if they get mad at you, they stop packing plants," the *Berenice's* mate put in. "Which will make the Mallor Company mad at you, too. This place is a regular bargain basement for drug materials. At least eight different drug plants, all of them worth as much as uranium. More, in some ways."

"Mm." The ex-agent picked up a handful of brown leaves from a table. "This, for instance. It's a distant relation of coca. The natives chew it for fun, but it's the source of a first class anesthetic. And this. If your kidneys ever break down, the doctors use this stuff to keep you alive. Kerosin, it's called. Anyway, you'll find price lists and descriptive material in the files. You've worked for Mallor before, haven't you?"

"Yes." Grady said. "I put in three years on Tengo, in Port City. Then I quit for a while. Had something else to do."

"Oh? What?"

Grady's face cracked into a slight grin. "Little bit of an argument. The Mutiny. I joined the local army, if you could call it that. I had my own gun, so they made me a major on the spot."

"The Mutiny?" The *Berenice's* mate had heard of that brief and savage war, in which a handful of settlers and local militia had beaten off the troops

of a powerful state, and had actually won. The mate hastily readjusted his opinion of Grady upward. A trader's agent was one thing; a man who had fought through the Mutiny was something more than that. The mate opened his mouth to ask more of the story; but the *Berenice's* air-horn cut him off with a long wail.

"Take-off in twenty minutes," the mate said, as the noise subsided. "You ready, Jansen?"

The ex-agent nodded, and shook hands with Grady. "Good luck," he said, and started for the ship, the mate following.

"Yeah," Grady said, closing the door of the agency. He had completely put the *Berenice* out of his mind by the time the roar of her departure split the wet air of Pru'ut. He was, in fact, well on his way to settling down as a permanent resident by that time.

A YEAR LATER, the *Berenice* had called twice, and her captain and mate were calling Grady by his first name. He had also acquired a native woman, who, in accordance with one of the innumerable customs, could not call him by name at all. She referred to him as Kotasa, which is a sort of title. He, also in accordance with customs, called her Shallra, which was not her name, but that of her mother.

Grady was also extremely careful not to speak to her mother at all, because of another custom.

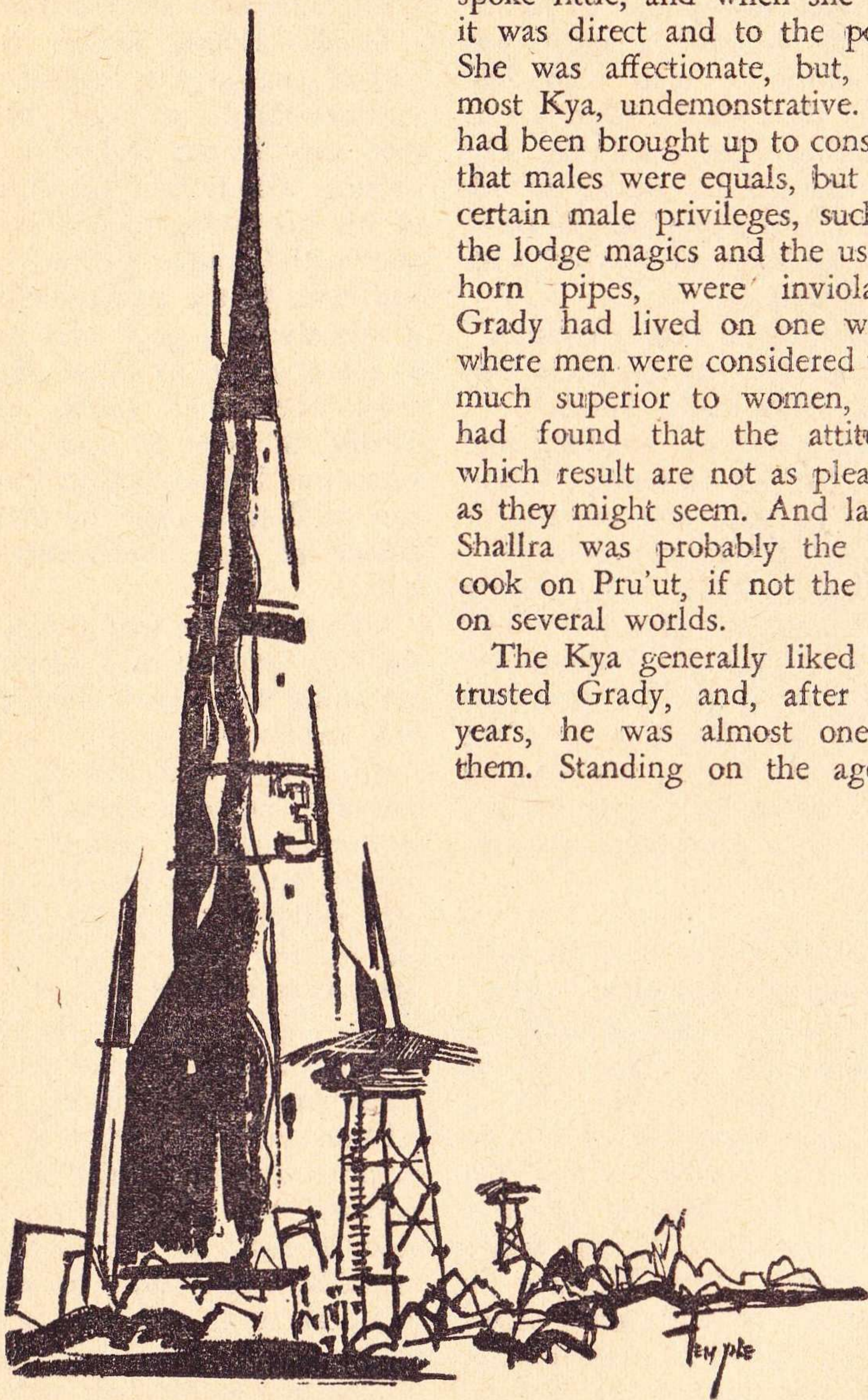
Grady—Kotasa to his wife, and Shassa to the rest of the village—fitted in well, better than any Terran had until his coming. Grady had spent most of his life living in odd places and with strange people; and had come to the conclusion that it was always a good idea to be a conservative by local standards. He could recall, quite clearly, the day he had found what was left of Steynert, who had tried to change the dietary habits of the inhabitants of Kree.

By comparison with the Kree, the Kya were an easy people to get along with. Their lives were not hard, since Pru'ut was a fertile world, and full of food sources. The Kya farmed their garden patches, fished, and hunted, and spent the remaining time gathering plants for Grady and reciting endless and complex genealogies. Grady paid for the plants with goods from the trade warehouse, and listened gravely to the genealogies, making mental notes whenever anything was mentioned that might be of practical use. He did not consider himself as a collector of scientific information; he was a practical man, and he selected information for practical ends.

Shallra was the best wife he

had ever had, and Grady had lived on several worlds. She spoke little, and when she did, it was direct and to the point. She was affectionate, but, like most Kya, undemonstrative. She had been brought up to consider that males were equals, but that certain male privileges, such as the lodge magics and the use of horn pipes, were inviolable. Grady had lived on one world where men were considered very much superior to women, and had found that the attitudes which result are not as pleasant as they might seem. And lastly, Shallra was probably the best cook on Pru'ut, if not the best on several worlds.

The Kya generally liked and trusted Grady, and, after two years, he was almost one of them. Standing on the agency



porch, in the weak sunlight, he seemed to have acquired the same yellowish skin and lean face, and he was dressed in the same loose kilt. Shallra came out to stand beside him, and they looked like any other Kya.

"The sun," she said gravely. "There will be a dance tonight."

Grady nodded. "Like to see it," he said. "The dance, I mean."

"It is for men," Shallra said. "Koor," she pointed at the sun, "is a god belonging to men. The women dance when the sky clears in the night."

"Men's dance, eh?" Grady said, sucking on his pipe. "You're probably right about it's being all right for me to go. But I'd better check with the Chief anyway."

He started down the log-paved walk, toward the Chief's house on the other side of the village. He could see it clearly at the far end of the long, muddy street, but it was necessary to walk along a twisting detour, rather than directly toward it. There was an acre of ground in the center of the village, filled with crumbling, empty huts, and no Kya walked through this ground. It belonged to Sa'ahah, whose ghost walked in a wide circle around the hut where a jealous rival had speared him in his sleep.

The house was the usual Kya

affair, on tall stilts, with painted signs on its facade, but much more elaborate as befitted the Chief's position. He was Anla-Who-Speaks-for-the-Ancestors. There were several other kinds of chief, but it was Anla whom Grady consulted before trying anything in the least unusual. Anla sat on his porch now, regarding the sun through slitted eyes.

Grady greeted him in proper form, and Anla returned the greeting, rising and bowing.

"Is there any reason why this person may not attend the dance of Koor with his brothers on this night?" Grady asked.

Anla thoughtfully pulled his lower lip; then, nodding, he said, "No, there is no reason not to."

Then Grady made the mistake. He made it in full view of Anla's mother-in-law, who sat peering balefully out from her special room in the corner of the Chief's house; and of Anla's wife, and of his wife's innumerable relations, who were clustered on the porch. When Grady saw their silent staring, he looked down at his feet, and he saw what it was that he done. Anla saw it too, and the two men looked up again, and at each other, very gravely.

GRADY did not say he was sorry. It would have been of

no use whatever. Nor did he point out that the sun came out so infrequently that his mistake was one which could be excused. Among the Kya there are very few mistakes which can be excused, and stepping on the shadow of a chief is not one of them.

Neither did Anla make any reference to the long friendship between them, because there would have been no point in doing so. Anla's eyes grew darker, and the wrinkles at their corners deepened, but his words were calm, the correct words for such a time.

"Your name was Shassa," Anla said. "You have broken the ghost-cloak of the Chief, and your name cannot be Shassa. From this place and this time I take back your name, Shassa, and you have no name."

Grady did not say anything, because a Kya cannot hear the words of a man without a name; besides, there was nothing to say, though a great deal to think about. The *Berenice* was due in four days. Four days during which a man without a name would have to avoid the custom which decreed that such a man must be killed. Killed as soon as possible, because each day he continued to live was a day which must be removed from the calendar, a day on which no man's birth date might be

celebrated, or any animal killed for food, or any root taken from a garden.

Grady turned, and walked slowly, with a stiff back, down the path away from the Chief's house. To run, or to show fear, would be fatal; the Kya were themselves in a state of shock at the thing which had happened, and it would be an hour or more before they began to prepare for what they had to do. Therefore, Grady held his spine straight, feeling a cold spot between his shoulderblades where the first iron-headed arrow might strike in.

Ahead of him, through the village, the silent children ran on light feet, darting into the houses and out again—the children, who were the bearers of news. He saw three of them dash toward the agency, and enter it; and in a moment, as he came up the path, Shallra came out on the porch, carrying a clay pot in her hands.

"You who were Kotasa," she said, "take this, and drink it to free me of your name."

It was the standard form of divorce among the Kya, and if the eyes of Shallra had not been bright with tears, Grady might have slipped. He took the clay pot, but he did not drink, because he could smell the faint and bitter odor about it, which was not the odor of the fruit

wine that it should have held.

"Why?" he asked her, quietly.

"Because it is an easier death than the knife and the arrow," she said, and added, "When you were Kotasa, you were—a good man for me. Drink the wine." She said it pleadingly. He shook his head.

"I am sorry," Shallra said, and there is nothing harder for a Kya to say. But she added something even harder for a Kya woman to say; his name, his proper name, which she had always known but could never use. Then she walked away, and out of Grady's life, because he was now a man without a name.

He set the pot down carefully on the agency's steps and went inside. As he closed the door, there was a high, whistling noise, and a sharp thud against the door planks. He did not need to look to know that an arrow stood in its wooden panels.

GRADY closed the heavy wooden shutters carefully, not even jumping when a second arrow whickered through the last shutter as it swung. He lit a table lamp and took the heavy, seldom-used rifle from the wall. He did not need to check it; he had oiled and cleaned it once a week for two years. Instead, he laid it on the table and took a book down from a shelf.

"General Code of the Federation Authority," Grady read the words on the spine, and opened it. "Extent of responsibilities of individuals on mandated planets . . ."

Under the circumstances, Grady discovered, he could kill any number of Kya if he were so inclined. The Authority would require a full report, in quadruplicate, of the circumstances—and as another arrow struck the door, Grady wondered wryly who would make out that report.

Also, Grady was not in the least inclined to kill any Kya. If doing so would have saved his life, he would have shot any number of them without any particular qualms. But there were no reasons at all to think that killing any of them would do Grady any good. And Grady thoroughly understood why it was that they had to kill him. He was no more angry with the Kya than he had been with the Imperial Guards, five years before, when they had come up Kanno Hill with their band playing and their bayonets gleaming. He could remember how military and colorful they had looked, in comparison to the overalled, grimy rabble who stood beside him; and how they had come up that hill again and again, fewer of them each time, and the band losing a bit of

verve on the last. Grady's anger then had been at the damned fool, whoever he was, who ordered those useless charges; and his anger now was with himself, because it had been his own mistake.

There was a growing murmur outside the agency. The villagers were gathering in the street, and in the yards behind the building. There was no way out now, and nowhere to go if there had been a way out.

Grady got up, and walked to the door. He opened the sliding panel a crack and peered out.

The rain had begun again, and through its thin gray curtain he could see the ranks of villagers, silent, standing around the house, along the railings, and watching. The men stood in front, each holding his weapons, his bow bent in his hands. There was Lahrsha, who had been brother in the Lodge to Grady, and whose blood had been mixed with his to seal the tribal bond. There was Ahl, whose small son Grady had nursed through a bad week. There were Grady's friends and neighbors and brothers, each with an arrow on the nock for Grady.

"It's a queer thing to happen," Grady said to himself, aloud. The sound of his own voice startled him; he had become so much a Kya that to him

a man without a name should not have a voice.

The arrows struck oftener now. Grady saw a small group of men move away, and then return, carrying a short log.

The door, Grady thought. They'll break it down, and come in, with their grave faces and their polite ways, and they'll cut my throat. And it won't matter if I kill one or two or ten of them; they'll do it anyway. They won't hear an argument, because they can't hear me at all, without a name; they won't even hear any noise I make when they finish me off.

The log had begun to beat against the door, with a steady thunder. Grady opened a cabinet, and took out a jar of brown liquid. Quickly he drank it and sat down, his face graying. His head fell forward on his arms, and the book of regulations fell to the floor, atop the unfired rifle.

THE *Berenice* swung outward, riding home to port with an empty hold. The Mallor Company would not be pleased, but there were other jobs. And the mate, sitting across the mess-room table from James Grady, put the matter in its simplest terms.

"Just one of those things," the mate said. "You can't be blamed. They'll take another

agent without any fuss, I imagine."

"No doubt of it," Grady said. "Can't say I'm glad to leave, though. It was a good place."

"I still don't get it," the mate said. "We came in and found you in the agency, out cold with coca. The door was down, and arrows all over the place. Why didn't they come in and dig a knife into you?"

"Customs and taboos," Grady said. "I took a chance on it, but I was pretty sure I was right. Common sense—by their standards. Man's asleep—his ghost is walking around. If you kill him in his sleep, you free his ghost, which is very bad, very strong magic. So you have to wake him up to kill him. And they couldn't wake me up; I was full of that coca leaf, enough for a week."

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Sweet Dreams

(Continued from page 96)

She was flinging a comforter over the mirror.

"That's a special glass. There's a camera pickup in back of it. It just now came to me what a sight I must look to all of them out there."

"Woman," he said weakly, "don't do that." He suddenly put his hand on her shoulder and said, "Know what?"

"No, what?"

They laughed.

"I love you."

A new light came into her face. Silently they looked into one another, too happy for laughter. They were speaking the same language.

Billy moaned and awakened. He sat up, rubbing away what the sandman had sprinkled.

O'Reilly looked at Billy, looked at life going on, and an almost terrifying tenderness surged through him. He swept the boy up in his arms and held him fiercely. Then he loosened the hug and said quietly, "Did we wake you, son?"

A child is at his most angelic when he's just leaving the waking world and when he's just coming to. Billy smiled and his father didn't notice the lack of wings. "That's all right, daddy. I'm glad you did. I was having an awful nightmare."

∞ ∞ ∞



EVEN

***It only takes one man
to destroy a pacifist
Utopia—if he has a
gun, and will use it!***

by CHARLES A. STEARNS

THE HENNA-HAIRED young man with the vermillion cape boarded Stephen's vehicle on the thirty-third air level, less than two whoops and a holler from a stationary police float, by the simple expedient of grappling them together with his right arm, climbing over into



STEPHEN

Illustrated by EMSH

the seat beside Stephen, and allowing his own skimmercar to whisk off at a thousand miles an hour with no more control than its traffic-dodging mechanism afforded.

The peregrinator was barbarically splendid, and his curls showed the effect of a habitual

use of some good hair undulant. More to the point, he had a gun. It was one of those wicked moisture rifles which can steam the flesh off a man's bones at three hundred paces. Quite illegal.

He smiled at Stephen. His dentures were good. They were stainless steel, but in this day

and time that was to be expected. Most of his generation, in embryo during the last Blow-down, had been born without teeth of their own.

"Sorry to inconvenience you, Citizen," he said, "but the police were right on my brush that time. Please turn right at the next air corridor and head out to sea."

And when Stephen, entranced, showed no inclination to obey, he prodded him with the weapon. Prodded him in a most sensitive part of his anatomy. "I have already killed once today," he said, "and it is not yet eleven o'clock."

"I see," Stephen said stiffly, and changed course.

He might simply have exceeded the speed limit in the slow traffic stream and gotten them arrested, but he sensed that this would not do. A half-memory, playing around in his cranium, cried out for recognition. Somewhere he had seen this deadly young man before, and with him there was associated a more than vague unpleasantness.

Soon the blue Pacific was under them. They were streaming southwest by south at an altitude of eighty miles. Stephen was not terrified at being kidnapped, for he had never heard of such a thing, but there was one thing that did worry him. "I shall be late for work," he said.

"Work," the young man said, "is a bore."

Stephen was shocked. Work had always been the sacred principle of his life; a rare and elevating sweetness to be cultivated and savored whenever it might be offered. He, himself, had long been allotted alternate Thursday afternoons as biological technician at Mnemonic Manufactures, Plant No. 103, by the Works Administration, and he had not missed a day for many years. This happened to be one of his Thursdays, and if he did not arrive soon he would be late for the four-hour shift. Certainly no one else could be expected to relinquish a part of his shift to accommodate a laggard.

"Work is for prats," the young man said again. "It encourages steatopygia. My last work date was nine years ago, and I am glad that I never went back."

Stephen now felt a surge of fear at last. Such unregenerates as this man were said to exist, but he had never met one before. They were the shadowy Unemployed, who, barred from government dispensation, must live by their wits alone. Whimsical nihilists, they, who were apt to requisition human life, as well as property, at a breath's notice.

Small lightning sheeted in front of their bow. A voice

crackled in the communications disk. "Attention! This is an official air barricade. Proceed to Level Twelve to be cleared."

"Pretend to comply," the young man said. "Then, when you are six or eight levels below these patrol skimmers following us, make a run for it toward that cloud bank on the horizon."

"Very well," Stephen said. He had quickly weighed the gloomy possibilities, and decided that his best chance for survival lay in instant compliance with this madman's wishes, however outrageous they might seem.

He nosed down, silently flitting past brightly painted fueling blimp platforms and directional floats with their winking beacons. To the east, the City lay, with its waffle-like subdivisions, its height-foreshortened skyscrapers, and its vast Port, where space rockets winked upward every few minutes.

"If you were only on one of *those!*" Stephen said feelingly.

His abductor smiled—a rather malicious smile. "Who wants to go to Mars?" he said. "Earth is such a fascinating place—why leave it? After all, only here, upon this exquisitely green, clean sphere of ours can the full richness of man's endeavors be enjoyed. And you would have me abandon it all!"

"I was only thinking aloud," Stephen said.

The smile withered. "Mind your altitude," the young man said. "And try no tricks."

Twenty seconds had passed. Thirty-five . . .

"Now."

Tight-lipped, Stephen nodded, leveled off, and energized the plates with their full, formidable power. They shot past the police stationary, and into the great, azure curve of the horizon at a pace which would have left Stephen breathless at any other time. There came a splutter of ether-borne voices.

The henna-haired young man turned off the receiver.

In an instant there were skimmers in hot pursuit, but the cloud bank loomed close, towering and opaque. Now the wisps of white were about them, and a curious, acrid smell filtered in through the aerating system. The odor of ozone. The skimmer began to shudder violently, tossing them about in their seats.

"I have never experienced such turbulence," Stephen exclaimed. "I believe this is no ordinary cloud!"

"You are right," the henna-haired young man said. "This is sanctuary."

"WHO ARE YOU?" Stephen said. "Why are you running from the police?"

"Apparently you don't read the newspapers."

"I keep abreast of the advances in technology and philosophy."

"I meant the tabloid news. There *is* such a page, you know, in the back of every newspaper. No, no; I perceive that you never would allow yourself to become interested in such plebeian goings-on. Therefore, let me introduce myself. I am called Turpan."

"The Bedchamber Assassin! I knew that I'd seen your face somewhere."

"So you *do* sneak and read the scandals, like most of your mechanics' caste. Tch, tch! To think that you secretly admire *us*, who live upon the brink and savor life while it lasts."

"I could hardly admire you. You are credited with killing twelve women." Stephen shuddered.

Turpan inclined his handsome head sardonically. "Such is the artistic license of the press. Actually there were only nine—until this morning, I regret to say. And one of those died in the ecstasy of awakening to find me hovering over her virginal bed. I suppose she had a weak heart. I kill only when it is unavoidable. But so long as my lady *will* wear jewels and keep them on her boudoir dressing table—" He shrugged. "Naturally, I am sometimes interrupted."

"And then you murder them."

"Let us say that I make them a sporting proposition. I am not bad to look upon—I think you will admit that fact. Unless they happen to be hysterical to begin with, I can invariably dominate them. Face the facts, my stodgy technician. Murder is a term for equals. A woman is a lesser, though a fascinating, creature. The law of humane grace does not apply equally to her. It must be a humiliating thing to be a woman, and yet it is necessary that a supply of them be provided. Must we who are fortunate in our male superiority deny our natures to keep from trampling them occasionally? No indeed. 'Sensualists are they; a trouble and a terror is the hero to them. Thus spake Zarathustra'."

"That is a quotation from an ancient provincial who was said to be as mad as you are," Stephen said, rallying slightly, but revising his opinion of the uncouthness of his captor.

"I have studied the old books," Turpan said. "They are mostly pap, but once I thought that the answers might be discovered there. You may set down now."

"But we must be miles from any land."

"Take a look," Turpan said. And Stephen looked down through the clearing mists and beheld an island.

"IT HAPPENS to be a very special island," Turpan said. "The jurisdiction of no policeman extends here."

"Fantastic! What is it called?"

"I should imagine that they will call it 'Utopia Fourteen', or 'New Valhalla'. Idealists seldom possess one iota of originality. This is the same sort of experiment that has been attempted without success from times immemorial. A group of visionaries get together, wangle a charter from some indulgent government and found a sovereign colony in splendid isolation—and invariably based upon impossible ideas of anarchism."

The skimmercarr shook itself like a wet terrier, dropped three hundred feet in a downdraft, recovered and glided in to a landing as gently as a nesting seabird. They were upon a verdant meadow.

Stephen looked around. "One could hardly call this splendid isolation," he remarked. "We are less than five minutes from the City, and I am sure that you will be reasonable enough to release me, now that I've brought you here, and allow me to return. I promise not to report this episode."

"Magnanimous of you," Turpan said, "but I'm afraid that what you ask is impossible."

"Then you refuse to let me go?"

"No, no. I merely point out that the cloud through which we arrived at this island was not, as you noted, a natural one. It had the ominous look of a Molein Field in the making. In other words, a space distortion barrier the size of which Earth has never seen."

And Stephen, looking around them, saw that the cloud had, indeed dispersed; and that in its place a vast curtain of shifting, rippling light had arisen, extending upward beyond sight and imagination, to the left and to the right, all around the circle of the horizon, shutting them in, shutting the rest of the universe out. Impenetrable. Indestructible.

"You knew of this," Stephen accused. "That's why you brought me here."

"I admit that there were rumors that such a project might be attempted today. The underworld has ears," Turpan said. "That we arrived just in time, however, was merely a circumstance. And even you, my stolid friend, must admit the beauty of the aurora of a Molein Field."

"We are lost," Stephen said, feeling stricken. "A distortion barrier endures forever."

"Fah!" the Bedchamber Assassin replied. "We have a green island for ourselves, which is much better, you'll agree, than being executed. And let me tell

you, there are many security officials who ache to pump my twitching body full of the official, but deadly, muscarine. Besides, there is a colony here. Men and women. I intend to thrive."

But what of me! Stephen wanted to cry out. *I have committed no crime, and I shall be lost away from my books and my work!* However, he pulled himself together, and noted pedantically that the generation of a Molein Field was a capital offense, anyway. (This afforded little comfort, in that once a group of people have surrounded themselves with a Molein Field they are quite independent, as Turpan had observed, of the law.)

When they had withdrawn a few yards from the skimmercar, Turpan sighted upon it with the moisture rifle and the plastic hull melted and ran down in a mass of smoking lava. "The past is past," Turpan said, "and better done with. Come, let us seek out our new friends."

THERE WERE MEN and there were women, clamorously cheerful at their work, unloading an ancient and rickety ferrycopter in the surprise valley below the cliffs upon which Stephen and Turpan stood. Stephen, perspiring for the first time in his life, was almost caught up in their enthusiasm as he watched that

fairy village of plasti-tents unfold, shining and shimmering in the reflected hues of the Molein aurora.

When Turpan had satisfied himself that there was no danger, they descended, scrambling down over rough, shaly and precipitous outcroppings that presented no problem for Stephen, but to which Turpan, oddly enough, clung with the desperation of an acrophobe as he lowered himself gingerly from crag to crag—this slightly-built young man who had seemed nerveless in the sky. Turpan was out of his métier.

A man looked up and saw them. He shouted and waved his arms in welcome. Turpan laughed, thinking, perhaps, that the welcome would have been less warm had his identity been known here.

The man climbed part way up the slope to meet them. He was youthful in appearance, with dark hair and quick, penetrating eyes. "I'm the Planner of Flight One," he said. "Are you from Three?"

"We are not," Turpan said. "Flight Two, then."

Turpan, smiling like a basilisk, affected to move his head from side to side.

And the Planner looked alarmed. "Then you must be the police," he said, "for we are only three groups. But you

are too late to stop our secession, sir. The Molein barrier exists—let the Technocracy legislate against us until it is blue in the face. And there are three hundred and twelve of us here—against the two of you.”

“Sporting odds,” Turpan said. “However, we are merely humble heretics, like yourselves, seeking asylum. Yes indeed. Quite by accident my friend and I wandered into your little ovum universe as it was forming, and here we are, trapped as it would seem.”

The crass, brazen liar.

The Planner was silent for a moment. “It is unlikely that you would happen upon us by chance at such a time,” he said at last. “However, you shall have asylum. We could destroy you, but our charter expressly forbids it. We hold human life—even of the basest sort—to be sacred.”

“Oh, sacred, quite!” Turpan said.

“There is only one condition of your freedom here. There are one hundred and fifty-six males among us in our three encampments, and exactly the same number of females. The system of numerical pairing was planned for the obvious reason of physical need, and to avoid trouble later on.”

“A veritable idyl.”

“It might have been. We are all young, after all, and unmar-

ried. Each of us is a theoretical scientist in his or her own right, with a high hereditary intelligence factor. We hope to propagate a superior race of limited numbers for our purpose—ultimate knowledge. Naturally a freedom in the choice of a mate will be allowed, whenever possible, but both of you, as outsiders, must agree to live out the rest of your natural lives—as celibates.”

Turpan turned to Stephen with a glint of humor in his spectacular eyes. “Celibacy has a tasteless ring to it,” he said. “Don’t you think so?”

“I can only speak for myself,” Stephen replied coldly. “We have nothing in common. But for you I should still be in *my* world. Considering that we are intruders, however, the offer seems generous enough. Perhaps I shall be given some kind of work. That is enough to live for.”

“What is your field?” the Planner asked Stephen.

“I am—or was—a biological technician.”

“That is unfortunate,” the Planner said, with a sudden chill in his voice. “You see, we came here to get away from the technicians.”

“I,” said Turpan haughtily, “was a burglar. However, I think I see the shape of my new vocation forming at this instant.

I see no weapons among your colonists."

"They are forbidden here," the Planner said. "I observe that you have a moisture rifle. You will be required to turn it over to us, to be destroyed."

Turpan chuckled. "Now you are being silly," he said. "If you have no weapons, it must have occurred to you that you cannot effectively forbid *me* mine."

"You cannot stand alone against three hundred."

"Of course I can," Turpan said. "You know quite well that if you try to overpower me, scores of you will die. What would happen to your vaunted sexual balance then? No indeed, I think you will admit to the only practical solution, which is that I take over the government of the island."

The officiousness and the *élan* seemed to go out of the Planner at once, like the air out of a pricked balloon. He was suddenly an old young man. Stephen saw, with a sinking feeling, that the audacity of Turpan had triumphed again.

"You have the advantage of me at the moment," the Planner said. "I relinquish my authority to you in order to avoid bloodshed. Henceforth you will be our Planner. Time will judge my action—and yours."

"Not your Planner," Turpan said. "Your dictator."

THERE could be but one end to it, of course. One of the first official actions of Dictator Turpan, from the eminence of his lofty, translucent tent with its red and yellow flag on top, was to decree a social festival, to which the other two settlements were invited for eating, drinking and fraternization unrestrained. How unrestrained no one (unless Turpan) could have predicted until late that evening, when the aspect of it began to be Bacchanalian, with the mores and the inhibitions of these intellectuals stripped off, one by one, like the garments of civilization.

Stephen was shocked. Secretly he had approved, at least, of the ideals of these rebels. But what hope could there be if they could so easily fall under the domination of Turpan?

Still, there was something insidiously compelling about the man.

As for Stephen, he had been allotted his position in this new life, and he was not flattered.

"You shall be my body servant," Turpan had said. "I can more nearly trust you than anyone else, since your life, as well as mine, hangs in the balance of my ascendance."

"I would betray you at the earliest opportunity."

Turpan laughed. "I am sure that you would. But you value

your life, and you will be careful. Here with me you are safer from intrigue. Later I shall find confidants and kindred spirits here, no doubt, who will help me to consolidate my power."

"They will rise and destroy you before that time. You must eventually sleep."

"I sleep as lightly as a cat. Besides, so long as they are inflamed, as they are tonight, with one another, they are not apt to become inflamed against me. For every male there is a female. Not all of them will pair tonight—nor even in a week. And by the time this obsession fails to claim their attention I shall be firmly seated upon my throne. There will be no women left for you or me, of course, but you will have your work, as you noted—and it will consist of keeping my boots shined and my clothing pressed."

"And you?" Stephen said bitterly.

"Ah, yes. What of the dictator? I have a confession to make to you, my familiar. I prefer it this way. If I should simply choose a woman, there would be no zest to it. Therefore I shall wait until they are all taken, and then I shall steal one—each week. Now go out and enjoy yourself."

Stephen, steeped in gloom, left the tent. No one paid any attention to him. There was a

good deal of screaming and laughing. Too much screaming.

He walked along the avenue of tents. Beyond the temporary floodlights of the atomic generators it was quite dark. Yet around the horizon played the flickering lights of the aurora, higher now that the sun was beyond the sea. A thousand years from now it would be there, visible each night, as common to that distant generation as starlight.

From the shadow of the valley's rim he emerged upon a low promontory above the village. Directly below where he stood, a woman, shrieking, ran into the blackness of a grove of small trees. She was pursued by a man. And then she was pursued no more.

He turned away, toward the seashore. It lay half a mile beyond the settlement of Flight One.

Presently he came upon a sandy beach. The sea was dark and calm; there was never any wind here. Aloft the barrier arose more plainly than before, touching the ocean perhaps half a mile from shore, but invisible at sea-level. And beyond it—he stared.

There were the lights of a great city, shining across the water. The lights twinkled like jewels, beckoning nostalgically to him. But then he remembered

that a Molein Field, jealously allowing only the passage of photonic energy, was said to have a prismatic effect—and yet another, a nameless and inexplicable impress, upon light itself. The lights were a mirage. Perhaps they existed a thousand miles away; perhaps not at all. He shivered.

And then he saw the object in the water, bobbing out there a hundred yards from the beach. Something white—an arm upraised. It was a human being, swimming toward him, and helplessly arm-weary by the looks of that desperate motion! It disappeared, appeared again, struggling more weakly.

Stephen plunged into the water, waded as far as he could, and swam the last fifty feet with a clumsy, unpracticed stroke, just in time to grasp the swimmer's hair.

And then he saw that the swimmer, going down for the last time, was a girl.

THEY RESTED upon the warm, white sand until she had recovered from her ordeal. Stephen prudently refrained from asking questions. He knew that she belonged to Flight Two or Flight Three, for he had seen her once or twice before this evening at the festival. Her short, platinum curls made her stand out in a crowd. She was not beautiful,

and yet there was an essence of her being that appealed strongly to him; perhaps it was the lingering impression of her soft-tanned body in his arms as he had carried her to shore.

"You must have guessed that I was running away," she said presently.

"Running away? But how—where—"

"I know. But I had panicked, you see. I was already dreadfully homesick, and then came this horrid festival. I couldn't bear seeing us make such—such fools of ourselves. The women—well, it was as if we had reverted to animals. One of the men—I think he was a conjectural physicist by the name of Hesson—made advances to me. I'm no formalist, but I ran. Can you understand that?"

"I also disapprove of debauchery," Stephen said.

"I ran and ran until I came, at last, to this beach. I saw the lights of a city across the water. I am a strong swimmer and I struck out without stopping to reconsider. It was a horrible experience."

"You found nothing."

"Nothing—and worse than nothing. There is a place out there where heaven and hell, as well as the earth and the sky, are suspended. I suddenly found myself in a halfworld where all directions seemed to lead straight

down. I felt myself slipping, sliding, flowing downward. And once I thought I saw a *face*—an impossible face. Then I was expelled and found myself back in normal waters. I started to swim back here.”

“You were very brave to survive such an ordeal,” he said. “Would that I had been half so courageous when I first set eyes upon that devil, Turpan! I might have spared all of you this humiliation.”

“Then—you are the technician who came with Turpan?”

He nodded. “I was—and am—his prisoner. I have more cause to hate him than any of you.”

“In that case I shall tell you a secret. The capitulation of our camps to Turpan’s tyranny was planned. If you had counted us, you would have found that many of the men stayed away from the festival tonight. They are preparing a surprise attack upon Turpan from behind the village when the celebration reaches its height and he will expect it least. I heard them making plans for a coup this afternoon.”

“It is ill-advised. Many of your men will die—and perhaps for nothing. Turpan is too cunning to be caught napping.”

“You could be of help to them,” she said.

He shrugged. “I am only a technician, remember? The hated

ruling class of the Technocracy that you left. A supernumerary, even as Turpan. I cannot help myself to a place in your exclusive society by helping you. Come along. We had better be getting back.”

“Where are we going?”

“Straight to Turpan,” he said.

“I CANNOT believe that you would tell me this,” Turpan said, striding back and forth, lion-like, before the door of his tent. “Why have you?”

“Because, as you observed, my fate is bound with yours,” Stephen said. “Besides, I do not care to be a party to a massacre.”

“It will give me great pleasure to massacre them.”

“Nevertheless, their clubs and stones will eventually find their marks. Our minutes are numbered unless you yield.”

Turpan’s eyes glowed with the fires of his inner excitement. “I will never do that,” he said. “I think I like this feeling of urgency. What a pity that you cannot learn to savor these supreme moments.”

“Then at least let this woman go. She has no part in it.”

Turpan allowed his eyes to run over the figure of the girl, standing like a petulant naiad, with lowered eyes and trembling lip, and found that figure, in its damp and scanty attire, gratifying.

"What is your name?"

"Ellen," she said.

"You will do," Turpan said.

"Yes, you will do very well for a hostage."

"You forget that these men are true idealists," Stephen said.

"Yesterday they may have believed in the sanctity of human life. Today they believe that they will be sanctified by spilling their own blood—and they are not particular whether that blood is male or female. If you would survive, it will be necessary for us to retrench."

"What is your suggestion, technician?"

"I know a place where we can defend ourselves against any attack. There is an elevation not far from here where, if you recall, we stood that first time and spied upon the valley. It is sheer on all sides. We could remain there until daylight, or until you have discouraged this rebellion. It would be impossible for anyone, ascending in that loose shale, to approach us with stealth."

"It is a sound plan," Turpan said. "Gather a few packages of concentrates and sufficient water."

"I already have them."

"Then take this woman and lead the way. I will follow. And keep in mind that in the event of trouble both of you will be the first to lose the flesh off your

bones from this moisture rifle."

Stephen went over and took Ellen by the hand. "Courage," he whispered.

"I wish that both of us had drowned," she said.

But she came with them docilely enough, and Stephen drew a sigh of relief when they were out of the illuminated area without being discovered.

"Walk briskly now," Turpan said, "but do not run. That is something that I have learned in years of skirmishing with the police."

At the foot of the cliff Stephen stopped and removed his shoes.

"What are you doing?" Turpan demanded suspiciously.

"A precaution against falling," Stephen said.

"I prefer to remain fully dressed," Turpan said. "Lead on."

Stephen now found that, though the pain was excruciating, his bare feet had rendered him as sure-footed as a goat, while Turpan struggled to keep his footing. Between them the girl uncomplainingly picked her way upward.

And then they came to a place, as Stephen had hoped, where it was necessary to scale a sheer scarp of six or seven feet in order to gain a shelf near the summit. He had to kneel in order to help the girl up. Turpan,

not tall enough to pull himself up with his arms, cursed as his boots slipped.

"Extend the barrel of your rifle to me," Stephen said, "and I will pull you up until you are able to reach that overhanging bush. It will support your weight."

Turpan nodded curtly. He was not happy about this. He was never happy when playing a minor role, but he appreciated the urgency of the moment.

Stephen pulled and the Bed-chamber Assassin strained upward. Then he grasped at the bush, and at the same moment Stephen gave a sharp, Herculean tug.

Turpan snatched for the bush with both hands. "Got it," he said, and swung himself upon the ledge.

"Yes," agreed Stephen, "but I have the rifle."

TURPAN, fettered like a common criminal, lay upon his couch in the tent where he had sat not long ago, a conqueror. The powerful floodlight that shone in his face did nothing to sooth his raw temper. Someone entered the tent and he strained in his bonds to see who it was. Stephen came and stood over him.

Turpan licked his dry lips. "What time is it?" he asked.

"It is almost midnight. They have destroyed your rifle, but it

has been decided that, in view of your predatory nature, it would be dangerous to release you again upon this colony. Are you prepared to meet your fate?"

Turpan sneered. "Destroy me, fool—eunuch! It will not change your lot here. You will remain an untouchable—an odd man out. May your books comfort your cold bed for the rest of your life. I prefer death."

Stephen removed the hypodermic needle from the kit which they had furnished him and filled it. He bared Turpan's arm. The muscles of that arm were tense, like cords of steel. Turpan was lying. He was frightened of death.

Stephen smiled a little. He looked a good deal younger when he smiled. "Please relax," he said. "I am only a biological technician; not an executioner."

TWO HOURS LATER Stephen emerged from the tent, perspiring, and found that the revel in the encampment continued unabated even at this time of morning. Few suspected what had been going on in Turpan's tent. These few now anxiously awaited his verdict.

"How did it go?" the former Planner of Flight One asked. "Was—the equipment satisfactory? The drugs and chalone sufficient?"

He nodded wearily. "The character change appears to have been complete enough. The passivity will grow, of course." A group of men and women were playing a variety of hide-and-seek, with piercing shouts and screams, among the shadows of the tents, and it was no child's game.

"Don't worry about them," the Planner said. "They'll be over it in the morning. Most of them have never had anything to drink before. Our dictator's methods may have been cruder than we intended, but they've certainly broken the ice."

"When will we see—Turpan?" someone asked. It was Ellen.

Stephen had not known that she was waiting. "Any moment now, I believe," he said. "I will go in and see what is keeping him."

He returned in a few seconds. "A matter of clothing," he said with a smile. "I warned you that there would be a complete character change."

The garments were supplied. Stephen took them in. The floodlight had been turned off now, and it was fairly dark in the tent.

"Hurry up," Stephen said gently.

"I can't—I cannot do it!"

"Oh, but you can. You can start all over now. Few of the colonists ever knew you by sight. I am sure that you will be warmly enough received."

Stephen came out. Ellen searched his face. "It will not be much longer now," he told her.

"And to think that I doubted you!"

"I am only a technician," he said.

"There are one hundred and sixty-two male high scientists upon this island," she said, coming forward and putting her arms around him, "but only one, solid, unimaginative, blessed technician. It makes a nice, even arrangement for us women, don't you think?"

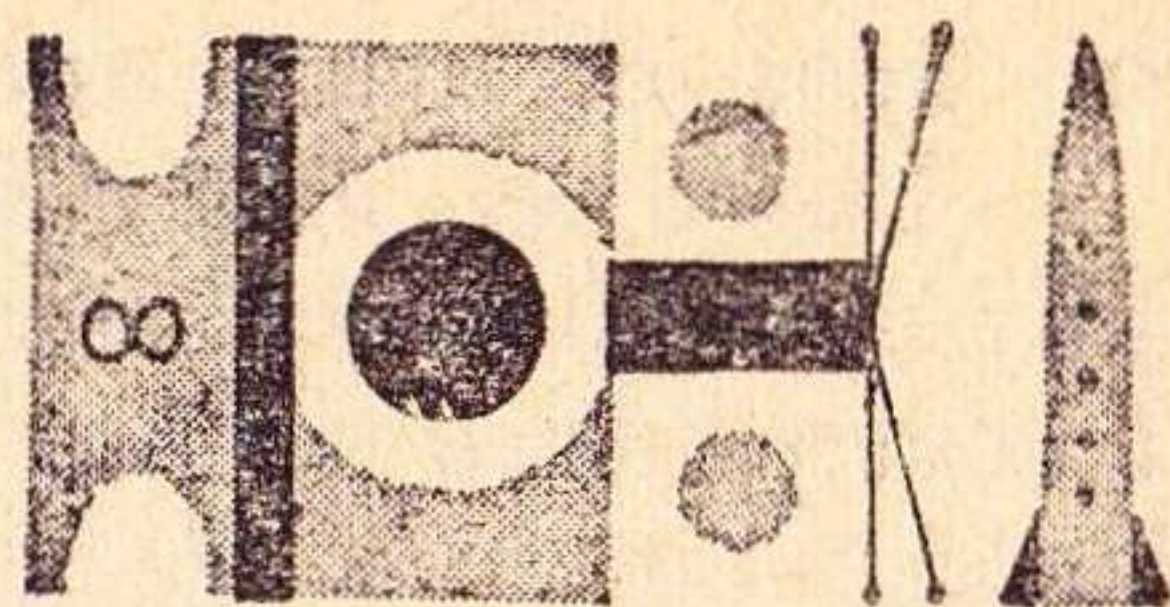
"Even enough," he said. And at that moment Turpan stepped out of the tent, and all of them looked. And looked. And Turpan, unable to face that battery of eyes, ran.

Ran lightly and gracefully through the tent village toward the cliffs beyond. And all along that gauntlet there were catcalls and wolf whistles.

"Don't worry," the Planner said. "She will come back to us. After all, there is a biological need."

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By the editor



BUT IS IT SCIENCE FICTION?

WHEN the manuscript for "The Men Return" by Jack Vance arrived in this office, everyone on the staff was anxious to read it. We all like Vance and regret that he writes so little, so there was quite a scuffle to get first look at this new story—particularly since Vance's agent had assured us in advance that it was extremely off-trail.

After we had read it, the reactions varied enormously. Some of us thought it was the best thing Vance had ever written; the others howled that it should be rejected forthwith. When the confusion cleared up a bit, however, it developed that the "anti" faction didn't think it was a bad story, by any means. They simply insisted that it was not science fiction, but fantasy.

Needless to say, the "pro" faction won out; the story appears in this issue. But none of us is naive enough to believe that the argument is over. We expect a large and vociferous reaction from the readers, and we know those readers will be decisively and righteously divided into at least two sharply defined camps.

I, personally, think "The Men Return" is excellent science fiction. Unusual, yes. Off-trail, certainly. But fantasy? No, definitely not. There is no question in my mind about it; this story is science fiction, and science fiction of the very purest sort.

I admit freely that the objects, the events, and even the characters described in the story bear very little relationship to reality as we understand it. That does not make it fantasy, because the components of the story are not supernatural. Even the supernatural elements in a fantasy story, if it is any good at all, must obey their own laws, must conform to principles that are consistent even though they are not completely believable. And the elements in "The Men Return" are utterly inconsistent, obeying no discoverable laws whatever!

Very well, you might say at this point; so it isn't fantasy—but how can it possibly be science fiction? Well, it can be and is. It is based on science; specifically, on the scientific discovery that on the atomic level matter and energy do not always obey

the laws of cause and effect!

I hasten to admit that the story is only loosely based on this discovery, since science has not found, and does not expect to find, any direct correspondence between the seeming inconsistencies on the atomic level and the complete dependability of known scientific principles in the larger world around us. But given our current state of knowledge of atomic structure and sub-atomic forces and events, any story concerned with these things would have to be "loosely" based. We just don't know enough about how they work to extrapolate closely and tightly how they would work under slightly different circumstances, or what kind of meaning they would have in a world such as Vance proposes.

Strictly speaking, then, Vance is not extrapolating from known scientific principles. He is taking known scientific principles and *guessing* what would happen if they were made to apply in areas where, as far as we know or can deduce, they do not apply at present. He is still, however, supplying his own thoughtful answer to one of those "What would happen *if* . . ." questions that have always been the starting points for the best science fiction stories. And while we like

to claim that our answers to such questions are always based on extrapolation, or logical deduction, if we're going to be honest we should admit that the vast majority of them are based, instead, on guesses. Educated, intelligent guesses, we hope—but guesses none the less.

In the past, a great many writers, editors, critics and readers have attempted to define exactly what we mean when we say science fiction. Some of the resulting definitions have a lot to be said for them, but none of them is completely satisfactory, since none of them completely satisfies anywhere near a majority of the people most concerned with the field. I haven't attempted to write a definition myself, and don't intend to add to the confusion by doing so. I know what science fiction is; it's a fairly large area, bordered on one side by pure fantasy and on the other by realistic stories with some science in them. And I know, to my own satisfaction, whether any given story is or is not science fiction. "The Men Return" satisfies all of my requirements.

But I'd very much like to know whether it satisfies yours or not—and, if it doesn't, where it fails. Will you write and let me know?
—LTS

∞ ∞ ∞

Feedback



I GOT the April 1957 issue of INFINITY today and so far all I read is the letter from Sgt. Billings with which you end the issue. It is all I could read because after I read it, all went black before my eyes.

Do you realize what the man said? He said: "There is an attempt to scoff at religious matters (Asimov's *Foundation*)."

I'm ashamed of you, Larry, letting that pass. MY NAME IS SPELLED WITH AN "S"—ONE "S". (*Even if the whole world disagrees with you?—LTS*)

Incidentally, and seriously, I only scoff at *false* religion which is what some of the *Foundation* stories dealt with. Everyone scoffs at false religion, including the pious. Especially the pious. Read the Bible and see.—Isaac Asimov.

∞

I've been reading science-fiction ever since September of '46, and I consider that I am more aware, inwardly and outwardly, for it. So with me it's a study, and every once in a while something like Asimov's "Let's

Get Together" is written and published, making all the lesser stories I've waded through worthwhile. You know, they fool you—you think "Here's a hot one!" and you begin to read enthusiastically, and the ending may be more disappointing than surprising.

So—thank you, Mr. Asimov!

It's real nice—the whole magazine. Except the brevity of the letter column. I want to know how many of your readers are in my own area, and how am I going to know that if you don't print their letters? It's the one reason why I should pay 35¢ a copy for current stories instead of just searching out second-hand and much cheaper old sci-fic 'zines I missed for the last five years.

I have a little unprofessional artistic talent of my own, and put my watercolor pencil nudes on my own walls, but they are undoubtedly not good enuf for INFINITY. Like Jerry Greene says, Emsh takes top honors!—Ann Chamberlain, 42 Collins Avenue, Miami Beach, Florida.

∞

Although I am, by my own definition, a non-militant agnostic, I feel (perhaps paradoxically, for some individuals) that S/Sgt. Joseph H. Billings' complaints concerning the scarcity of religious values in science fiction are quite legitimate.

Although I am far from an all-inclusive reader, I do keep a check-list of fantasy and science fiction stories which, for a multitude of different reasons, I find interesting. Of the 324 stories which I have listed, *only* 15 have ANY kind of religious background! And, with only one exception (Nelson Bond's "Uncommon Castaway"), all are the product of the last few years, which have brought a belated and much-needed increase in philosophical and literary values to science fiction.

Of course, science fiction writers and readers can hold quite diametrically opposite ideas on the place (and even the worth) of religion in the years that lie ahead, but even I, as a non-believer, find it extremely difficult to believe (as so many science fiction writers do, apparently) that religion will expire from sheer philosophical decrepitude in the future.—Robert F. Duguay, 85 Lafayette Street, Hartford 6, Connecticut.

∞

I enjoy INFINITY almost incessantly—but why must the

subscription copies invariably arrive a week *after* newsstand appearance? Smacks of deliberate sadism, it does! (*Strangely, this letter arrived on the newsstand appearance date of the issue in question. So you must have received your copy about a week early. Some newsstands, however, manage to display copies early, usually through pure carelessness. We can't help that, but we're doing better all the time on the subscription end.*—LTS)

Glad to have Fritz Leiber back; I trust that "Friends and Enemies" is only the first of many new stories by him.

The five best stories from the first six issues? Simple: "The Star" (Clarke), "The Engineer" (Pohl & Kornbluth), "Sponge Dive" (Blish), "Indigestible Invaders" (Knight), "Lower than Angels" (Budrys).

Let's have more Knight and Blish.—Robert E. Briney, 521 B Graduate House, M.I.T., Cambridge 39, Massachusetts.

∞

I am writing this letter to INFINITY concerning the letter by Sgt. Billings in the April 1957 issue. I first shall state that I am in agreement with him concerning the general attitude of S.F. to religion.

Although there are several outstanding exceptions, S.F. writers do not realize that reli-

INFINITY

gion is a basic force in our present day world and it is unimaginable that it will disappear from our lives at any time in the future. Religion—be it Christian, Moslem, Taoist, Buddhist, or any other—gives the individual a reason for existence. It also furnishes man goals for his behavior.

Most of my friends at George School are not fans or even readers of Science-Fiction. I constantly try to win them over, but I find it hard to find stories that really are worthwhile, and that my friends won't tear holes in after they have read them. What the S.F. stories that I read need is a more sensible regard for religion. Here is the main point of my letter—*All that is keeping Science Fiction from being recognized as equal in stature with straight literature is its unrealistic ideas concerning the basic beliefs of living man.*—Roland Hirsch, George School, Pennsylvania.

∞

Mr. Billings makes the usual mistake of confusing the belief in (a) god with organized religion. Personally, I cannot rid myself of the perhaps superstitious belief in God, but I abominate that man-made curse known as organized religion. Here is not the "word of God," but rather some man's interpretation of another man's interpretation

of the "word of God." Certainly no scientist, philosopher, or science fiction writer need support what in many cases borders on blasphemy towards any real god. I certainly wouldn't want to live in those Dark Ages when the Church controlled all thought, and hypocrisy ran rampant among the leaders. And neither would I want a return of the control by the Church. And as a force, Organized Religion, or the Church is, to quote Mr. Billings out of context, "an evil force left over from prehistoric days."

Still it is strange that such a strong believer in God should be blind to sincere treatments of the Christian theology. Arthur C. Clarke certainly did not "scoff" at religion in *Childhood's End*. I showed the book to a friend of mine who is a Presbyterian Minister, and while he personally disagreed over some of Clarke's interpretations, he endorsed the book wholeheartedly. And how could Billings forget Clarke's "The Star" in INFINITY #1? I think Billings is merely quibbling over an out-of-date cliché: that all "scientists" (and thus stf writers) are atheists, and out to prove the Bible false. Still, any person who uses a reasonable amount of logic in his thinking will find it hard to accept many of the Bible's claims, and much of the

current religious propaganda.

So, Mr. Billings, "I *must* protest" your misinterpretations and the manifestations of sloppy thinking so evident in your letter.—Ted E. White, 1014 North Tuckahoe Street, Falls Church, Virginia.

∞

Listen closely!

I was so enthralled by Harlan Ellison's "Deeper Than the Darkness," and the inside illustrations for it, that I'm just going to say it was the best INFINITY so far. "The Case of the Snoring Heir" was typical Arthur C. Clarke—he sure gets around, anyway, so let's try to have a short in every other issue, or two. Like his last, I mean.

That was an awful nice thing that John Butterworth said about INFINITY — magazine of the year. Although I can't quite agree with him, it is one of the best, and really going places. Algis Budrys' "Lower Than Angels" really put INFINITY up to first class, and I know that it will continue to rise.

Anyway, I think that you have

the best letter department of any magazine. Hats off to "Feedback"!—James W. Ayers, 609 First Street, Attalla, Alabama.

∞

Concerning the letter in the April issue of INFINITY from Sgt. Billings. I wish to beg difference about the statement, "The worship of the God of Science." In simple words, there isn't such an animal. Science is a tool and man is its maker and it is he who uses it. A man doesn't worship his hammer, his slave, for that is beneath him. Man only worships things that are bigger than him. I call that God, you may call it what you please. It is silly to mix the two for one is on the right and the other is on the left and you are in between. You can't mix the two, only yourself.

I enjoy your magazine. Keep the stories varied and I will be happy. I have yet to throw away an issue that I haven't read from cover to cover.—A/1C Robert S. Adams, AF28057992, Box 67, Hq Sq 3645th Plt Tng Wg, Laughlin AFB, Del Rio, Texas.

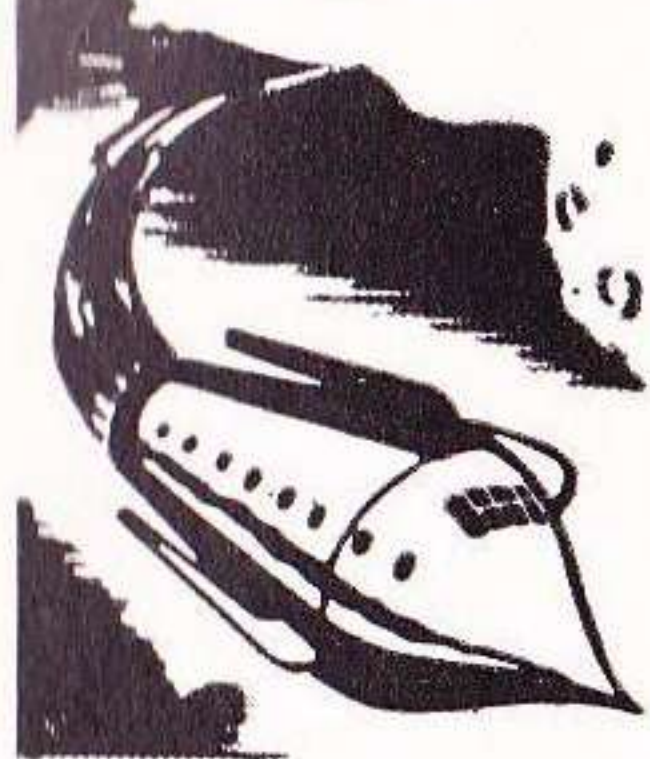
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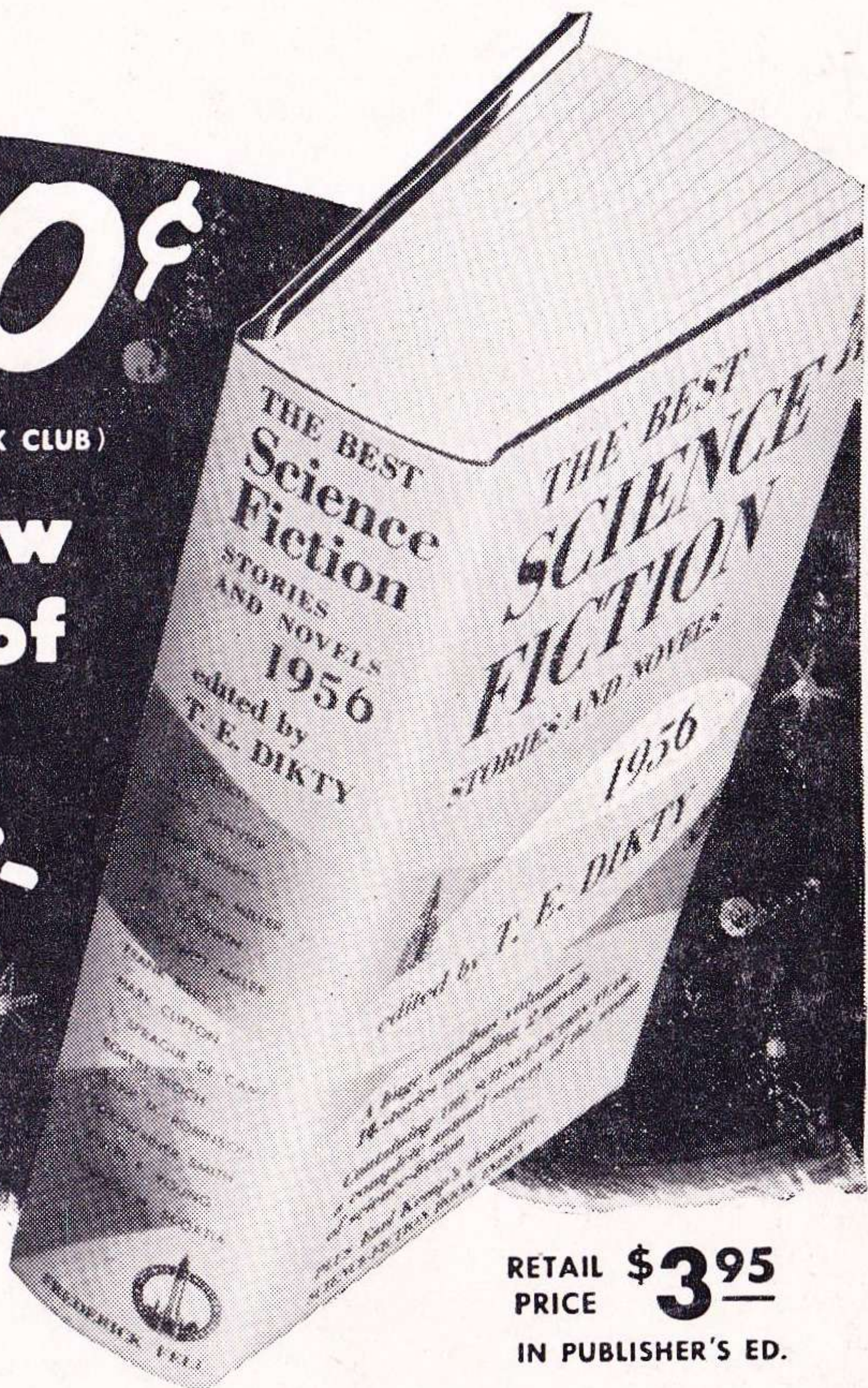
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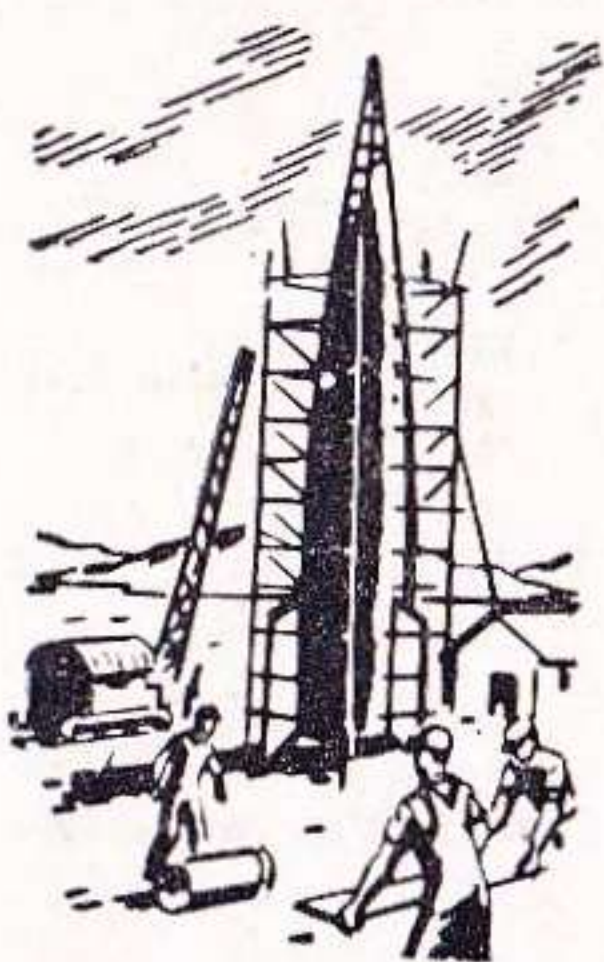
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