Science Fantasy

No.

VOLUM

2/-

Science Fantasy

Vol. 5 No. 15

1955

CONTENTS

Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover by QUINN Illustrations by Quinn and Hutchings

TWO SHILLINGS

In the United States of America, 35 cents.

Subscription rates :

Great Britain and the Commonwealth, 6 issues 13/- post free

United States of America, 5 issues $1.75 post free

Published Bi-monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., DERWENT HOUSE, 2 ARUNDEL STREET LONDON, W.C.2.

Telephone : COVent Garden 1811

Printed in England by Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby 9/55

The policy of having a Guest Editorial each issue has been one that has received popular acclaim and brought many letters from readers. In issue No. 13, however, author Jonathan Burke touched off some spirited replies criticising his remarks about scientific accuracy in science fiction being unnecessary. We feel, therefore, that it is only fair to let some of the readers have their say in the matter.

Dear Editor . . .

Hollywood, California.

I certainly don't agree with Jonathan Burke's statements about the negligible need for scientific accuracy in s-f, for I believe that accurate science can be made most interesting if the factual material is of vital necessity to the story. Accuracy is particularly important when, within the story-framework, an " authority " speaks, as was supposed to be the case in " Mossendew's Martian." Kippax had a reasonably good snapper, but in preparing his snapper he allowed an "authority" to speak these lines : " taken with a flash bomb from the side of the moon we never see—the dark side." No " astronomer " would make that statement, for about astronomy, Astronomers are reality-centred; would always take into consideration the physical facts of the moon which indicate most clearly that there is no " dark side," in the absolute. The side that is not *lighted at the time* is the dark side, and it does not necessarily follow that the side we do not see is the " dark side," for we see all of *A* dark side in a round projection from the first line of light on the first night of any new moon. Eliminating that little three-word tag brings the sentence into the realm of a *creditable statement from an authority* ; leaving it in only invalidates the character as an authority.

This point of valid authority is one that writers must constantly watch. Authority must be presented accurately.

Though Jonathan Burke protests that he is not lamenting over the critic's failure to take Burke's novel seriously, Astronomical science can still prove spectrographically (possibly to Burke's discomfort) that

the air on Mars is unbreathable to *man as we know him and as he is now physiologically constituted.* Spectrographic analysis is not dogmatism. Unless the agile minded author provides a favourable environment through the use of shelter and anti-gravity, *man as we know him* cannot live on Uranus, either.

I hate to seem to pick on Burke, but for me, as a s-f fan and as a s-f writer, a great part of the fun comes from reading and writing about those *impossible* things coming to pass through the application of the principles of the various sciences and through engineering. Far from ruling out sociological problems, these problems are always inherent in a realistically conceived work of sound fiction, and their solutions are no less fascinating than the physical science problems, and both are legitimate springboards for the imagination. S-f is not an either/or proposition; good s-f is a cunning blend of known facts and projections into the future or onto other worlds coupled with and well seasoned with humanistic elements that have been relationally conceived within the framework of the story development.

I have read too many exciting, stimulating and amusing works by my American colleagues to credit Burke's statement on pg. 4 that *there are no human beings in s-f.* It's just not true !

Referring to paragraph 2, pg. 5—Burke ! Part of the *fun* of writing s-f is thinking about the details which you denounce. I find the details challenging; I enjoy the research; I enjoy working into the framework of a whacking good plot (or at least what I hope is a whacking good plot) the accuracies that abound in every branch of every science, weaving them in so that they *don't* sound like copy-book stuff. I adore the mental exercise of projecting my mind into space or into the future to imagine a culture that is at variance with the one we know, and working out that culture so that the elements stick together.

Man must explore himself, and I believe that s-f provides today's most broad and unrestrained stamping ground for this human exploration; however, modern man is inextricably bound up with the physical sciences and part of this cultural examination must be aimed at understanding some of the pressures that the physical sciences place on us. Accuracy helps along that understanding. The casual reader whose science is shaky can not know that the fan who knows his science will sluff off inaccuracies with the realization that not all writers are well schooled enough in the disciplines of writer's research to be accurate; the casual reader is confused and his understanding lessened if s-f is not accurate within the areas of *known accuracy.*

I have recommended books by Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Hal Clement, Nelson Bond, Fredric Brown, L. Sprague de Camp, A. E. Van Vogt, and others of their quality, to friends of mine who are not

s-f fans and who are literally inquisitive and diversified, and the reason why I have recommended these authors is that they blend the elements of sound fiction technique, well rounded characterizations, logical cultural mechanisms and meticulous research within the range of *known* phenomena with the added excitement of far-ranging, lively, projective imagination. These 'intelligent' readers have said almost as a single voice that s-f had sparked their imaginations to reading within scientific fields as the result of their imaginations being directed by fiction to some specific point. I believe this sparking of the interest for the extension of our understanding is one of s-f's great achievements as a literary form, and it is an insult to the reader to ask him to accept this lure to knowledge and then blatantly ignore available knowledge just for the sake of saving a little time on research, plotting, development, etc.

A good s-f writer is a damned hard worker, seriously tackling the craft of s-f writing, trying to bring into his stories as much accuracy as possible and in a manner that takes it out of the copy-book class of injected 'fact.' He doesn't find his medium to be a straight jacket; he doesn't have to use 'types;' those writers whom I know even seem to find that writing s-f is fun. I've seen some evidence that they even enjoy the research.

And what ideas research can give ! I know that I'll never live long enough to develop all the story possibilities that I found screaming at me from a year's collection of *Science News Letters* that I picked up second hand. Every idea a guaranteed dilly; every one based on some aspect of current research that, given a slight push in the direction of future time, would provide a sound framework onto which to hang a tale. There is so much going on in the way of current research in all the sciences that no s-f writer could possibly complain legitimately of limitations. S-f, as I see it, is expanding idea-wise much faster than even the whole Ackerman stable can cope with.

Among the writers with whom I talk I hear no complaints of straight-jackets; none seem to be searching for 'safe' fields. Their sights are up; they're *with it.* Ghosts; space ships; bems; guys and gals; cultural mechanisms; mechanical marvels; general semantics—stars in their minds and their *known facts* aimed as straight as possible into magnificent projections of possibility, improbability and fascination, they're whacking away at this exciting business of writing science fiction.

I believe that facts can be made entertaining, and that known facts are not necessarily a limiting factor—it all depends on the writer.

Helen M. Urban.

Continued on page 5

Gary, Indiana.

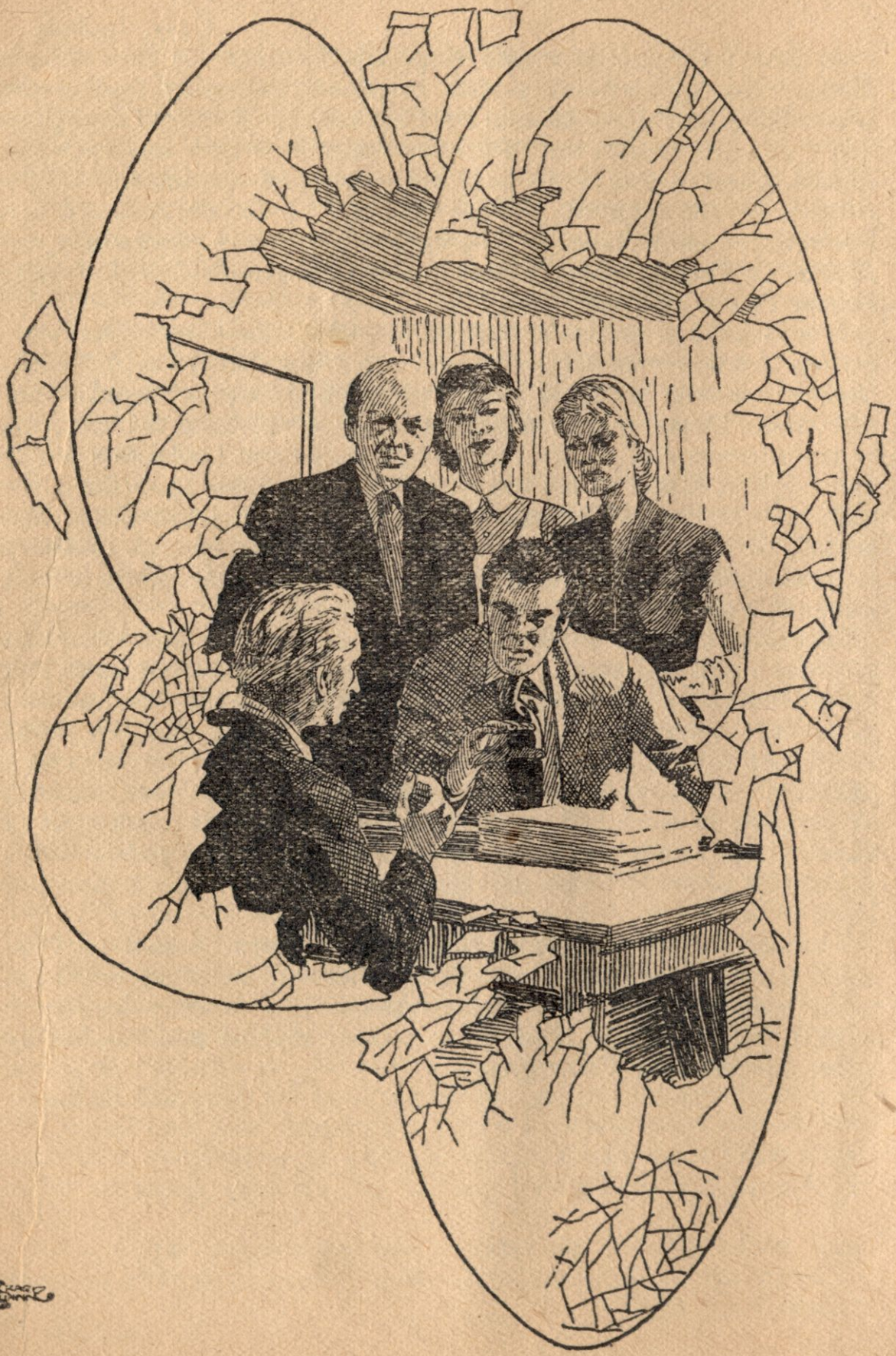
At first I considered myself singularly fortunate to have *Science Fantasy* No. 13 arrive in perfect condition, but, after reading the Guest Editorial I'd just as soon have not seen it. I've read enough of this " take the science out of science fiction " to gain an ill temper. Messrs. Crossen and Tenn have been answered on this side of the Atlantic by the question " *What* science ?" I choose to query Mr. Burke in the same manner. The last story with any science in it was *Mission Of Gravity* by Hal Clement which was serialised in *Astounding Science Fiction* two years ago.

It strikes me as strange to hear about authors spending several years getting together material for a new novel and then to read Burke's lamentations over having to look something up in an encyclopedia once in a while. Does it take such diligent research to discover that extremes of temperature will do an unprotected man harm ? All one has to do is light a match to his finger, keeping the flame there for a few minutes—the charred remains will have little life, I can assure Mr. Burke. If the good gentleman doubts the ability of high pressures to make a man uncomfortable, he could have someone gently lower a locomotive on his prostrate figure.

Similarly, there is empirical proof of any of the difficulties that confront a writer, I think. The sarcasm adds little to this letter, but it does soothe my spirits while illustrating the point that research isn't as difficult as one might be led to believe. The fact that Mr. Burke mentioned equations as not being as enjoyable as stories hints at a mathematical background which should make easy any serious work on his part, so I see little to his statements. Even if this be not so there are magazines meant for the layman (the *Scientific American* is one in this country) which provide an abundance of information and ideas.

I would suggest that those prophesying gloom because of " too much science " first give illustrations rather than nebulous references to insensibilities. It would appear that the field not only *needs* more science, but that it also needs better writing such as could be had by some old-fashioned elbow grease.

Ed Luksus.



Sinclair was a very mediocre artist who never aspired to fame—somewhere, somehow, the final inspiration was always missing. Until one day he found the little egg-shaped charm which apparently changed his life and also the lives of many others. Thereafter he had the touch of genius.

THE TALISMAN

By JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrated by QUINN

I

Sinclair liked to walk in London. He liked to watch the people more than the places; he enjoyed the bustle and the milling thousands that throng its busy streets, letting the feel of this city which resembles no other city sink into his mind.

For everybody comes to London, or so it seems.

So it was that one hot morning in June he went down the Charing Cross Road, looking into the windows of the little shops that sell loud ties and newspapers in every imaginable language and the bigger ones whose shelves are packed with an incongruity of bright paper covers and solemnly pompous leather bindings, mellowed with an age which has lent them an interest they never had when new.

He was stuck with the picture he was working on, and the sudden flaming heat that had overtaken the city, as it often does, without warning on top of a chill and misty May, had driven him out of his flat into the streets scented with hot asphalt, exhaust fumes and many, many people.

He paused irresolutely at an intersection, and then wandered across the road between a taxi and a long American car shimmering

in the brilliance of its sky-blue and chromium decor, towards one of the bookshops with its wares displayed optimistically in open-air shelves. He picked a pocketbook at random out of one of the racks, and was amused to find that the cover was one of his own—part of a job lot of six he had sold last winter when he was almost broke and willing to do anything. He wondered idly if the story behind it was worth reading, or indeed if it had anything to do with the title he had so casually bestowed on his work.

Lady, Mind my Gat, by Chi Slaughter, he read with a wry grin, and put it back where it had come from. Maybe the hack who had received the cover as an assignment had managed to work the scene it depicted into his tale, but he wasn't very interested.

He pushed open the door and went into the cool dark avenues between the bookcases. It was like stepping into a world fifty miles—or years—away. The two or three elderly men in dark suits who were steadily reading their way through books they had no intention of buying looked up at him over the tops of their glasses, dismissed him instantly, and went on reading.

A morose man in shirt-sleeves and carpet slippers with an aged smoking cap on his bald head shuffled out of a dark recess and said, "Can I help you, sir?"

"Thank you," answered Sinclair according to formula. "I'm just looking."

The morose man shuffled away into the gloom, and Sinclair lit a cigarette and began to glance along the shelves. There was a smell of respectability and comfort in here, like a Victorian library, and the books neatly ranged in their cases, however ill-assorted, matched the mood they created. They were mostly tomes too old to be enjoyable and not old enough to be interesting. He found two or three that held his attention for a moment, and then turned to try another shelf.

His eye was caught by a tray of ornaments and bric-a-brac as he did so, and he paused to examine them. They were tidily set out in rows, each with a neat white price-tag attached. Among them was a pair of nice brass candlesticks, but the price was exorbitant and he put them back reluctantly. Then he saw it.

It was roughly the shape of an egg, with the top and bottom flattened. On the upper of the two smooth surfaces so left, a design or inscription had been chased and then—he ran his fingers over it—filled in with some transparent substance. It was made of a lucent iridescent material, like fine mother-of-pearl.

He picked it up. It was a little too heavy for its size, and he guessed it had been weighted with lead, but he could not see a

shadow in its translucency when he held it to the light.

He stood for a moment admiring the changing sheen on its surface, like one of the shreds of rainbow a pool of oil makes on a wet road, and irresolutely looked for the price on the underside. It made him blink a little—it seemed high for so simple an object—but he reflected it was probably hand-made. How an exquisite piece like this wound up in a dusty London shop . . .

He told himself he was probably getting a bargain; he told himself that an occasional extravagance was good for him; but he had the damnedest feeling that if it had cost him every penny he had in the world he would still have bought it; and if it had cost more he would have been sorry to lose it for the rest of his life.

He looked around for the morose man, who shuffled obligingly out of the depths of the shop and accepted payment. While his purchase was being wrapped, Sinclair asked on impulse, "Do you know where that thing comes from?"

The morose man shook his head, and the smoking cap wobbled dangerously. "No idea, sir. Bought it in a job lot at an auction. But it's a nice piece."

"Very nice," said Sinclair warmly—so warmly that the morose man glanced up sharply, wondering if he had cheated himself. He gave change, handed the wrapped object over as if he were still undecided, and made his slow way back into darkness.

Sinclair dropped the package into his pocket, but kept his hand on it as if its presence there were somehow comforting, and left the shop. Outside in the noise of buses and cars he paused before joining the crowd.

It was as if a knot in his mind had miraculously untied itself. The picture he had been working on for three days without success, striving for a special effect, had suddenly resolved itself. He had to do something about it at once.

He made for the Leicester Square underground station.

There was fear there now. It quivered in every line of his body. There was no longer any need to turn his head so that a forced—almost ludicrous—expression of terror could be shown to the watcher. And the heavy scarlet drape that he had lifted hung in solid folds so that one could imagine reaching out to touch its soft velvet surface.

Sinclair breathed a sigh of deep satisfaction. It was a pity it had no better fate than to adorn the jacket of a not particularly distinguished novel. But it ought to sell the book.

He filled a brush with paint and meticulously added the title and

the author's name in misty white letters on the shining red fabric. Then he stepped back and looked at it.

It was good. It was damned good. In fact it was so good it almost frightened him. It . . .

He took a deep breath and suddenly realised that for the past three hours he had been working all but unconsciously. It was as if something had linked the picture in his mind and the muscles in his hand. For the first time he had been able to transfer the thing he visualised to canvas without struggling to create something that merely resembled it, and the revelation had left him a little weak.

And he knew he could do it again—any time he chose to.

For a while he stood in silence, until an entirely physical feeling in his stomach reminded him that he had worked straight through until half past two without lunch. He came to life, cleaned his brushes and palette and put them away, becoming conscious of the heat again as he did so.

The cramped rooms of his little mews flat seemed unbearable for the time being, and he went out into the street whistling Mozart. His right hand went into his trousers pocket, and he found the thing he had bought earlier. He realised he had forgotten to put it on his curio table, and determined to find a place for it on his return.

He went to a little restaurant near the Victoria and Albert Museum for his meal, for it was the nearest place catering for eccentric eaters likely to want lunch at three in the afternoon, and the first person he saw there was Shirley Butler.

She was still beautiful and still unmarried at thirty-nine, and a considerable authority on all matters of art. He remembered the first and only time had met her, when he was an impressionable and conceited nineteen, showing his work at an open-air exhibition on the Embankment.

She had come up to him and looked at his favourite picture with a coolly appraising eye. It was marked hopefully with the price of five guineas. Then she had turned to him and said, "Change that price ticket to read fifty and maybe someone will be fool enough to buy it. You'll never be an artist, but you might be a success."

Since then, he had tried to prove the first part of her judgment wrong, and in so doing had several times shown that the second was wrong too. However, now he had a little money in the bank and a fairly steady line of business. Maybe . . .

A little of the awe he had felt when he first learned who she was returned when he went shyly across the room and said, "Miss Butler?"

She looked up from the paper she was reading and a puzzled expression crossed her face. Then she said, "Oh, hullo! Are you a success yet?"

"You remember me?" said Sinclair in astonishment. "But we only met once—"

"Four years ago. Yes, I remember you. Won't you join me?"

"Thank you," said Sinclair numbly, and sat down. He ordered his food absent-mindedly.

Shirley Butler smiled at him. "But after all, is it so odd that I should have remembered you? You remembered me, didn't you?"

"That's different. You're *somebody*—I'm not."

She shrugged. "It's an accident. Success can be a matter of having the luck to do the right thing at the right time. Some people do it at the wrong time."

He said nervously, "Do you think this would be the right time for me?"

She looked at him closely. "Something's on your mind," she said. "What is it?"

"Miss Butler, I've just done something rather good. It's so good it almost frightens me. It's as far ahead of anything I've done before as—well, as da Vinci is of Landseer."

"And you want me to see it. Is that it?"

"Of course, I'd like you to—if you will. I didn't know you were here, of course, but as soon as I saw you I thought—"

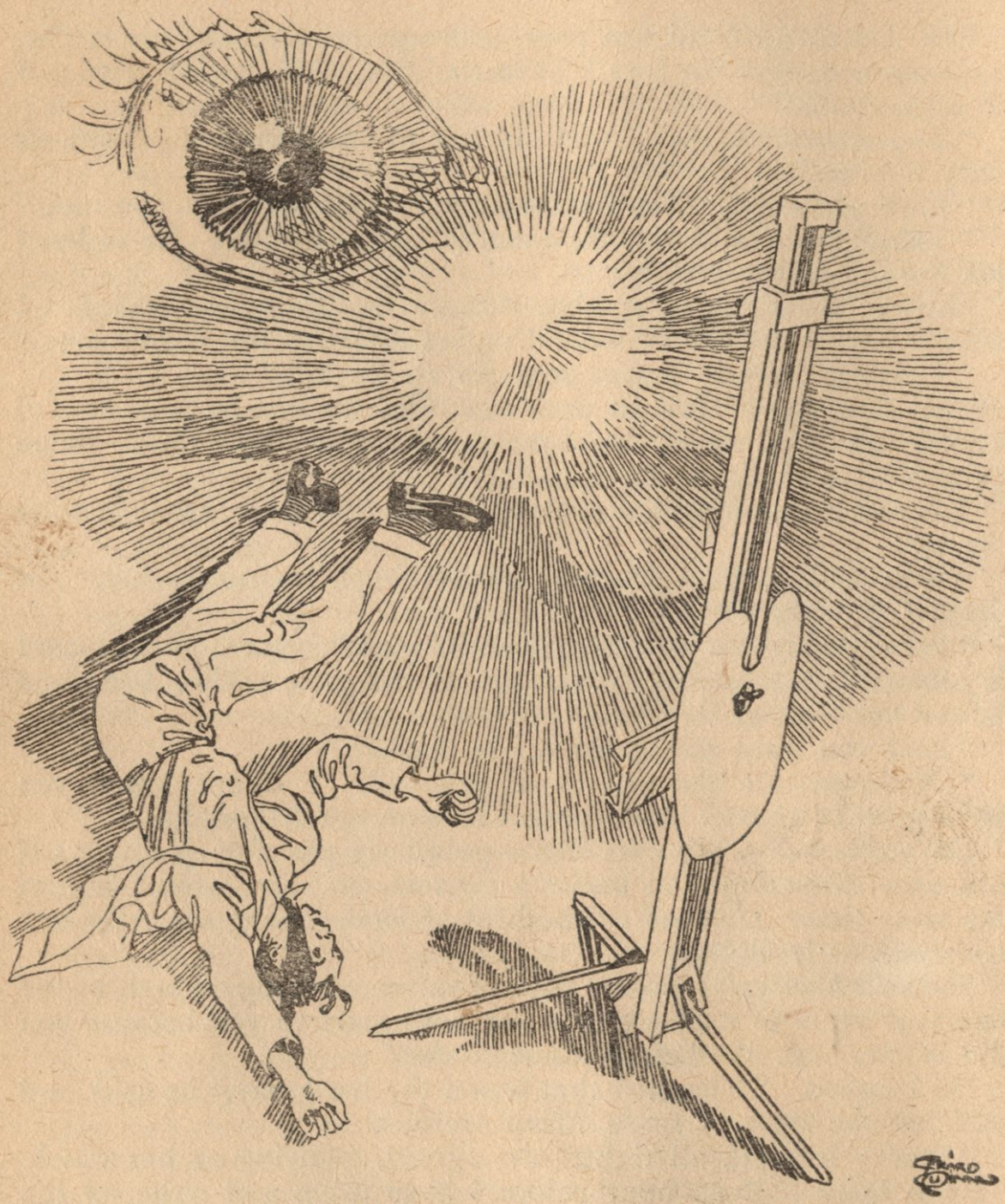
He noticed that her eyes had a peculiarly piercing quality, as if she were dissecting him under a microscope. She looked at him for some time. He took a mouthful of food, feeling absurdly self-conscious as he did so.

She said finally, "I believe you. You've grown up enough in the last four years to realise that what looks good to you because you did it may look like hell to someone else."

He laughed. "I learned that lesson the hard way," he said, and told her the story of *Lady, Mind my Gat.*

"You've learned, all right," she agreed, glancing at her watch. "I can spare half an hour before I have to go and write up the show at the Fleischer Gallery. As soon as you've finished, we'll go and take a look."

She walked into his studio and paused before the picture on the easel, studying it. Sinclair tried hard not to look nervous, and leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets. Once again he found the thing he had bought, and he clenched his fingers round it.



The wait seemed endless, but he came slowly to realise with growing excitement that her frozen immobility did not mean that she was thinking of a polite way to disillusion him.

Eventually she spoke, with a kind of strangled astonishment "That's a *book-jacket*?" she said.

Sinclair said it was, and she went on, "But it's too good! It's one of the most effective compositions I've seen in years. What else have you done lately?"

He showed her. Her disappointment was almost tangible.

"I warned you it was better than anything else I'd ever done," he said, wanting illogically to apologise for his sudden achievement.

"But what's come over you all of a sudden—do you know, I don't even know your name?"

"Davy Sinclair," he said.

"Well, then, Davy, how on earth did this happen?"

"I don't *know,* Miss Butler—"

"Shirley, for heaven's sake!"

"Shirley—I've been working on this for three days and not a single part of it would come right. I had *that*—" he nodded at the picture "—in my mind, and it wouldn't come out. Then all at once, this morning, it was as if something had made a new link between my mind and my hand. I got it all down on canvas as I visualised it—and that's something I'd never managed before."

He swallowed. "It was as if I'd just had an attack of genius," he finished.

"But have you done anything—seen anything—been anywhere —that might have helped you to see it clearly when you couldn't before?"

He was beginning to shake his head, when it came to him. He had been out, and he had bought—

"This," he said, tearing the paper off the thing he had in his pocket.

It was ridiculous to connect his casual purchase with his new-found talent—a case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc,* a confusion of coincidence and casuality. But it refused to be ignored.

Shirley looked at it lying in his palm, glistening and shimmering in the sunlight from the window overhead, and put out a cautious finger to touch it. She said, "Davy, it's absolutely lovely. What is it?"

He laughed embarrassedly. "I'm beginning to think it must be some kind of talisman. I picked it up in the Charing Cross Road this morning, and the first thing that happens to me is—that."

Shirley took it from him and examined it closely. "I wonder what it's made of.

"I don't know. I don't even know what it is or where it comes from. I asked in the shop, but the man didn't know anything about it."

"I think I may be able to tell you where it comes from," Shirley said. She sounded puzzled. "You noticed the design on it?"

"Yes. I thought it was some kind of an inscription."

"Well, as you see, it consists of a circle, viewed at an angle, with a line passing though it. All over India you'll find the poorer classes wearing a little amulet consisting of a wooden ring with a

stick through it. It's a fertility symbol. Of course, basically, it's a stylised depiction of the act of coitus."

"Is it Indian, then?"

"It isn't like anything else Indian I've seen. Its shape doesn't give much clue, either—the World-Egg, if this is a fertility image, is pretty wide-spread. And it's almost too regular to be hand-made."

"It couldn't be some sort of jade, could it?"

"I never heard of a jade quite like that. Look—would you like me to take it to Sayers for you?"

"Sayers the orientalist, you mean?" said Sinclair. He put out a hand and took the object from her.

"No, I don't think so. I doubt if it's worth it. But he's quite welcome to come here and look at it if he wants to, naturally." He laughed, but Shirley answered him quite seriously.

"I think he will when I tell him about it. You realise it's quite probably unique?"

"Is it?" Sinclair looked at it with renewed interest. Once again he felt the sensation of having had to own it, and the compulsion prompted him to ask, "Shirley, do you think there could be a connection?"

She pondered over her reply for a while. Eventually she said, "Well, if the contrast between what you've done today and what you were doing yesterday is anything to judge by, there must be."

"You mean, so to speak, I was so pleased at having found this that it did something to me, and the picture was the result?"

She shrugged. "If you like. Or perhaps it is a genuine talisman. Perhaps it brings luck to its owner." She glanced at her watch. "Heavens, I must be going. But first, let me give you a bit of advice."

"What?"

"Paint out the title on that picture and send it to Fleischer for his next show. You can do another book jacket, but if I'm any judge someone with sense will pay fifty guineas for that painting and like it."

Sinclair felt a heady surge of pride go through him. "You mean that?"

"Would I say it if it wasn't true? I'll see Fleischer and tell him you're submitting it. He'll run it on my recommendation even if he doesn't fall in love with it himself. And Davy—if you do anything else half as good, I want to see it. Here, here's my card."

He took the pasteboard numbly.

"Goodbye, and congratulations."

After a while, he started to chuckle. He put the talisman in a place of honour on his curio table, and carefully expunged the title from the former book-jacket. When he had done that, he sketched an entirely fresh design to replace it, and was delighted to find the idea in his mind flowing freely from his brush. He worked until the light began to decline. Then he put on his one presentable suit and went out to make an occasion of the day.

II

He returned late that night, and was drunk enough to have some difficulty finding the keyhole. When he managed that, he could not turn the key. In exasperation he pushed at the door, which obediently opened.

He tried to remember whether he had locked the door before he came out, but the effort was too great and he decided he must have forgotten. Singing softly to himself, he went inside and snapped the catch.

He stood a little unsteadily at the foot of the stairs and it occurred to him to look at the talisman once more before he went to bed. His feet carried him uncertainly to the landing outside the studio door, where he paused for a moment. Then, changing the tune he was humming into the opening theme from the last movement of Beethoven's Sixth, he went inside and turned the light on.

The melody died in the middle of a note, and he was suddenly as sober as if he had never drunk a thing in his life. The ice-cold hand of fear brushed the alcohol from his brain, and he went swiftly across the room.

After a moment he came back and went into the tiny bathroom next door. The accumulated liquor of the evening drained out of his stomach.

When he had put his head under the cold water tap for a moment, he took a towel and made his way to the telephone to dial 999. When he was answered, he said, "Police, please."

Later: "I want to report a death. My name is Sinclair. I'm speaking from 61, Falcon's Mews, South Kensington. There's a body in my flat. I never saw the man before. J just came in and found him."

After that, he sat down and waited for the fast black patrol car to pull into the narrow court outside. It came in less than five minutes, and he went to the door to let the officers in. Then there was a jumble of uniforms; a half-remembered sequence of questions asked and answered; a grey-haired man in gloves who carried out an examination of the body; sudden bursts of light from the police

photographers; two unobtrusive men in plain clothes who went around testing locks and using an insufflator in a search for fingerprints.

He found himself sitting in an armchair at half-past three opposite a square man in a drab raincoat whose name, he realised, was Inspector Forster, though he did not remember being told so. There was a lighted cigarette in his hand which he could not recollect having begun.

Through the open door he could see two white-coated figures manhandling a long bundle impersonally tied with a length of yellow manilla rope to a stretcher. As they went out, Forster said, "This must have come as a great shock to you, Mr. Sinclair."

Sinclair nodded. He tried his voice and was pleased to find himself able to control it. "I was pretty drunk when I came in, I'm afraid, and it wasn't pleasant."

"How did you know he was dead?"

"I sobered up—just like that—when I found him. I tried his pulse."

Forster nodded. "Was anything missing?"

"I hadn't noticed anything. But I'll just go and make sure. Do you mind?"

Forster answered him by standing up, and together they reentered the studio. It seemed very bare under the harsh fluorescents now that everybody else had left. The first thing that caught Sinclair's eye was the picture of the frightened man, propped up on a table. The second, and it made him empty with loss, was the vacant space left by the talisman.

He gave a stifled exclamation, and Forster sa[illegible] something missing?"

Sinclair nodded. "A sort of egg-shaped piece of iridescent material, rather like mother-of-pearl, weighing two or three pounds, with an Indian phallic symbol on top."

He was surprised to find he could describe it so dispassionately.

Forster started towards the door. "I'll see if they found it in his pockets, but I don't remember it."

He was interrupted by the sound of the ambulance pulling out of the court, and said, "Blast it. I'll have to make inquiries later. Was it valuable?"

"Well, I showed it to Shirley Butler—the art critic, you know—and she said it might well be unique. But how could he have known I had it? I only bought it today—yesterday, rather."

"He must just have come on the off-chance of finding something," said the inspector. "He was probably only a novice, anyway. No experienced burglar would have cracked a crib like this

one. I mean, young artists are seldom rich." He laughed as if what he had said was funny.

"It was certainly the only thing in the place worth taking," Sinclair agreed sourly.

"All right, Mr. Sinclair," Forster went on. "I think you could do with some sleep. You'll hear from us again."

He offered his hand, unexpectedly. Sinclair took it, and then showed him out.

Later, in the by now cold studio, stars twinkling down through the skylight, Sinclair looked at the picture of the frightened man, and remembered the burglar who had lain where he was now standing—a little man with black hair, wearing a dark suit and gloves. He too had died in terror, his eyes open and glazed, his mouth widening in a scream. Had that scream ever materialised?

His mind went back to the talisman. Had the thief come for that? How had he known about it? No, it was absurd—he must just have found the door open and come in, and thought only the talisman worth taking.

He put out his hand and ran his fingers through the place where it had lain, as if he were hoping to feel it where he could not see it. Why had the thief died? Of terror?

What had frightened him, then?

He felt sleepy suddenly, and a haze filled the room. He turned out the light and closed the door on the empty studio—all that much emptier for the taking of the talisman—and went thoughtfully to bed.

III

There were the busy sounds of London at work by the time he awoke in the morning. He rolled over and gazed at the ceiling, letting his body lie relaxed under the single blanket which was all he could bear to cover him in this weather. There had been something last night—some sort of vivid dream—

He swung his feet to the floor, feeling very vigorous and wide-awake, and gazed down at the calves of his legs, flexing the muscles to make hard flat planes of flesh just below his knees. Then he stretched himself, pulled on his dressing-gown, and went downstairs to get the paper from the letter box.

He opened it and scanned it with a sort of subconscious urgency. For a while he could not quite recollect why. There was something—

He threw down the paper and went upstairs to the studio three

at a time, his bare feet slapping the wood. It was exactly as it had been yesterday, except . . .

Except that he had bought something yesterday. Was it the statuette of Aurora? Surely not. Nor the lacquer box.

Maybe it was still the clothes he had been wearing. He went back to the bedroom and looked in all his pockets. In his trousers he found a card which read:

SHIRLEY BUTLER

The Clarion,
Fleet Street,
E.C.4. Phone Central 00993

The train of thought eluded him. It was like trying to catch a fish with his bare hands. The sequence was there, but it was without a beginning. Why had he one of Shirley Butler's cards in his pocket? The only time he had met her had been four years ago.

But this card couldn't be four years old. Therefore he had met her recently.

Once he had got that, the rest followed easily. The picture of the frightened man. The talisman. The dead burglar.

He went to the phone wonderingly, and called the police. When there was an answer, he said, "I want to speak to Inspector Forster."

"What was the name again?"

"Forster. F-O-R-S-T-E-R."

"I'm sorry, sir, but there is no one here by that name. Perhaps I can help you."

"But damn it, man, he was here in my flat this morning. He came about the dead man I found."

"Just a minute, sir . . . What was the name?"

He gave it and waited, wondering insanely if he had dreamed it after all.

"You said you found a dead man in your flat, sir? When was that?"

"Early this morning! Inspector Forster came round with a whole squad of detectives and an ambulance and lord knows what."

"Are you sure, sir?" When Sinclair began to lose his temper, the other said, "All right, sir. I'll check up and let you know. May I have your phone number?"

In a sort of vast empty void Sinclair gave it, without really knowing what he was doing, and then slammed the receiver down. Good God, if it had been a dream after all!

He went over the flat, looking for something to support his

memory, but there was nothing at all, not even a mark left by the intruder. And the absence of the talisman proved nothing.

He stood moodily gazing out of the window, and then, discouraged, went to wash and shave. Halfway through this, something clicked in his mind and he realised that he had at any rate one proof of the loss of the talisman. Shirley had seen it.

Desperately, he phoned her paper, and learned that she could be contacted at the Arborfield Galleries. He rang there, and while someone went to look for her, bit his nails in an agony of frustration lest she too should have forgotten.

Perhaps the whole thing was a delusion. Perhaps he was going mad.

Then he heard her voice say coolly, "Shirley Butler speaking."

"Hello, Shirley. Davy Sinclair here." Did she remember?

"Davy! Is something wrong? You sound awful."

He breathed a shuddering sigh of relief. "Yes, Shirley. Something is very wrong. You remember the talisman I showed you?"

"Of course."

"It's been stolen. And that isn't the half of it. When I came home last night, there was a dead man in my studio. I had the police here, and an ambulance and a doctor, and someone called Inspector Forster. But I rang up just now, and they've never heard of me." Bitterly he added, "I think I'm going crazy."

"I'll be with you in ten minutes," said Shirley, and the receiver clicked.

He dressed hurriedly and was waiting impatiently when a big saloon car that fitted into the mews court with barely room to spare drew up outside. Shirley got out and came to his door.

The first thing she said when he opened to her was, "Let me hear the story."

He told her, at length and in detail, and finished, "Now tell me I was drunk."

"Why?" she demanded. "I believe every word you've told me, and you're the level-headedest person I've met in months."

For that, he wanted to cry. He had seriously doubted his own memory for a while, had come close to believing that his story of the night before had been spun by alcohol from the forces of his imagination, and the cloud of depression which had hung over him lifted the moment she affirmed her confidence. He compromised by kissing her.

After a moment she pushed him away, laughing. "Easy now, Davy," she said. "I'm old enough to be your mother if I'd started young enough."

He grinned at the remark. "I'd have kissed my grandfather's uncle if he'd told me what you just did," he said. "Shirley, what in hell happened?"

Instead of answering, she said, "Let's sit down. I want to tell you something I heard last night, and it may need a little swallowing."

"Surely. Take that chair."

The doorbell sounded. "Excuse me," said Sinclair. "That'll be the police, coming to ask why they haven't heard of an Inspector Forster." He went to open the door.

It was indeed a young constable who stood there. He said, "Mr. Sinclair?"

"That's right."

"Inspector Forster asked me to look in," said the constable incredibly. "He told me to tell you that we found no trace of the item you reported stolen last night. It wasn't on the dead man's body."

Sinclair took a deep breath. "Now look," he said slowly, "I just rang up your people and they said they hadn't heard anything at all about this case."

The officer looked politely puzzled. "That's very odd," he contended. "Maybe you got on to the wrong station. Did you call Hartspur Street?"

Sinclair nodded.

"Probably there was a mistake, then. Perhaps the report hadn't come down to the desk. I'll find out when I get back. Good morning, sir. We'll let you know if anything further comes up."

He turned and went out of the court, leaving Sinclair gazing helplessly after him.

Shirley said breathlessly, "So there was a body, after all."

"Either that or someone was playing a joke on me—"

"People don't play jokes like that, Davy." There was a serious note in her voice which made him turn from the door and stare at her. She went on, "Sit down, and stop trying to think about what's happened."

"But damn it, Shirley, I did ring the police and they said they knew nothing about it! And now someone comes to see me and says he's from an inspector who doesn't exist—"

"I don't know a lot about police procedure," said Shirley, making a determined effort to keep her voice calm. "But I do know that if you called 999 last night, it's perfectly possible that you didn't stop to wonder where you were answered from. Look, Davy, on your own admission you were unable to remember what happened

yesterday when you first woke up, and after what you've been through, you're bound to be overwrought."

"But just—finding a burglar—shouldn't do that to me!"

"Not just finding a burglar, Davy. Your mind's had a much greater strain than that put on it."

He looked at her, staring. "What do you mean?"

"Did you know Christopher Bacon?"

"I know him, of course. He's dead, isn't he?"

"No. No, he isn't dead—but that isn't important. Do you know his *Nine Canticles*?"

"I've read them. I ought to have a copy, but I haven't."

"There's one called 'The Touch of Genius,'" said Shirley. "You remember it? I met Josef Hebbel at a party last night, and told him about your talisman, and he advised me to go home and read "The Touch of Genius" again. So I did. And I hauled Josef out of bed at half-past six this morning to find out the story behind it."

It seemed that Christopher Bacon had been a poet of the kind called promising—even very promising—without showing any sign that the promise was ever to materialise. Until, suddenly, a couple of years before, something happened to him.

"In the next year," said Shirley, "he wrote two books of verse which set him on a peak with the greatest lyricists in the English language—*The Knight of Glass* and *Nine Canticles*."

"I remember," nodded Sinclair, his face strained. "He went insane."

Shirley nodded slowly. "Yes, I'm afraid he did. Three days after his last book was published. But it was the images used in the poem 'The Touch of Genius' that made old Josef think of your talisman. Don't you recall all those descriptions of the world as an egg? The whole thing's full of words like lucent and nacreous and pearly. People thought it was a metaphor he had invented, but having seen the talisman, I'm not so sure."

Sinclair closed his eyes. "You mean—"

"I think you bought what he had, and it did the same to you. You remember saying you felt as though you'd had an attack of genius? Isn't that just the point of the poem?"

"And he lost it—and went mad."

"Davy, that won't happen to you! You didn't know Chris—but I did. You're a much more stable type than he was. He was aloof and morose—almost manic-depressive.

"But it looks as if what you called a talisman was—just that."

Sinclair felt eerie fingers on his spine.

"Don't laugh. After all, we know next to nothing about the reality of this own small planet of ours, let alone the universe. We may be very clever at finding out how it works, but as for the why and wherefore—we haven't any idea. I met a very brilliant speaker once who argued that the power of the mind may be focused, like light through a lens, by an event, and if by an event, why not by an object? Suppose that there is such an object, that it intensifies the power of the mind of its owner. It did that to Chris—and to you! Wouldn't men steal and fight and murder for it if they knew it existed?"

"Then you imply that the man who came here last night knew very well what he was after?"

"It's possible," she said soberly. "But it's unlikely, when up to yesterday he could simply have bought it. No, the way I see it is that two men came here just by chance—and found it in your studio. When one of them fell dead, the other seized the talisman and ran away."

"But what killed the dead man?"

"Perhaps the talisman did. If it focuses the mind of the holder, perhaps it could kill a man whose greatest talent was for being afraid. We speak of mortal terror, don't we?"

"Then what about the real thief? How do I set about finding the talisman again?"

Shirley's answer was pointed. "In a city of eight million people?"

"But we can't just let a thing like that stay in the hands of a criminal! Think of the untold good it could do to all the artists and writers who just need that spark to realise their latent talent!"

"That talisman must be very old," said Shirley. "A lot of unscrupulous people must have had it at one time or another. I don't think there's anything to worry about. If it found you and Chris so close together, it won't stay stolen very long."

"You make it sound as if it had a will of its own."

"Maybe it has. I shouldn't be surprised."

His thoughts reverted to himself again. "But I must have it back! I can't pass up my chance of greatness!"

She leaned back in her chair. "I don't think you have, Davy. Go and paint something."

The touch was not gone.

It was as if the talisman had forged a new channel for transferring his ideas to his canvas. It breathed fresh vigour and vitality into his work.

Fleischer took The Frightened Man for his next show. It made seventy-five guineas, and Fleischer asked for more. Sinclair provided them, and as the weeks went by he seemed to forget the talisman and the dead man who had lain on the floor near his easel.

He attended the inquest to testify to the circumstances of the death, but made no mention of the talisman, and the jury returned an open verdict on the authority of the police surgeon who stated that the symptoms were those of shock. A weak heart had accelerated death, but there was no evidence to show what had caused the shock itself.

But Sinclair shut it deliberately out of his mind. He had been touched by genius, and it seemed it would not leave him.

They were suddenly talking about his work all over London. An American came from California, bought one and promptly commissioned three more. Yet it seemed that Sinclair was unaffected by sudden fame, and it was true. He was finding so much pleasure in his new gift that he often turned aside from his ordinary saleable work to something he had never tried before—strange surrealist landscapes of bare deserts or fantastic cities under an unearthly sky, studies in pure light and colour.

Shirley seemed to find more and more excuses to visit him, and there was a subtle change in her attitude to him. She was no longer the expert, guiding and advising. She had become the disciple worshipping at the master's feet. She had in effect been the midwife at the birth of a new talent, and she had been subdued by it.

She came to the studio one day when September was breathing one of its rare but lovely St. Martin's summers over London, to find him working on something new again—a broad bare plain watched over by stalking beasts and drifting spheres of pale pastel shades—reminiscent of Paul Nash but with a subtly personal difference.

After looking at it she said, "What started you on this, Davy?"

"I don't quite know," said Sinclair, without turning away from his work. "I think it came from an outside source."

He put down his brush and turned to her. "Shirley, do you remember when you told me I was too stable to go insane?"

"As if I'd forget!"

"But I have dreams since I had that lump of stone. It's against all reason that anything could inspire talent, but Christopher Bacon had the same kind of dreams, at least." He nodded at the canvas. "This is one of them. Yet I never used to remember my dreams before, unless I was ill. It's as if something had opened up a whole new range of visual experience for me."

Idly he leafed through a copy of *Nine Canticles* which lay on a table near him. "They're unearthly, Shirley. That's the only word for them. I'm beginning to wonder—"

He picked up his brush again and meticulously shaped a blue-green sphere that completed the composition, and then stood back to look at it.

He said, "I'm so good it's almost monotonous."

The sound of the telephone bell came tinnily up from below. "Hell," he said, putting down his brush. "Watch my canvas for me. If it grows any more bubbles, let me know."

Alone, Shirley at first watched the painting, taking his parting remark more than half in earnest. It had an aura of ghostly power that exuded almost tangibly from the long-legged, stalking beasts which forever trod the plain under a sun that one felt would hurt the eyes if one watched it long enough.

She could hear Sinclair's voice faintly from downstairs.

After a moment she got up and looked at some of the discarded canvasses leaned up against the wall. There were a couple of pre-talisman roughs and one finished article, which Sinclair had been using to test his colours on. Then there was an immediately post-talisman study of her own head which she had not known about. The compliment made her flush like a school-girl. She made up her mind to ask him for it.

There were three of the alien dream-pictures too, which she could place at once in order of their painting. There was an increasing remoteness from reality, which had reached a peak in the latest composition, seeming almost to imply a new force at work in his mind. But not insanity. She had studied enough pictures by madmen to know that. Rather, it was as if an enormous and frightening clarity had dawned upon him, enabling the wildest and most complex works of imagination to be transmuted with crystalline exactness by brush and paint.

She replaced those pictures and looked around the studio. One canvas which she had overlooked stood on its own in a corner, and she went across to it and turned it around. It proved to be a head and shoulders portrait of a man in his thirties, with fair hair and intense grey eyes. It puzzled her with a tantalising air of familiarity until she saw with a sudden start who it was.

Behind her, Sinclair's steps sounded on the stairs. She put the picture back and turned to face him as he entered.

"Davy," she said.

He halted on his way to the easel, and noticed the strain in her face. "What is it?" he asked concernedly.

"Davy, I thought you said you didn't know Christopher Bacon."

"I don't. I never met him. I'm sure I would have remembered if I had. Why?"

In answer, she turned the picture around.

Sinclair glanced from it to her face and back again, seeming not to understand. Then it dawned on him. He tried to find words, but they would not come.

"That's Chris Bacon," she said. "It's a perfect likeness."

He covered the gap between them in three quick strides and lifted the portrait on to a table. He looked at it in bewilderment.

"But it can't be!" he said.

"Exactly. It can't be. For one very good reason. I didn't know Chris very well, Davy, but I knew that one of his oddities was a horror of being photographed. He never had a picture taken, as far as I know. Davy, how could you know what he looked like?"

Sinclair shook his head. He seemed dazed. "Maybe someone told me—but that wouldn't account for a recognisable portrait. I did this a couple of weeks ago, but I never thought . . ."

His voice tailed away. When he spoke again, he sounded somehow withdrawn and distant.

"Shirley, I dreamed about him."

V

Late that night, he lay awake gazing through his window at the lights, listening to the traffic as it wound its intermittent way past his flat.

Something is happening to me.

He reached for his watch and found it was after one o'clock. He had lain here now for more than an hour, trying to face and resolve the facts: that he had dreamed of places he could paint which he could not have reproduced before he had the talisman; that he had seen in a dream the only other person he believed to have owned it, and had made a perfect picture of him . . .

No use seeking a guide in past experience for something like this. No one could be of help to him, either. Spiritualists—psychical researchers—they were no more than at the fringes of something which they could not handle with certainty; they were seeking words to describe the indescribable.

The psi faculties would not be understood until the mystics left them alone for the scientists to explore. Maybe he could find people to believe him, but he could not spread knowledge of the talisman abroad, or someone might take him at his word, find it, and misuse it.

He fell at last into an uneasy slumber.

When he was asleep, he dreamed, and imagined that he rose from the tumbled bed and stood at the window to look out over London. After a moment he saw that what he had taken for the darkened city spangled with lights was in fact a carpet of heavy black grass dotted with little shining flowers. Overhead the sky, which had had the familiar yellowish tint of low clouds reflecting the light of sodium lamps, turned to a true orange as a vast sun grew momently over an absolutely level skyline. He watched, fascinated, and waited for the coming day to turn the grass to green.

But it stayed black, with the rich darkness of a cat's fur, and when he stirred in it his feet broke the flowers into tiny metallic shards.

Far away across the level ground he could see someone approaching. His course was strangely erratic, as if he were darting from place to place, halting and bending down. As the light grew, he saw that this was indeed correct. The oncoming man was plucking the tiny flowers and casting them aside with gestures of despair as they crumbled in his hand. Sinclair stood watching and waiting without moving.

The other did not seem to be aware of his presence. He continued his darting way until he was within a few feet of Sinclair. Then, for the first time, he stopped his plucking and throwing down, to turn a shadowed face towards the watcher.

As if a light had suddenly been turned on, a ray of sunshine lit his face. It was a strong, tired face, and in its deep-set grey eyes was an expression of such longing and pleading as a lost soul must feel in the deeps of hell.

It was Christopher Bacon.

Sinclair awoke, sweating, and forced himself to sit up lest he should slip back into sleep. It was already light, though the weather had broken and the clouds hung low and oppressively hot over the town. Soon, it would rain. For a moment he was surprised to find it relatively quiet. Then he remembered it was Sunday.

He lowered his feet to the floor and wiped dampness from his forehead with a handkerchief. Maybe his mind was slipping even as Bacon's had slipped. Maybe the talisman—

He wondered without pity if the man who had taken it had had joy of his prize.

After a while he got to his feet, having taken a decision that he now realised had been a long time coming, but which he had not been aware of. He made his way downstairs.

Dr. Schiller was a Jew, Sinclair noted without surprise, and wondered in passing why so many Austrian Jews had taken to psychiatry. His office was pleasant—more like a study than an office—and the pictures on the walls showed a discriminating taste.

He made Sinclair and Shirley welcome, and took his place behind the desk, sitting back in his chair.

"What can I do for you?" he asked in a softly modulated voice which still bore traces of his Viennese birth. "I am of course familiar with both your names. I follow events in the world of art as well as I am able with my limited time."

They nodded their thanks for the compliment, and Sinclair glanced at Shirley.

"Christopher Bacon is one of your patients," she said without preamble. "We'd like to see him. I used to be a friend of his before he—was taken ill."

"I see," said the doctor thoughtfully. "Well, of course there can be no objection to that. He cannot have had many friends. In fact I do not remember anyone coming to visit him since he arrived, except his publisher, and he has not been here for more than six months."

"I never knew him really well," said Shirley. "In fact, I didn't know where he was until this morning. Is he—very bad?"

"There is always hope," said Schiller. "But in his case—it would take a miracle. I must be blunt about it. It is a very great shame. Of all the patients I have had here—and there have been many artistic people among them—I have known none whom I so regretted. You doubtless know his works."

He sighed. "He was a great poet," he added.

"Does he still write?" said Sinclair.

"Indeed he does." Schiller opened a drawer in his desk. "Unfortunately, though his writing is lit with flashes of his former brilliance, he appears to be trying to convey something beyond the limits of sane experience. Much of it tends to be incomprehensible. That alone would not mark out his work among the poets of today—" he ventured a smile at his comment "—but it is affected by his withdrawal from reality."

He passed some sheets of exercise book paper to Sinclair. "I have some of his more coherent work here. I find that the products of the over-stimulated imagination are of help in diagnosis and sometimes in therapy."

Sinclair took the scrawled paper and read it through slowly. It bore a sonnet with whose form the most carping critic could not have found fault, but it made no sense whatever. He gave it back with a sympathetic shake of his head.

"You see?" said Schiller. "A complete lack of ability to communicate. Perhaps it was not true insanity to begin with—but the human intelligence is dependent upon communication. And to so vital a mind as his was, the loss of the power to communicate must inevitably bring complete breakdown."

He rose. "I'm afraid I cannot let you stay long, but since you said you only wish to see him, I'll take you to him now."

They followed him out of the room and down a corridor whose doors were numbered in white paint. As they passed one of them,

they heard a voice from inside softly singing in a minor key. Sinclair exchanged glances with Shirley. The presence of the warped minds was somehow making itself felt to him, and he was upset by it.

The doctor led them to the upper floor, where a girl in a nurse's uniform sat at a small table reading a text-book of psychiatry. She put it down at their approach, and Sinclair noticed that it bore Schiller's name and the imprint of a famous medical publishing house.

"What is Christopher Bacon doing?" the doctor asked.

The girl smiled wistfully. She had a big-boned face with thick, fleshy lips, but somehow she was pretty when she did that. Sinclair knew that his artist's eye had added her to the vast assembly of visual images which formed his pictorial capital. "He's writing again," she said.

"Some visitors have come to see him," Schiller told her. "Would you let us in?"

Obediently the nurse felt for a key at her waist, and unlocked the door nearest to them. Schiller stood aside for them to go in.

The occupant of the room was sitting at a table, his hand moving swiftly over a piece of paper. Beside him, a thick pile of clean

sheets lay ready, and on the floor were many others that had been discarded. But there was no pen or pencil in his hand.

As he stepped into the room, Sinclair felt a sudden access of pure terror. This was indeed the man whose portrait he had painted—unknowingly, impossibly.

"The world is an egg," said Bacon, looking up with a petulent expression. "No oyster-mother mothered pearl like this."

Schiller smiled at the two visitors as if to say, "You see?" But he was amazed to realise that they were both staring at the insane man as if he had just made a statement of supreme brilliance.

"Hullo, Chris," said Shirley softly. "No oyster, no. But what did?" She moved over to him and took his hand.

Schiller opened his mouth as if to speak, but Sinclair brushed him aside, a vast hope growing in him. He made straight for the table and seized a sheet of the blank paper. With an ink-pencil from his pocket he started to sketch the shape and symbol of the talisman. Bacon watched him, his eyes growing round with wonder. As soon as it was finished, he snatched the picture and stood up, pointing excitedly to it and trying to catch Schiller's attention.

"Egg-world!" he insisted, over and over again.

"What have you done?" Schiller demanded, coming up to the table. "Have you managed to make him understand—?"

"Shut up," said Bacon with startling clarity. "I've found someone who knows what I'm talking about. Let's get on with it."

He sat down as if the brief and unexpected access of lucidity had drained his strength. The nurse put her hand to her mouth as if she were going to faint, and Schiller reached out an arm to steady her absent-mindedly. This was indeed the miracle for which he had asked. He looked on in sheer disbelief, but it was happening.

Sinclair drew up a chair and said, "Give me that copy of *Nine Canticles,* Shirley."

"Here it is," she answered, opening her handbag. She had a marker already placed at 'The Touch of Genius.' Sinclair took it and read aloud a passage he had underlined. Bacon listened, nodding as if his head would come off his neck. When Sinclair put the book down, he took it and began to study it carefully and with concentration, as if he were trying to recapture words that made sense to other people but which he himself had long ago given up using.

There was a breathless hush in the room, broken only by the sound of pages being turned over. Sinclair, his eyes switching between the paper and Bacon's face, was sketching one of the dream pictures he had done a few weeks before.

When it was almost done, Bacon turned from the book and immediately nodded at the picture. He said with an air of desperation, "You hold the world within the egg, and not this world alone but others with it."

Gravely, Sinclair answered, "I called it a talisman."

Wondering, Dr. Schiller followed the meaningless exchange of words and asked himself if he was to have another patient on his hands—two, in fact, for Shirley was listening with rapt attention.

"Where's it from?" Sinclair went on. "Do you know?"

A helpless look spread over Bacon's face. "Somewhere," he replied. Then his mood changed again, mercurially. "Can you hold it?"

"No. It was stolen from me."

"Soon?"

"I had it only a few hours."

"You only touched it. I had it for a year. It is too much. Words—there are none." He looked around the room, as though 'words' was concrete to him and he expected to find them lying on the floor to be picked up.

Sinclair frowned. He was beginning to understand—and he did not like what he understood.

"You're trying to describe sensations for which there are no words," he ventured. "You think the talisman—the egg—caused the sensations."

Bacon nodded emphatically. "No!" he said.

"No—but I thought—"

"He means know—k-n-o-w," put in Shirley. "He knows the sensations came from the talisman."

Bacon bestowed a pleased smile on her. "She touched it too," he commented.

Sinclair turned his head, a great light breaking in on him. "Shirley, he's right. You did touch it, didn't you? When I first showed it to you. Did it—do anything to you?"

Her face twisted suddenly as if she were going to cry. "So you finally realised," she said bitterly. "How do you think I felt, Davy? I've lived almost twice as long as you, and I've always known I was only second-rate. You know the saying—he who can, does; he who cannot, criticises."

Sinclair's mind was suddenly full of an overwhelming pity. Of course. He should have seen it. To think that all this time Shirley had been concealing her sorrow and frustration at losing her chance to become more than a mere commentator on other people's work—and she had shielded her envy so well even he had never noticed it.

He touched her hand. "Shirley, my dear, I'm truly sorry," he said.

She blinked back tears. "That's all right," she said gruffly. "There's nothing that can be done about it now."

Slowly, Sinclair turned back to Bacon. "Did the talisman do all this to you? Make you—this way?"

Bacon nodded. He took a deep breath as if trying to discipline his mind. With extreme care he said, "All my life I lived for words. I was a poet even when I was a bad one, and my life *was* words. Then I had this thing—this egg—and it brought me knowledge which I had no way to express. I've been trying to recapture it ever since. I know now I'll never succeed. But if I hadn't lost the egg, I might have been able to get them under control eventually. After all, that book of mine you have there isn't entirely incoherent, is it?"

"It's one of the greatest books in the English language," said Shirley warmly.

Bacon nodded. "I know. I wasn't around long enough to read the notices, but they must have been good." His voice was more certain now. "But I lost the egg."

"I paint," said Sinclair. "It did things to me, too. It's still doing them."

Bacon considered for a moment. "Still?" he echoed doubtfully.

Sinclair nodded. "I have dreams. Maybe the influence of the talisman doesn't stop when you lose it. Have you thought about that?"

"You mean—" Bacon seemed stunned.

"He means that there was no need for you to run off and hide from the world while you tried to recapture the images the talisman brought you," said Shirley. "The talisman meant so much to you you thought you couldn't continue without it. So did Davy here—at first. He was wrong."

"Once it's been in your hands long enough for it to establish a rapport," said Sinclair, his mind working busily while he spoke the theory as it came to him, "you are permanently changed. Stop living in the past. You don't have to cut yourself off for fear of losing the stimulus. A powerful lot of good it did you, at that. Your trouble is—" he was purposely blunt "—you were afraid of people in the first place. Stop it. You're good and you know it. You'll get by."

Bacon closed his eyes for a while. He said softly, "So it wasn't all memory. Some of it was still dreams. Thank you. Oh, thank you very much."

He opened his eyes, but he did not move.

Cautiously Sinclair stood up. He motioned to Shirley, and together they left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Schiller burst into a flood of excited words, demanding to know how they had done it. A little wearily, Sinclair said, "Let's go back to your study. I want to sit down and relax. But you needn't worry about Bacon. He's sane—he never was otherwise, really."

"But please—*please* tell me what you did!" insisted the doctor. It had cost him a vast effort to contain himself while they went downstairs again, and now he could wait no longer.

"His egg was real. I owned it," said Sinclair. "And it really does the things he claimed for it. I know that's absurd, but you'll have to accept it. After all, think of what it did to me—you must have heard of my sudden success if you knew my name.

"Bacon's theory appears to be that it came from another world. Maybe it did. It has an Indian symbol on it, but that could have been added by anyone. Certainly I don't believe anyone on Earth could endow it with the powers it has. In essence, it opens a new channel for existing ability. It gives the gift of greatness."

He looked across at Shirley. She sat dry-eyed, but he knew from her own admission how she felt. He clasped her hand as he went on, "That's our story, doctor. You can accept it or not, as you like. But it gave the world a great poet in Christopher Bacon, and it gave me talent which isn't altogether worthless. It'll go on. It can't have succeeded twice just by coincidence."

He gestured through the window. "It's out there somewhere—who knows where? Who knows who had it before we two did? To a religious man, perhaps it appeared in the past as divine inspiration. In an age of sceptics, perhaps we see closer to its real nature—or perhaps we don't. Whichever it is, I don't think we need fear for its fate. It hasn't done badly up to now."

He stood up. "Tell Chris to look us up when he gets back to town," he added. "Goodbye, doctor."

They turned and left the room. The door closed quietly behind them.

John Brunner

Legend said that when disaster threatened the tiny French village all the dogs howled a warning, and history had proved it many times. Now the dogs howled again . . .

THE DOGS OF HANNOIE

By DOUGLAS WEST

An accident brought me to Hannoie. I had been motoring through the Alps, driving without thought as to where I was going, content to follow roads which steadily degenerated from wide, well-paved ones of concrete, to narrower ones of stone; from those of stone to twisting lanes of packed dirt; ending finally by winding a slow way along a tortuous path full of pot holes and slick with many layers of sodden leaves.

I first saw Hannoie from the brow of a hill. It nestled against the hillside, a collection of small, stone houses dominated by the squat spire of an old church and looking, in the dying light of the setting sun, like one of those medieval villages used to illustrate historical novels. I drove towards it, the car gathering speed as I sent it humming down the incline when an animal, a dog I thought, suddenly darted from the undergrowth and caused me to brake sharply. My instinctive reaction caused the heavy vehicle to skid into a deep hole. It took little time to diagnose a broken axle. It took far longer to arrange repairs.

The villagers were very kind. They were of unspoiled peasant stock, thick-set, swarthy, phlegmatic in their way but quick to take either offence or liking. I explained my predicament to the *patronne* of an

estaminet, listened to her sympathies, then waited, sipping brandy of a surprising excellence while she sent for the mayor.

He too was desolate.

" A tragedy, monsieur. To happen to one who has come from so far. From England ? Ah, *vive la Angleterre.*"

Smiling, I assured him that it was no tragedy. I bought him brandy and we drank with grave, old-world grace. I spoke of the crops, the hills, the beauty of the sunset. I told him much of myself, more than I would normally tell to a casual acquaintance and, in return, he confided in me. Finally, he mentioned my car.

" Tonight, monsieur, it is impossible, but the nights are calm and it will come to no harm. Tomorrow, Jacque will take his horses and tow it to the garage. It is a long way, monsieur, twenty kilometres over the hill, and it is but a small garage. Jacque is a poor man with many children. I hesitate to ask, monsieur, but . . ."

" I will pay Jacque," I interrupted. " You will tell me what you think fitting."

He bowed at that, pleased at my relegation of authority, and again the *patronne* filled our glasses with a distillation not to be found in any bottle. Over the drinks he spoke of my accident.

" The roads are treacherous, but what would you ? We are poor and the taxes are heavy, traffic is light and there is an alternate road." He shrugged, a gesture purely Gallic and done properly only by those to the manner born. " You are not to be blamed for so unfortunate a happening."

" I ?" I shook my head. " It was not my fault. There was an animal, a dog I think, which ran straight across the road and . . ." I paused. For some reason it had grown very quiet, even the loungers inseparable from any establishment dispensing wine seemed all attention. The mayor slowly picked up his glass.

" A dog, monsieur ?"

" Yes. A great shaggy beast. Looked more like a wolf than a dog but you wouldn't have wolves around here, would you ?"

" You . . . killed it, monsieur ?"

" Of course not. I braked to avoid it and skidded into a hole." I laughed. " The dog wasn't hurt, only my car."

" *Bien* !" He smiled and raised his glass and even the loungers seemed to have forgotten me. It was the most peculiar thing and I felt as a man must feel who has been tried and found not guilty. It disturbed me a little and, either because of that or because for the first time in many months I was enjoying myself, I drank a little too much of the excellent brandy. Not that it mattered. The mayor took charge of me and I have dim memories of being supported along a twisting

street while all around me rose the sounds of uninhibited merriment. A stalwart youth in simple dress helped me up to a great bed piled high with soft eiderdowns and I sank into sleep as a swimmer sinks into the ocean.

I woke once only during the night and heard the monotonous howling of many dogs.

I spoke about it at breakfast next morning.

" It is the dogs, monsieur," explained the mayor. Aside from being the elected representative of the village he was also the proprietor of the single hotel, the registrar, and the local policeman. He sipped his coffee with a healthy gusto and, to my surprise, I found that I too had an appetite.

" The dogs ?"

" Yes, the Dogs of Hannoie. It is a legend stemming from the past, a simple thing, but we are a simple people, monsieur, and we like the simple ways." He spoke with an unaffected dignity and I admired him for his ' we.' " The legend has it that the village was once saved from destruction by the howling of the dogs." He shrugged. " Be that as it may, yet the fact remains that the dogs always howl when trouble affects us. A death perhaps, an illness, a poor harvest." He shrugged again. " Sometimes it seems as if the dogs are always howling."

" I see." I frowned down at my coffee. " Then that explains it. Yesterday in the cafe, when I told you of my accident . . ."

" Yes, monsieur. I was glad that you had not harmed the animal. For me, I am an intelligent man and, after all, a dog is a dog. But others would not take it so. The dogs are never molested. They run as they please and none harm them. They are not truly wild but neither are they tame. In bad times they are fed and, so it is whispered, in very bad times they are even worshipped." He looked guilty. " I tell you this in confidence, you understand. I would not like the Curé to hear me talk so."

I reassured him, trying hard not to laugh, and sat down in the lounge to while away the time. A simple people indeed ! A folk tale of howling dogs, a few coincidences, and the result ? A form of animal worship. No wonder the Curé did not encourage discussion on the subject and yet, remembering the sudden stillness in the cafe when I had mentioned almost killing one of the animals, I wondered. The mayor looked in at me, a bundle of papers in his hand.

" I have ordered wine for you, monsieur. I go now to arrange about your car and in the meantime . . ." He gestured with the papers in his hand. " Sometimes we have travellers pass through here, not

many, but some. Last week we had a visit from a party of Americans, they left many papers and books behind, if you are interested . . ." He put them on the table, smiled, bowed, and left. Idly I sorted through the pile.

The New York Post, a battered copy of the *Readers Digest*, an assortment of *Saturday Evening Posts*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, a jumble of comic suppliments and a few *Colliers*. I selected a few, asked the trim maid for a bottle of wine, discovered the time of lunch, and walked out into the sunshine to read and drink and sit the day away.

Or so I thought. Actually what happened was that warmed by the sun and relaxed by the wine I fell into a dose, the papers untouched at my side, and it was only the voice of the mayor calling my name that aroused me to a setting sun and a ravenous appetite.

After dinner I glanced again at the periodicals. I read them, more to slake the mayor's obvious curiosity than for my own amusement. The poor man had studied those brightly coloured publications for over a week now and had been tantalised by a glimpse of the outside world, a glimpse he could not augment because he could not read a word of English. I gave him a running translation.

" The Americans say that more of their people than ever are taking holidays on the continent."

" So ?" He nodded. " That is good, we can do with the money they will bring." Shyly he touched a four-colour print of a semi-nude actress. " And she."

" Starring in a new film about the life of the Prophets." I turned the pages then stopped, looking at the same old symbol. Something about my expression must have revealed the way I felt for the mayor touched the portrayal of the billowing mushroom cloud and shook his head.

" *Le bombe atomic*, it is not good, no ?"

He was a simple man, the mayor, but he had a basic intelligence equal to any I had previously met. He didn't argue, he could only have had a smattering of distorted knowledge, and yet he knew with a sure instinct that the atomic bomb was bad. I could have told him a lot more. I could have told him of the decreasing margin of safety caused by the continued release of radio-active particles in the air. I could even have told him of my own illness which had sapped the strength of my mind and body and sent me wandering through the Alps in a vain effort to regain them. Despite myself my eyes fell again to the printed page.

New tests, of course, and this time with the cobalt bomb. Tiredly I wondered just when the playing with racial death would stop, if it

would stop, if anyone could now stop it, and whether it would be best, on the long-term view, not to stop it at all.

Silently the mayor passed me the brandy and, beneath the warm glow of that potent spirit, I shook off a little of my depression.

" I have news of your car, monsieur. The garage informs me that they will deliver it here for you tomorrow. They are welding the broken part, it is all they can do, and you must have it replaced later." He hesitated. " About Jacque, would five thousand francs be too much ?" He must have misread my expression. " He has many children, monsieur, but he will take less if you desire it."

" It is very reasonable," I assured and then, because perhaps of a whim, or perhaps of memories of a time when I too had been poor, I made a gesture. " Many children, you say ?"

" Yes, monsieur, seven."

" Then give each of the little ones something for their stocking." I counted out a thin sheaf of notes. " Here."

He took them, his eyes widening. " A thousand francs for each ! Monsieur is very kind."

I shook my head, dismissing the incident and he, gentleman that he was, made no further mention of it. The twilight had come by then and, as the mayor went off to attend to my errand, I sat and watched the night slowly thicken over the hills, filling the valley with deep, purple shadows and dimming the outlines of trees and buildings so that they seemed to take on an air of fantastic unreality as though seen through a film of disturbed water.

The mayor returned and we sat as the maid lit the lamps, drinking and smoking, sitting and thinking and, beneath the timeless spell of the place, I relaxed in a way I had not known for too long. It was still early when yawning, I went up to the big room with the incredibly soft bed. I fell asleep almost at once, a deep, dreamless slumber and woke, sweating, my ears strained to the monotonous howling of dogs.

I have never heard dogs howl so loud or so long.

I lay trying to isolate the sounds. A sharp barking came from the north, a form of prelude to a concerted howling from the south and, softened by distance, the frenzied yelping of dogs to the east and west ringed the village with discordant sound. It went on and on, so that, lying in the darkness of the room, I imagined brass-throated animals standing all around me and howling, yelping, barking, yapping, pups and dogs, bitches and litters, all rending the peace of the night with their desperate urgency. Finally, unable to sleep and unable to rest, I rose and, dressing, went downstairs.

The mayor was already awake. He and the entire household had congregated in the lounge and, through the windows, I could see light streaming from the open doors of the village. I glanced at my wrist watch, it was past midnight, and such activity from people who started their work with the dawn was unusual.

" Monsieur !" The mayor came towards me his hands fluttering before him. " I had hoped that you would not awake."

" I couldn't help it. The dogs . . ."

" Ah, yes, the dogs." He shrugged. " Never have I known them howl so. Last night was bad, and the night before was not normal, but tonight !" He paused, listening, and in the silence the howling seemed to lash against the houses and echo from the hills. " No one remembers them howling so. Not even Pierre, and he is so old that he remembers the armies of Napoleon, or so, at least, he claims." He smiled at his own jest. " Marie will make coffee and there is brandy on the table." He paused again, listening to the ghastly sounds around us, and he shivered a little. " It is bad," he said soberly. " Very bad. Me, I am an intelligent man and I do not believe in the legend, but still it is bad."

I knew just what he meant. Even I, the product of modern civilisation, could sense the atmosphere which had fallen over the village. To these people, immersed in their legend, isolated in their hills, the howling must have brought the fear of the unknown. The dogs warned of impending danger, but which danger.? Where from ? When ? I could guess how they must be feeling.

" You must pardon me, monsieur." The mayor had struggled into his policeman's uniform, the pistol at his belt in striking contrast to the natural benignity of his face. " I am needed outside. Already the church is full of those saying their prayers and there is great restlessness in the streets. I must calm them." He shook his head. " Simple people, monsieur, at times almost like children, but who can blame them for that ? Always before the dogs have howled with reason and now, with such howling, the reason must be grave indeed. Your pardon, monsieur."

He bowed with courtly grace and, as he opened the door, the yelping discord from outside sounded with redoubled urgency.

I sat down and tried to forget the howling. I found one of the American magazines and opened it and, for some reason, it opened at the mushroom cloud symbol which had ruined my life. I was staring at it when Jacque burst into the room.

I had seen him before, a squat, brown, stocky man. A man who, I thought, would have never known extremes of emotion. Now he

was panting, his eyes rolling with fear, his dun-coloured smock rising and falling in time with his breath.

" Monsieur," he gasped. " You must come with me. I have horses and my cart. We can reach your car by dawn."

" Leave ?" I shook my head. " Impossible !"

" You must, monsieur." His urgency was contagious. " Listen to the Dogs of Hannoie !" He paused and we could hear them as though a thousand dogs were howling in the street outside. " It is peril, monsieur. I know these things, I know them here." He struck his breast. " You were kind to me and to my little ones and, for that, I do this thing. Hurry, monsieur. Hurry !"

His fear, as I have said, was contagious. Abruptly I ceased trying to be the sophisticate and became almost wholly primitive. I ran upstairs and fetched my bag. I dropped money onto the bed and ran downstairs again to where Jacque was waiting by his nervous horses. I climbed into the cart and we moved off through the village, passing little knots of men and women who stared after us with wide, frightened eyes.

" Your wife ? Your children ?"

" At church, monsieur, the *Bon Dieu* will protect them."

He said no more after that but sat, hunched over the reins, controlling the sweating horses with sure fingers, at times mumbling a prayer and crossing himself whenever the howling grew louder.

And so I left Hannoie, sitting in a jolting cart driven by a superstitious peasant, listening to the howling of dogs grow slowly fainter in the distance, the nerve-jarring howling which, for more than two hundred years, had warned the village of impending peril.

And it wasn't until I had waved goodbye to Jacque and had recovered my car and resumed my journey that I realised that I was still in possession of the American magazine. I read it, finally, two days after I had left Hannoie and it took little time to work out the different times and the correct dates.

The tests had taken place—and the dogs had howled.

Coincidence ?

Or were they warning, not merely Hannoie, but the world ?

There is only one way to find out.

—Douglas West

Here is another story by the author of "My Brother's Wife" in our last issue, which once again shows the fertility of his imagination and the smoothness of his writing technique.

THE JOB IS ENDED

By WILSON TUCKER

Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

The moment I saw Marie Jackson I knew I was finished. At last, a thirty-year search was over, a suspicious man's theory had become a fact, and a laboratory problem was solved. Marie Jackson brought it to a close.

Strangely enough, it was her husband who had betrayed her to me, and gave me the first hint that the job was nearing its finish.

The secondary discovery was as strange as the first and was the one thing I had not been expecting. Marie Jackson was a woman . . . I had been searching for a man. For thirty years I had been hunting down a man, any man who happened to fit the specifications of a laboratory theory. My instructions from Brigham in Washington had been to search for a man who didn't belong, who, if he *did* fit the specifications, would prove that the theory was an actual fact and that Earth did have a visitor. Instead of a man I turned up Marie Jackson, and I made ready to close the case.

Arthur Jackson wandered into my office one warm June day wearing his troubles on his face.

A second look revealed that he wasn't merely having domestic troubles, but was drowning his miseries. It was in his walk, it hung from his shoulders, and it preyed on his mind constantly. He failed to see my outstretched hand—I don't believe he saw *me* very clearly. He sat down across the desk from me and ran a palm over his moist forehead. Nashville in the summer was insufferably hot, but Jackson was suffering from more than the heat.

He was well dressed, though his suit was wrinkled, and he crushed a hat in his hand. He wasn't soft by any measure, he had no paunch, his fingers were long and sure, and the nails reasonably clean. His eyes were intelligent enough behind the blanket of worry, and his hairline was beginning to recede. Jackson wore a small *ACT* pin in his lapel, which was what tipped me off that he was an Oak Ridge man. The American Chemical Trust runs things out there for the government.

Finally he looked me straight in the eye. " People say you're pretty reliable, Mr. Evans."

I shrugged and waited.

" I read about you in the papers a few Sundays ago," he continued. " That was why I came to you. The papers said you had never lost a case, Mr. Evans. That is, they said you have found every man you've ever hunted."

" Sunday supplement stuff," I told him.

" But it *is* true ?" he persisted.

" Reasonably so," I nodded. " Those I couldn't locate later proved to be dead."

" I'm having trouble, Mr. Evans," he said uselessly. " The paper —well, perhaps it *was* melodramatic, but it claimed your deductive powers were uncanny. Pardon me, Mr. Evans—it said you could almost read minds. You would have to be a mind reader to find my wife !"

I smiled at him in modest depreciation. " You know the newspapers, Mr. Jackson." I paused for the right length of time. " How much do you want to tell me ?"

He stared up at me again, directly into my eyes. The words rushed out eagerly.

" Everything, I want to tell you everything, Mr. Evans, but you probably won't believe me. *They* didn't. "

" Who didn't ?"

" My doctor, and a psychiatrist recommended by the doctor." He pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his forehead. " I went to the doctor first because I grew up in the habit of taking everything to my doctor. I could have saved myself the trouble," he added bitterly.

"And the psychiatrist?" I prodded gently.

"Practically the same. A mild neurosis, he told me. Said I would probably be completely happy in a matriarchy, but there was nothing to worry about. He did assure me that I was reasonably sane—I suppose I should be thankful for that."

"And so," I put in, "you turned to me."

"Yes—" he was staring at me intently. "Will you do me a favour, Mr. Evans, a very great favour?"

"If I am able, yes."

"Please—" the words came tumbling out again. "Don't laugh at me. Don't laugh at what I have to tell you. Don't pat my shoulder and tell me I am imagining things, that I need a long rest. If you choose

not to believe me, I'll leave. Refuse my case and stop right there. But don't laugh."

"That much is easily granted. Where are you going to begin?"

"With my wife. Everything begins with my wife—and ends there, I'm afraid. She's—" he hesitated, stole a glance at me, and finished, "she's too damned smart!"

He waited for my reaction but I showed none.

"Have you ever had the misfortune to marry a woman far more intelligent than yourself, Mr. Evans?"

I shook my head. "Not married."

He rushed on. "You can imagine what a man desires in a woman. Among other things, the usual physical things, he wants a smart and intelligent wife, a woman possessing mental abilities sufficient to understand him and his world. A woman who can stride along with him, and understand his problems. But still, and this is a paradox I'll admit, a woman necessarily inferior to him—the least bit inferior, sort of a balance of ego. A man wants a woman who needs his advice, who needs to lean on him, who needs his greater reasoning powers. That is the kind of woman every healthy man desires, Mr. Evans. I thought I had found such a woman in Marie."

I stared past him out the window, at the sunlit street and an idea formed in my mind. "How old is your wife?" I asked him, and his answer was my first clue to her, although it went unrecognized as such, right then.

"We don't know, really." He seemed embarrassed. "She is an orphan and we couldn't locate a birth registration—the situation stirred up a bit of a fuss when I started with the Manhattan people as they looked into everything, you know. Marie and I agreed when we married that she was about five years younger than myself." He paused in thought. "That would make her thirty-two now . . . we think. Sometimes I'm not sure. She hasn't grown much older than the day— Her physical appearance bears that out, Mr. Evans. Thirty-two."

I knew that to be a half-truth for he wasn't sure in his own mind. "And you?" I asked. "You're a success in your field?"

He absently fingered the lapel pin and nodded. Jackson told me about himself, about Manhattan in the days before we got into the war, and afterward: About Oak Ridge now and his position there, the full, fruitful years of his life; about the growing unhappiness and strain between himself and his wife, about his striving to overcome it. He wound up by asserting, "I consider myself an intelligent man, Mr. Evans. You'll grant me that, leaving false modesty aside."

I agreed without quibbling. "Easily granted." He had told me far more than he realized and I could honestly agree with the statement. "But now—back to your wife?"

"Yes, my wife."

He lapsed into what must have been a painful silence for him and his mind skittered back over those years, tracing the early ripening of his love for her. He made it easy for me to follow him although I was careful to give no outward sign of that; I waited patiently for him to speak. I saw him as a young man holding down a modest-paying position, a young man with reasonable security, a future, and a desire—the not unnatural desire to find a wife to share that future. He discovered Marie in a library.

"In the evenings after work," he finally broke the silence, "I studied the technical books and journals I could not yet afford. I wanted to climb as rapidly and as safely as possible and I realized that if I waited until I could afford those books, it might be too late.

"I met her in the library. She was looking at a schematic drawing in an early radio journal, tracing it with her finger. It startled me when I looked closely to see what she was really doing and at the same time it pleased me. You must realize it was—and is—very unusual to find a woman interested in such things; I stood behind her chair and watched her finger. She went along splendidly for a few moments and then ran into trouble.

"I don't recall now what it was, but it threw her entirely off the track and caused her to lose the thread of thought as well. I could determine that much by the way she reacted. When you lose the thought behind a schematic you may as well start over again." He paused to look at me.

"I understand what you mean. Go on."

He continued. "Well—she pushed the journal away with a whispered exclamation of annoyance and started to get up. And I, like a damned fool, had to butt in; I leaned over her shoulder and pointed to the trouble spot.

"'No, *this* way,' I remember saying to her impulsively, and then I stopped and could say no more. She threw me one withering glance over her shoulder and I hurriedly left the library, in some confusion I must admit. She disturbed me."

"Was it an act?" I wanted to know.

"Act? You mean, was she pretending? No, I don't think so. She was an utter stranger to me. I avoided the library on the following night because I still felt some embarrassment, but on the third evening an overpowering desire to see her again swept away any misgivings

I may have had. The desire amounted almost to a pull, a compulsion. She still disturbed me."

I pricked up my ears and senses. I was beginning to learn things about Jackson's wife.

He said, " I went back to the library . . ."

". . . and there she was," I finished for him. He misinterpreted me, and thought I was asking a question.

" Yes. I found her studying a book I had turned in only a few weeks previously. It was a field closely allied to my own, can you understand that ? It had not been easy going for me but there she sat, working through it. I was astonished and I was delighted—and although I carefully avoided her that evening and continued to do so for several nights thereafter, eventually . . . well, Mr. Evans, eventually the attraction to her overcame my reticence. I can't explain it more clearly."

" No need," I assured him. " Easily understandable, and it happens all the time. Mutual interest in your sciences, each of you obviously alone—" I let it hang there.

He nodded. " Yes, yes, I finally summoned up my courage, approached her and introduced myself. She was not angry." He closed his eyes, dreaming. " In time we became fast friends. We met there several times, and elsewhere. In a very short while I began to entertain ideas. Frankly, they surprised me for up until that moment I had been rather shy where women were concerned, but Marie's presence seemed to invite ideas."

I'll just bet—I said to myself.

" I thought," he went on without a pause, " she was—or rather she would be—what any intelligent man might call a perfect wife. She was endowed with everything I could ask in a mate, including the remarkable intelligence I desired in my dream woman. I . . . I may as well make this brief. We were married."

I turned from the window to face the man. He was looking at me, waiting for my reaction thus far.

" Jackson," I said, throwing it at him, " you were hooked."

" Uh . . . hooked ?"

" Hooked," I nodded without a smile, " but don't be alarmed, *that* goes on all the time too. A million women employ a million ways to *hook* a million men. Quite common."

He wasn't alarmed at my words, he merely went off on another dream train. His voice trailed off and drifted back across the years to their marriage.

He married her because he was madly in love with her, with her body, her beauty, her soul and her intelligence quotient. He married

her because he would have something few other men could boast—an alert, brainy woman who was practically his equal in any field he chose to explore. He married her because she could read a schematic, *but* ran into trouble on certain parts of it. That iota of necessary inferiority was there. He married her because she would be a valuable asset to his own standing and mentality. And somewhere along the line, between the honeymoon and the present day, the glorious bubble burst. I saw it blow up in his face as he relived it in his mind.

" Which brings us to the present," I reminded him, jolting him out of his silence.

" Yes," he echoed bitterly, " the present. Mr. Evans, I love my wife."

You are a liar, I said to him, but *not* aloud. He didn't *love* his wife any more; it was something else now, something akin to love but definitely not affection. However, I said nothing, it wouldn't do for me to call his cards.

" Still married ?" I prodded.

He nodded unhappily.

" Exactly why did you come to me ?" I demanded of him.

Arthur Jackson stared at me. I had forced the crisis on him and had already read his answer, but still had to wait for his torrent of words.

" Because Marie has surpassed me," he almost cried, " out-stripped me because she is an unimaginable distance ahead." He held up a hand. " No—please, don't mistake me. I'm not mad, not angry, I'm jealous, yes, terribly jealous. But all that aside, Mr. Evans, she won't let me see her."

" Other men ?" I wanted to know.

" I don't know; I suppose so. She has moved out of our home and lives at some hotel. These other men—if they exist—I've never seen them, I can only suspect they exist. But that isn't what is bothering me. I can't *see* her !"

I caught something there which was startling.

" What was that ?"

" Mr. Evans, in the many years we lived together, Marie sucked my mind of knowledge like a bat sucks blood. Everything I've learned in the past ten years she *knew* the following day ! I would spend weeks working through a technological problem and she would know the full answer in one evening at the dinner table. I just couldn't keep anything from her."

" Wait a moment," I cut in impatiently, " let's get back to your first statement. What do you mean, you can't see her ?"

" Mr. Evans—" he groped in a mental darkness, stammering. " Mr. Evans, you won't believe me, but—well, Marie blanks out."

I couldn't pretend that didn't shake me, couldn't hide my reaction from him. The shock reflected on my face. He was watching that face for disbelief, but whatever else he found there, it wasn't disbelief. Even though his earlier conversation had prepared me by laying the foundations, this was still a jolt. A jolt curiously marked with wonder, plus the birth of desire.

So Marie Jackson " blanks out." How very interesting. She did not have a birth certificate, and she knew every single thing that passed across her husband's mind—literally. After thirty years, I was near the end.

" Tell me how she does it," I suggested.

He only laughed hollowly. " If I knew that would I have gone to a doctor ?"

" But explain yourself. *Blanks out.* How ?"

" I honestly don't know, Mr. Evans. I suppose there is a—I *know* there is a logical explanation. I'm not superstitious, a believer in black magic and such nonsense. Some of the things we do and have done in the laboratory would startle a layman out of his senses, but behind every phenomena there is an orderly procession of facts." He sighed. " Mr. Evans, I only wish I could understand such an effect."

" How did you discover this . . . uh, effect ?"

" It was just after she moved out of the house. I tried to see her, to talk things over, to ask her to come back. She left orders not to admit me and refused my phone calls. I began following her but she soon discovered me, and when she did, she simply blanked out."

" You mean . . . vanished ?"

He nodded in despair. " Vanished—in mid-air, in the middle of the sidewalk, not half a block ahead of me. She didn't so much as turn around to look at me, to see if I was there. She *knew* I was there —and disappeared."

" Doorways ?"

" No, I thought of that; I've thought of a hundred things. Who wouldn't when the unexplainable happens ? No, it was not a doorway. In the middle of the sidewalk, I told you. It happened time and time again, crossing a street, sitting on a park bench, oh, just anywhere." He looked at me helplessly.

" How many times ?" I wanted to know.

" Six, maybe seven. Then I visited my doctor, and the psychiatrist, and then I came to you because now I never see her at all. I've waited

outside her hotel until I'm afraid of the patrolman on the beat, but she never, never allows me to see her any more."

I got down to business.

"In exact words, Mr. Jackson, what do you want me to do?"

"Find her! *See* her. Talk to her. Tell her I . . . I *must* see her again. Just once more."

I didn't like that last answer. "You want me to attempt a reconciliation?" I questioned.

He fell over himself in eager assent—in words. But he was a little too eager for my peace of mind.

"If not," I said, "then arrange a divorce?"

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Evans. Never that. I would never divorce Marie. I tell you, I love her, Mr. Evans."

That wasn't all of his complaint by any means, that was only the curtain raiser. Arthur Jackson spent a full two hours in my office that afternoon, crying on my shoulder. He told me his wife had always been a remarkable woman, that she was extraordinarily intelligent, and that her mind was so keen as to grasp whole problems before the verbal recital of the initial facts was fully presented.

"I can't keep anything from her!" he cried once, and went on to explain. She knew everything he knew, and more. She could fill his job or the jobs of any of his superiors, and that, to Arthur Jackson, was frightening because he was working on the most secret of government projects.

I thought I understood; he was unable to continue living with her and yet he lacked the will to give her up. One doesn't so easily part with a prize, even though the prize becomes increasingly hard to understand and manage. Could a moron mate with a savant, even when the moron was a brilliant atomic specialist in his own right?

Arthur Jackson had been an engineer in the Manhattan Project since the summer of 1940. He had also acquired a wife in the summer of 1940, although if he but realized the truth, the wife had acquired him. He now lived in Nashville and divided his time between his home there, and Oak Ridge.

Nashville was as close as *I* could get to Oak Ridge without raising suspicion. Of what earthly use were private detectives in a city like Oak Ridge, private detectives whose backgrounds could not stand investigation?

Long before that two-hour interview with Jackson had ended I learned a pair of startling facts from him, although he never mentioned either of them aloud. He had aroused my suspicions concerning his wife, to be sure, suspicions which caused me to speculate on what

Brigham had told me those many years ago in Washington. But they were as nothing compared to these solid facts.

Jackson tried to guard his mind during our conversation, not from me, as I knew he did not suspect me, but from force of habit from spending ten years with his wife. It was futile. He had kept no secrets from his wife and he kept none from me.

I learned first that Marie Jackson possessed a machine in a suitcase. Jackson thought of it that way because he had never been allowed more than a glimpse of it. To him it was just a grey, shapeless mass of machinery which fitted into a suitcase that was always locked. For years he had been curious about that little machine, and now, suddenly I was too.

Secondly, I learned from him that the United States had begun research on a hydrogen bomb out there at Oak Ridge long before public announcements were made that the government was merely considering it. This was a subtle bit of strategy in itself. The first actual bomb was near completion while Congress was still debating on whether the nation should start research on it !

Arthur Jackson was key man on the project.

The shock of that nearly showed on my face, but the man before me was too overwrought to see my face. He was still protesting his undying love for his wife.

Like hell you do ! You're lying, Arthur Jackson, and you don't love her—not any more, you don't. Fear has got you by the heart and jealousy by the guts. Hatred is tearing your fine intelligence right out of your skull. Your wife has left you behind like a ship sailing from a pier, and if you ever get Marie Jackson in your gunsight,you're a widower.

" All right," I said aloud, " I'll take the case. I'll try to find Mrs. Jackson for you."

The relief and gratitude on his face and in his mind was a physical thing. " I knew you would," he cut loose on me. " The paper said you were a miracle man; they said you could find absolutely anybody; they said——"

I cut him short. " A lot of eyewash. I happen to be as far advanced in my field as you are in yours. The newspaper writers add the fancy touches."

" But you *do* have a remarkable record."

" I do. And doubtless you do too. If you'll leave your address and telephone number with the girl, I'll have something to report in a few days. The retainer fee is thirty dollars."

He left. And in a short while I closed my office.

I spotted Marie Jackson in the hotel lobby.

I felt old and tired, washed up, like a horse put to pasture or a general put on the pension list. It was almost finished—my thirty-year job was as good as done. There remained only the necessary steps to close the case: make absolutely sure the woman was the one I had been seeking, and after that to mail in my report, and the job was ended. I would be on my own.

Marie Jackson came out of the elevator dressed for the street. She was a knock-out ! Tall, as beautiful as a storybook queen, magnificent figure and long, striking legs. She paused by the lobby newsstand, but didn't look at the papers. Dusk had fallen. Marie Jackson was searching the sidewalk outside the hotel for her husband. He wasn't there of course as he was at home waiting for my call. She seemed surprised at his absence and walked out regally through the door which was held open for her. Without a glance she struck off down the street.

I followed her, marvelling that a jealous husband had put me on the trail, but I still had that empty feeling now that the trail was nearly ended.

We hadn't gone many blocks through the brightly lighted district before I stumbled onto something else, something that I had been half-expecting. Her husband had put it in a very literal way. He had said: " She sucks my mind of knowledge like a bat sucks blood." Marie Jackson was doing that now. She reached out to touch the minds of those around her seeking knowledge.

Sometimes she paused here and there, not long and not often, to sweep across their minds like my eyes swept her attractive figure.

She kept this up for the better part of three hours, going up and down streets, in and out of the park, on crowded buses, in a theatre lobby, always searching, touching briefly and going on. She was finding nothing she didn't already know. I finally got tired of it and I had what I wanted for my report.

We passed a drugstore which had a pay phone. I went in and called Arthur Jackson.

" Did you find her ?" he cried out immediately. " What did she say ? Will she come back ? Can I see her ?"

" Hold on a minute," I choked him off. " I've found her, yes, but I haven't caught up with her yet. I must see her do this ' blank-out ' act, and then I'll close in. You've got to help me."

He was all eagerness to help.

" Get in a cab," I instructed him. " Cruise down Charlotte Avenue past those two theatres. She's mixing with the crowd. I want you to think of her—I said *think*. Think hard. Think about finding her there on the street. She'll know you're coming, and she'll get away

from the crowd. When she's in a safe place she'll pull the act. I'll be watching."

He agreed, and I left the drugstore. A minute or so later and I would have run into her as I came out the door. She had turned and was coming back along the block. I struck out ahead of her, letting her follow me. I saw to it that she did *not* touch my thoughts.

This should be interesting. I hoped that Marie Jackson wouldn't disappoint me now that the chase was at an end, hoped she was fast enough to protect herself. I couldn't afford to have anything happen to her now, couldn't let that silly ass of a husband put an end to her. The Cro-Magnon men in their age had taken adequate care of the Neanderthal, yes, but wasn't it safe to assume that every once in a while the brute force struck first, and fatally ?

I came to the mouth of an alley and paused. The alley was fairly dark and was deserted except for a pair of scavenger cats midway down. A large telephone pole, which held some kind of transformer in a locked, square case, promised sanctuary. I slid into the alley and lodged myself behind the pole, and waited.

Marie Jackson passed the mouth of the alley, still continuing her search. A part of her consciousness flicked past me, touched the cats briefly, evoking a snarling yowl. She passed from sight but I kept a careful contact, alert to flash a warning if she somehow missed her oncoming husband. She didn't. It was a distinct pleasure to watch her glide into action.

While Arthur Jackson's cab was still three minutes away she caught his thought. She also saw he packed a gun.

She suddenly stopped, glanced casually around, and again saw the mouth of the alley. Retracing her steps without visible hurry she gained the alley and turned into its concealing darkness. Then she did it . . . disappeared ! . . . " blanked out " as her husband called it. I was the only one watching. It was smooth. I found myself wishing I knew how it was done.

I kept her spotted by her thoughts, and thus pin-pointed her against a brick wall. She was completely invisible to the naked eye, mine or any other, but she had grown foolishly careless. She failed to hide her thoughts, and in the darkness of that alleyway the mental aura stood out like a neon glow. She stood with her back to the wall and waited for her husband, concealed from him but not from me. She did not fully protect herself by all the means at her command, and the Boss would want to know that and would be surprised when my report came in.

The cab crept slowly along the street, past the mouth of the alley and moved on out of our field of view. Marie Jackson watched it quietly. Her husband was leaning out the window, searching for her among the crowds on the sidewalk. He was looking for Marie—and for me. The crazy fool was looking for me ! He supposed that when he saw me, she would be not far ahead.

Damn his rotten soul, he betrayed me to the woman !

She jerked around and moved away from the wall, puzzled and alarmed at this new element. Marie stepped to the alley entrance to search, stared up and down the street seeking me. Her thoughts were a chaotic frenzy and for seconds she defeated her own purpose, trying to find me by sight alone.

Damn Arthur Jackson and his weak mind, damn that stupid moron for revealing me. She flashed after him, caught his memory and scoured it for my description. Getting that, she again searched the street for me, in vain.

It was then that she began to think, to use her brain. She stopped trying to find me by sight alone and fell back on her mental powers I blanked my mind, thought nothing, waited to see what she might do. My instructions had been not to reveal my presence, my mission, if at all possible. If for any reason I should be caught, I was on my own and had to get out the best way I could. I either ended my search and mailed in a report, or I ended my search and was prevented from mailing in a report. Either way, my success was obviously clear.

Marie had her back to the wall, thinking, analyzing. It had finally struck home and was like a bolt of lightning to her. She suddenly realized I was not to be found among that crowd on the street, that I was somewhere else not *in sight*. I was not in sight, and yet I was there. Her husband's anxious, fearful mind told her all that.

Belatedly that smashed home to her and she did what she should have been doing all along. She closed up her mind to outsiders and shut off that tell-tale glow of mental activity. She vanished from me.

I did nothing, I thought nothing. I waited motionless behind the telephone pole, concealed from her sight and from her prying mind. She could not catch me unless she caught my thought, or unless she moved deeper into the alley and came abreast of the pole. We were two invisible bodies in the darkness, two tightly wrapped minds hiding our heads from each other. I knew where I was but I no longer knew where she might be.

Then the stinking cats loused it up. I had forgotten the cats and did not realize they were so near. They had worked their way up the alley. Her unseen presence frightened them and my quite visible

body behind the pole annoyed them. I offered them a tangible means of expressing their nerves, so the nearest one arched its back, hissed, then clawed at me. It might as well have flashed a light on me.

I was done unless I acted fast, and the only defence I knew was a fast offence.

Without speaking aloud, I said, " Hello, Marie."

There was no answer.

I sent another thought. " Come on out, I see you."

That did it. " You can't !" she flashed at me, and the thought revealed her position and also the fact that she was frightened . . .of me !

" Oh, but I can. You're there, against the wall."

After a short silence, she asked, " Who are you ?"

Who was I ? I stared at her in concealed astonishment.

What the hell, did she expect me to come right out and admit the truth ? Did she expect me to give myself away so readily ? Yes, she apparently did, so I answered and lied to her.

" I'm another, Marie, another like yourself." I directed a pointed thought toward the starry heavens, hiding from her the false base of the thought. " From up there."

Even her responding gasp reached me on the mental line.

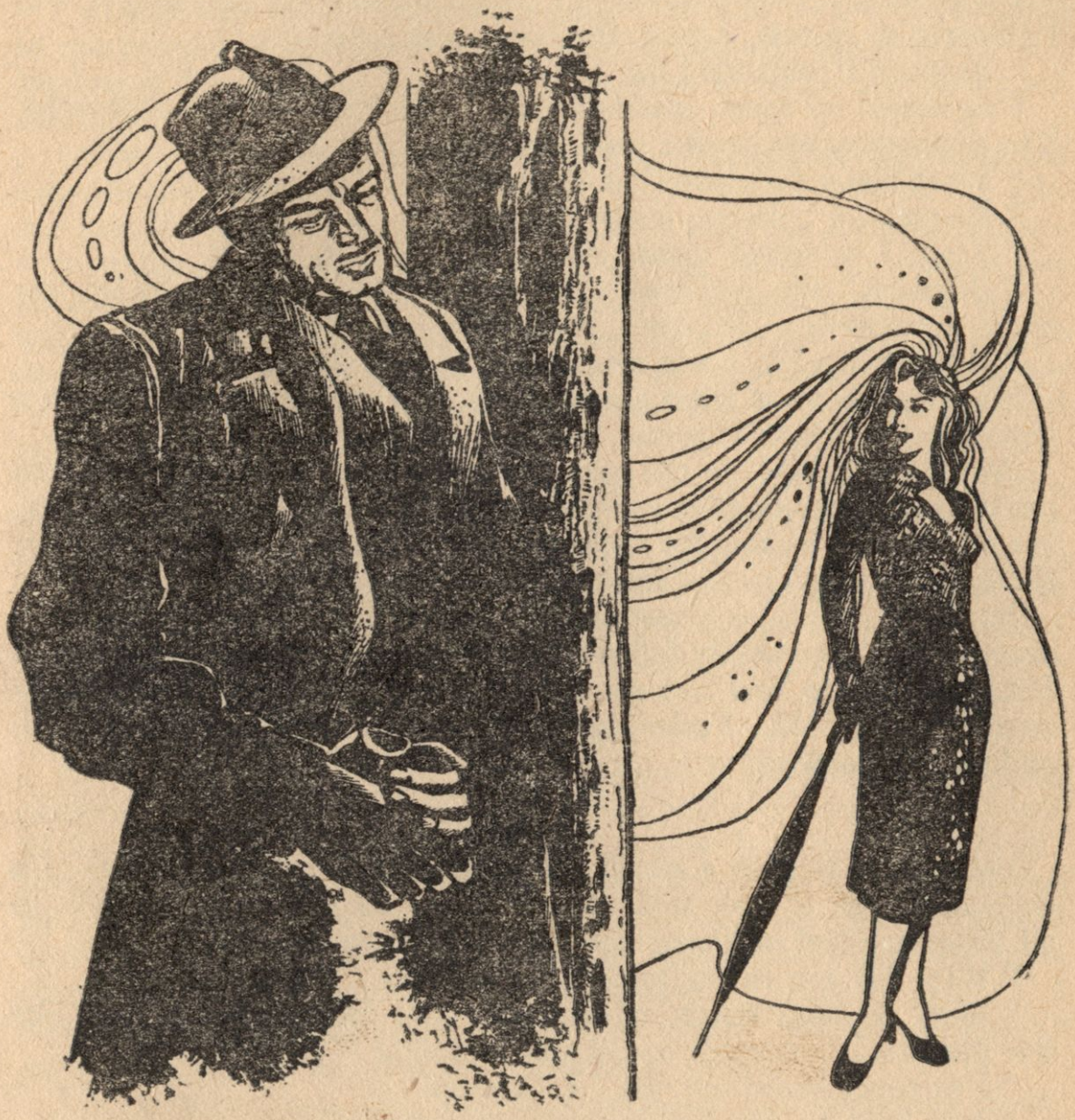
She was frightened, damned frightened and her reaction plainly revealed it. It puzzled me—I was the expendable who was supposed to get away from one of *them* the best way I could should I be caught, and yet she was frightened of me ! It didn't make sense. I waited for her to reply.

To all inward and outward appearance I was exactly like herself. If she could walk the earth in the guise of a human, as Brigham had suspected the visitors could, then she had no reason to believe that I was not doing the same. If she could probe into minds, could skim the intelligences of earthlings, then it was quite apparent to her that I was doing the same, here and now. We had looked into each other's minds and had seen only what was open for display, so it should have followed that we were both of the same kind, both of the same origin. Yet she was scared of me.

Brigham was the boss, the man I sent my reports to. I had seen him just once when my job was explained to me. He gave me a sum of money and instructed me as to the search, only he'd supposed it would be in the form of a man and I had automatically accepted the supposition. Yet it was a woman, calling herself Marie Jackson.

" Marie . . ." I questioned.

" What do you want ?"



" That was a dirty trick to play on your husband."

She said again, " Who are you ?"

" My name is Evans," I said patiently, and quickly covered up with, " Here on this world I am called Evans. And you are Marie Jackson."

" What are you going to do ?" she asked fearfully, and I realized something else that she had attempted to hide, but failed. She really meant, what was I going to do to *her* ! Me ! An ordinary mortal watchdog, endowed with only one superhuman power, *telepathy*. And now that I had caught an other-worldly visitor, one of the suspected interlopers from a neighbouring planet, what was *I* going to do to *her* ! I'm damned if it made sense.

I slipped, I let my mind-shield loosen without my realizing it, and I thought to myself, I wish Brigham were here.

" Brigham !" she cried out instantly.

I tightened up again, instantly alert. She knew his name all right. The familiarity was in her tone and mind.

" What about Brigham ?" I demanded.

" Do you . . . do you know him ?"

" Yes," I admitted cautiously.

" Brigham," she persisted, " in Washington ? Grey hair, left ear partly torn away ? Brigham, who offered a job——?"

" Jephosophat !" I was astounded. " Not you too ?"

She stepped away from the wall, the fear vanishing. " Yes. Are you one of Brigham's agents, too ?"

And there it was. In the next few seconds in that dark alley, while the betraying cats scuttled away to safety, the beginning of it came out. We were both working for the same man, both watching for the same thing, and each of us had mistaken the other for an alien.

It was a ridiculous situation and yet had apparently come about because Brigham simply followed secret government procedure when hiring his agents, and had not informed either one there was already another in the field. I asked her if she wanted a drink, which she did, and we left the alley.

We were sitting in a small, cozy booth in the darkened rear of a cocktail lounge, a place well away from the theatre district. Now, of all times, we had no desire for her husband to find us.

" Why did you marry him ?" I asked her.

" Why, to keep watch, of course," She frowned. " Where else but near his laboratories would *they* be found ?"

" I've never found one yet," I admitted.

" Nor have I. Do you suppose we ever shall ?"

I shrugged. " Brigham thinks so, and there is every evidence of it. Especially since the papers began reporting these " flying saucers.' If Brigham is right, sooner or later one of those aliens will turn up in a vital spot and we'll have him."

" I don't like it," she replied, and lapsed into telepathy. The place was noisy despite its quiet location. " I accepted the job because it seemed the best thing to do, but I don't like it. It frightens me."

I sought her hand, and held it.

" It's funny," I said, " how Brigham tried to make me believe he was an individual, hiring me on his own initiative and out of his own pocket, just to investigate a pet theory of his."

" I caught that too !" Marie answered. " And all the time I glimpsed in his mind just who was putting up the money, who was actually beginning the investigation. Do you suppose he forgot we could read his mind ?"

" One of those idiotic lapses," I laughed. Thirty years ago Brigham had put the proposition up to me and asked me if I wanted the job. He was, he claimed, just an old man who held the fantastic notion that beings from other planets were visiting Earth—he offered the books of Charles Fort as partial proof, and offered a pile of other, unpublished evidence as the remainder of the proof. He asked me to look upon him as a scientist who was conducting a laboratory experiment, asked me to search the Earth for proof. If I found such proof then his theory was proven.

He gave me a sum of money, which he said was all he could afford, and a postal address to which I was to make monthly reports. The reports in themselves were to be simple things, and so for thirty years I had been mailing one letter a month, a letter which contained but one word: " No." I had faithfully carried out his mission, because I saw behind his words, behind his carefully fabricated story about it being an old man's whim.

Brigham was a secret presidential agent.

I saw past Brigham as he talked. Behind him I saw a thoroughly alarmed president and a cabinet member, and a third party who was partly visible as a secret service agent. I saw that the money for my investigation had come from a private and confidential fund maintained by the president and accountable to no one but him. When I looked into Brigham's mind and realized that all four of them took the interplanetary threat seriously, I began to believe. I accepted the job, I listened to the instructions, I took the money and left Brigham's house, and I've been reporting to someone ever since.

The president had died, long ago, back near the beginning of my thirty-year task. The cabinet member was shuffled somewhere into the discard and I had no idea where he might be now. I had not been back to see Brigham and did not know if Brigham still personally directed the search or if he too had died and another was carrying on in his place. Brigham had still been there ten years ago when Marie came, when she married Arthur Jackson and settled down near the Manhattan Project. Brigham might still be there for all either of us knew.

Meanwhile I had grown up in the job, had come to believe in it completely, and was constantly on the alert for evidence that an alien walked the Earth, that someone or something from the nearer planets

was among us, watching and waiting. Waiting for the birth of interplanetary travel, in all likelihood.

We sat there, Marie and I, comparing notes. It was curious the way her own progress was comparable to mine. She knew no more of Brigham and the people behind him than I did, had no other memories of him different than my own. She knew as much—or as little—about the entire picture as I knew, and could add no original touch of her own. Her job, she told me, had come to her in the exact manner as mine had.

Marie's warm and lovely body was touching mine, and with a detached corner of my mind I envied those years Arthur Jackson had lived with her. There was really no sane reason to envy the past, I told myself. Marie was mine, now. Jackson had wanted an equal as a mate, someone, who matched his own intelligence. Until now, this moment, I had been certain I'd never find my mate—for where else on Earth lived another telepath? Suddenly I felt an outside warmth stealing over me, and realized for the first time how a mental blush might feel. I stared at the girl. The blush was sweeping into her cheeks.

"Sorry," I apologized. "I'll have to learn to keep such thoughts to myself."

She smiled but didn't answer, I dropped deeper into my mental state to spare her further embarrassment, and thought about her. From the corner of my eye I noted the lean ripeness of her body and its more apparent compliment, the lovely face.

No wonder her husband was madly in love with her, no wonder he desired to posses that body, and no wonder he nearly went mad when that beautiful wife disappeared from him, "blanked-out" her loveliness.

Blanked-out!

I sat up, stunned. What a sucker I had been!

Marie Jackson, a Brigham agent—like hell! She knew no more about Brigham than I did, had no other memory of him than my own. Of course she didn't, she knew no more of him than she had read in my own mind. From the time I had dropped my barrier in that alley and let Brigham's name slip through she had been using my own thoughts to deceive me! Had even tried to make me forget the one startling, paramount difference between us: she could vanish at will! I could not.

I had been right the first time. Marie was an alien.

"Jehosophat!" I said suddenly, pulling away from her. "Your husband!"

" Where ?" She jumped.

" Not here—I didn't mean that," I said hastily, " but I forgot to call him back. I'm supposed to report on you, and we certainly don't want him to come walking in here. I'll call now."

" Must you, *now* ?" she asked softly with words, and sending along with them a suggestive undertone of thought.

" I don't want to, believe me. I want to stay right here with you until hell freezes over." I carefully hid the lie and forced myself to return an intimate thought. " The sooner we get him out of the way, the sooner you and I—" and I let the suggestion hang there.

She smiled lazily. I got out of the booth and signalled the waiter for another round of drinks. She said, " Please don't be too long."

" Count on me," I replied. I looked again at her striking features and once more envied Arthur Jackson in his ignorance.

She winked and I walked over to the telephone booths. As soon as I was out of her line of sight I closed off from her my flow of thought and got the devil out of there, out the back way and down the street as fast as my feet would carry me. People stared at me as I ran. Marie was deadly. I wanted to get as much distance between us as was possible.

I ran until I found an empty cab and jumped in. " Get moving fast !" I snapped at the driver. I gave him the address of Arthur Jackson's home, hoping the man had given up the street search for us and returned there.

Marie Jackson—the thing I had been set to catch, had very neatly caught me.

I wanted to warn Jackson first because his danger was immediate, and because I did owe him a certain loyalty . . . he was a human being. And when I reported to Brigham I would not tell him how I had been taken in, would not tell him she had pretended to be another searcher like myself, that she had hoodwinked me with a feigned fright and pretended fear of me. She had lied to me, tricked me with word and thought, cleverly followed my conversational line on my search with insertions of her own which sounded as if she, too, had known Brigham. I didn't want him to know I had fallen flat on my face.

By using some sort of tremendous mental power which an earthborn telepath—myself—did not have and could not guess at, she had vanished from sight. She was from the *outside*, from up there where humans hoped to be someday.

The cab pulled up in front of Arthur Jackson's house. The lighted windows in one of the rooms told me where he was.

I dashed across the lawn and stopped in midflight, astonished. That which came spilling across the wide yard with the light told me something else. Marie was ahead of me.

"You want to kill me!" came the mental image of his accusation.

"You are a fool," she snapped. "This job is ended."

I hastily circled the house, searching the windows, and found a set of screened kitchen-windows open to the night. I crawled up through one of them, and lowered myself to the kitchen floor without a sound, and started quietly through the darkness of the house toward the lighted room. My mind caught a sense of urgency from Marie. I paused, sought out ahead of me and found she was working on a metallic object. She was not expecting me yet.

Her husband was frightened, and confused as to her presence and her purposes, and in his ignorant fear he was babbling furiously without pausing to organize his words. I listened to them for only a second and turned my attention back to his wife. Marie was extremely busy on *something* and I could pick up only bits of her concentrated thought. She was hurriedly attempting to take a fix upon some object which had moved, or to arrange a fix upon it. The fragments of concentration were very vague.

I crept closer to the lighted doorway, moved along until Arthur Jackson came into view. He was seated in a chair, held there by invisible bonds, staring at her and talking. I listened to him again.

". . . kill me, you found out what you wanted to know and you're going to kill me, you found out about the project and you're going to radio your friends, you're a spy but don't think I haven't been wise to you because I have, and I hired a man to follow you, so if you kill me now . . ."

He went on and on but I had lost interest in what he was saying. He had said radio. Radio—the machine in the suitcase, which earlier that day I had glimpsed in his mind, the thing on which his wife was now working. Marie Jackson was setting up a fix to find a position which had moved, and her husband thought it was a radio.

I remembered his eariler words, his telling me that he discovered her reading a schematic. I knew then what she was doing, what she was working on. With that key to her vague mental pattern, I could assemble the spillage that came my way and see what she was doing.

He thought it was a radio, thought she was using it to relay information on the hydrogen bomb back to her countrymen in Europe. He was only partly right. Marie Jackson was setting up a fix on her home planet, a body which had moved in space since she last used the in-

strument. The machine was the only kind of a communicator which was capable of piercing the Heaviside Layer, a combination telepathic-electronic transmitter which broadcast on a tight beam to a fixed position. It was a transmitter which employed an electrically stepped-up mental force to hurl a message across space to another planet.

She suddenly ceased working. I froze against the wall, waiting to see if she had discovered me but no thought from her indicated that. Instead she put out a feeler toward the street, splayed the mental search beam over a wide area seeking my presence. Satisfied that I had not yet approached the house, she dropped it.

The work on the transmitter was finished. Jackson was still babbling.

In a flaring instant of anger she silenced him, hurled a mental force which paralyzed his tongue, and the man fell dumb, choking. I carefully followed that, and noticed that she had also paralyzed his legs. That was why he had never left the chair since I had come into the house. Marie walked around a table nearer to him.

" Arthur," she said aloud, slowly, so that he would understand, " you're a fool ! The man you hired to follow me is a fool !"

I remained motionless in the darkness, against the wall. I listened to her words with my ears, but my mind was reaching out to that instrument, examining it, studying the manner of its operation, looking for the inlet which received the mental thought and amplified it.

" I have little choice in the matter," she was saying. " If I allow you to continue your work on that unit you call a ' hydrogen bomb ' I will be hastening the death of my own world. You do not know it but your military forces are as far advanced on space rockets as you are on this ' bomb ' unit. Do you see what that means ?

" Do you see what little choice I have ? Arthur Jackson, we cannot allow your race to get off this planet for you are much too dangerous, too deadly ! You are not yet fit to leave your planet for you would only spread your blackness to mine, to the other worlds. And so you must stay here until your race has conquered its own murderous habits.

" I am sorry, Arthur Jackson, but you must die, and any other man who follows in your place must die—until the time comes when your race can be trusted. The only other alternative is to eliminate this planet completely—to bring about an accident in your experimental laboratories, to cause this ' hydrogen bomb ' weapon to turn upon its makers. Surely you do not want that, nor do we. But your work must be stopped, and to stop that it is necessary to stop you—"

She stopped then in mid-sentence and whirled in alarm. Behind her the transmitter had flared into life.

In two short seconds it was over and she was too late. I had found the input channel, found the way to activate the mechanism. It was that which had caused her alarm. As she whirled to stare at it, I stepped through the doorway.

Using her own words, coldly, without emotion, I thought into the transmitter: " The job is ended."

The lost two seconds were her undoing. Once before on that evening she had betrayed a fatal weakness, revealed her inability to make split-second decisions and act on them. Marie had spent too many years on Earth and had grown careless of her training. She made the second mistake I knew she would make.

She started for the machine instead of hurling a contradictory thought into it, instead of jamming the transmission of my message by forcing one of her own. I dived for the table where the transmitter lay.

She reached it first, bent over it, and I chopped my hand down on the back of her neck.

I swear to God I didn't know that would kill her.

It wouldn't have killed a human—there was not that much force behind it. I had forgotten—or perhaps the fact never so much as occurred to me—that she wasn't human.

Marie Jackson was dead, and in her death she was changed. The mental image she had built around herself to walk Earth unnoticed was fading as fast as her mind died. The guise of a woman she had long ago assumed was slipping away and I did not like what was left. I stepped over the body, turned to her husband in the chair.

Arthur Jackson was dead, strangled to death on his own paralyzed tongue. I stood there a moment looking at him, wondering if he had lived long enough to see what his " wife " really looked like.

And then I walked out of the room, into the little entrance hall which contained a telephone. Standing there in the semi-darkness, I dialled the Western Union number.

" I want to send a night letter," I said to the clerk, and gave him Brigham's name and the post box number in Washington.

" And the message sir ?"

" Just say : ' The job is ended.' "

—Wilson Tucker

The following story is a unique type of 'ghost' story—a truly futuristic version which has no connection with the popular style of the Victorian age. Author Alan Guthrie, who is comparatively new to the fantasy field, has produced a very fine plot for the setting, which will please both science fiction and fantasy readers.

DEAR GHOST

By ALAN GUTHRIE

I stepped carefully into the transport and felt the sickening wrench as it sent me half-way around the world. With the wrench came the old, familiar fear. *This time?* *This time?* The fear was illogical, never yet had anyone failed to reach their destination but I couldn't remember to forget what would happen if anything went wrong.

Curtis was waiting when I arrived. I saw him as the door of the cubicle slid aside, sitting at his big desk, his grey hair a tumpled mess, his grey face lined with strain and fatigue. He looked up as I came towards him.

"Nugent! You made good time."

"Speed of light." I stood staring down at him waiting for him to get to the point. I didn't have to wait long.

"Nugent, I want you to take out a starship."

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to.

"I know that you've done your time, but this is an emergency."

I headed back towards the transport.

"John! Please!"

That stopped me. Not what he said so much as the way he said it. Curtis never appealed to anyone. Never. He told them and they did it. Or he told them and they didn't do it in which case they never had a second opportunity to refuse. I came back towards the desk.

"What's the matter, Curtis, you want to send me ghost?"

"You've still time in hand. You could make the trip easily."

"And back?"

"Molendis is a nice planet, John."

"Earth is better."

"Earth is the best," he agreed, and sat looking down at his hands. "You know that I wouldn't have sent for you if it hadn't been necessary."

"Definition of words. What is 'necessary' to you needn't be to me." I should have walked out then but something, curiosity maybe, forced me to stay. "What is this emergency?"

"There's been an outbreak of *colthin* on Molendis. It's a new planet and hasn't the laboratories and techniques to process and prepare the vaccine. We did that for them here on Earth and now we've got to get it to them."

"Simple, send it in the normal way." I stared at him. "Don't tell me that you've got no ships."

"We have ships, John. We need a pilot."

"But why me?"

This time it was his turn to remain silent and I thought I knew why. Pilots were scarce, scarcer than ships because ships lasted longer than men. It took a long time to train a man so that he could find his way through the swirling distortion of hyper-space. And it took men to do it, machines were affected too much by the drive-field.

"This is ridiculous," I said. "There must be more than one pilot on Earth at this time. You don't really need me."

"I think we do, John," he said quietly. And then I got it.

"Expendable! You think that I'm expendable! Damn you, Curtis!"

"Damn me if you like," he said, still calm. "But what about Molendis? You want me to send a new pilot there with the chance that he will bring *colthin* back with him? Have you ever seen what that disease can do? On Molendis it must be bad but on Earth . . ." He shook his head. "I can't take the risk. I dare not. Molendis is in quarantine for the next ten years and the vaccine will be the last cargo they'll receive for that period. It's up to you whether they get it or not."

He meant it and I hated him for leaving the decision to me. Now I knew why he looked so drawn why, despite all logic to the contrary, he was willing to make one last contact with the disease-ridden planet. I'd never seen the full effects of *colthin*, no one had, but up to date it had depopulated three worlds and decimated ten. They were frontier planets with plenty of open space and individual isolation. What it would do to Earth with its crowded cities and teeming population no one liked to think.

"Molendis is how far? Thirty?"

"Forty-two and a half."

"And I've a maximum of fifty hours." I looked out of the windows to where the sun was painting the soaring spires of the city with red and gold, pink and delicate orange. Across the blue sky a few clouds drifted like engineless ships and, in the distance, I could see a touch of green. Suddenly I didn't want to leave Earth again, ever.

"You're asking too much, Curtis. No matter which way you look at it I don't stand a chance. How far is the nearest planet from Molendis?"

"Fifteen."

"So I stay there or go ghost, is that it?"

"Yes, John. That's about it."

He didn't say any more. He didn't try to beg or plead or mention that ten million people were depending on me to give them a fighting chance. He didn't even mention that I owed a duty to the race. He didn't have to.

I was going to take out the ship.

It was old and, like me, expendable. It stood a little to one side of the field as if ashamed and, as I stood at the open hatchway after my pre-flight check up, I stared towards the new ships, the big ones, tall and sleek and as haughty as a woman. But no matter how good they looked now they were all sisters beneath the skin. They, like the crews who ran them, were all operating on vanishing time. Curtis was waiting for me at the foot of the ladder.

"Everything all right, John?"

"Seems to be."

He nodded, his grey face masked and expressionless, and I wondered just how it must feel to sit behind a desk and play at God. I didn't envy Curtis, sometimes sitting behind a desk can be the hardest thing there is, especially when you've a galaxy, an expanding race, and constantly diminishing ships and men to co-ordinate and intermesh the destinies of half a hundred worlds.

A group of youngsters passed close to us. Fresh cadets from the Academy, still wet behind the ears and all suffering from the impatience of youth. I stared after them, remembering the time when I'd been as they were. It seemed a long, long time ago.

"You've seen the vaccine release?" Curtis spoke as if the words burned his mouth. "You can unload as soon as you touch down without unsealing the ship."

"I've seen it." I stared at him. "What's the point? Does it matter if I unseal or not?" Something about the way he avoided my eyes made me step close to him. "Curtis! Just how bad is it on Molendis?"

"Bad," he admitted. "We were late getting the news and it's taken time to prepare the vaccine. *Colthin* is fast, John, fast and nasty." He looked away. "But we must do what we can."

"We?" I didn't mean to say it and when I saw his expression I wished that I hadn't. Regrets were useless. Even if every living soul on the planet were already dead we still had to try. Because we couldn't be sure. No one could, and if the vaccine could save a half of one percent, even if it could save a tenth of that, we still had to try. That's the way we're made.

"You can unload the cases in the central plaza and, if things look too bad, you can take off and head for one of the uninhabited regions." He was talking nonsense, and he knew it. "It's all I can offer, John," he said miserably. "I'm sorry."

"Is that why the ship's loaded with supplies?" I had wondered about that. "Near-ghost stuff I suppose?"

"Yes, John."

"The ship too." I looked back and upwards to where it waited. "You must have raided the graveyard for all that."

He shrugged, not answering, but I didn't need an answer. Expendable pilot, expendable ship, expendable supplies. Curtis was making certain that Molendis would stay in quarantine.

A siren cut through the silence between us and a red light began flashing a series of longs and shorts from the control tower. I didn't have to study them to know they were spelling out my signal. Time to go. Time to head out for the last time. Time to leave Earth—forever.

"Goodbye, John." Curtis's hand was warm and hard against my own. "Goodbye, and thank you."

I watched him walk away. I didn't repeat his thanks—how can you thank your own executioner? But I felt a vague regret that I would never see him again. I liked Curtis. I would always like him.

Sighing I turned towards the waiting ship.

Take off was as usual. The ship was old but, like all her breed, she had been built well. I lifted her gently, using more fuel than I might, but remembering the cases of vaccine. Take-off shock could do more than damage the packing, it could cause degeneration in the actual vaccine itself and anyway, I wasn't in that much of a hurry.

I levelled off at a hundred thousand miles and began to hunt for the target stars. The Moon was the other side of Earth so it didn't bother me and, as I'd risen in the shadow, the sun wasn't too much of a nuisance. Finding my bearings didn't take long and I blasted towards my destination, building up some forward velocity before engaging the field and dropping into hyper-drive.

On the panel before me the meters kicked and a green lamp flashed to give the all clear. I dropped my hand on the button then, just before pressing it, I took a long, last look at familiar places.

Then I pressed the button and, as the rainbow pattern of hyper-space swirled against the visi-screen, I started on the last fifty hours of my life.

Fifty hours in hyper-space that is, but all pilots and starship crews measure their lives that way. Five thousand hours plus or minus five. Five thousand light years of travel, plus or minus five. The sum total of ship expectancy for any man or woman in the starfleet.

And I'd less than fifty left to go.

Vanishing time we called it, and it was the price we had to pay for breaking the Einsteinian equations. In order to travel faster than light we had to take the ship somewhere out of the normal universe. The field did that, never mind how, and in that strange region of swirling light we travelled a light year an hour. It was wonderful, but it had a catch.

You can't play about with mass and you can't get something for nothing. There was a constant strain, a weakening, vibration, energy loss, call it what you like but it all added up to the same thing. After five thousand hours of hyper-drive travel a man went ghost. After twenty thousand hours a ship went the same way. Organic matter five thousand, inorganic twenty. Simple.

Except for those who lived on vanishing time.

Because no one knew exactly what happened when a man went ghost. He didn't die, not as we know death, but he didn't live either, not as we know life. He simply vanished. Food, water, clothing, all went the same way after five thousand hours. Metal, ships, fuel, wire followed fifteen thousand hours later. They winked out. They disappeared. As far as normality was concerned they ceased to exist.

There were theories, of course, there always are. The scientists said that normal matter, vibrated by the field, somehow reached the

breaking point and became transmuted into some form of negative matter. An atom is a small thing surrounded by space and, if that atom should somehow suffer energy loss or actual displacement, then matter as we know it ceases to exist. In effect it moves somewhere else, where is anyone's guess. They could have been right, I wouldn't know, but pilots, crews, all those who worked on, handled or knew about starships had a simpler term. They called it going ' ghost.'

I tried not to think about it. Five thousand hours isn't a long time, certainly not long enough to compensate for ten years of solid training. New pilots were constantly being trained, and as constantly being transferred to the interplanet ships when they had served their starship time. New ships were constantly being built, only to be relegated in the same way. The system was fine for interplanetary communications, but trying to maintain contact with the expanding frontiers as well as intermesh the settled star systems was like trying to scoop up water with a sieve.

I sat for a while staring at the visi-screen and letting myself calm down. Feeling the way I did it would only take a touch to make me collapse the field, reverse the ship and head back to Earth while I could still make it. Or I could head towards one of the nearer stars, there were plenty within twenty light years, and sneak back later. The only trouble with that was that I'd have to live with myself later, and somehow I knew that I wouldn't like that sort of a man to live with.

So I checked the ship instead.

It was big, too big for one man, and had only recently been resurrected from the graveyard. That's what we called the place where ships and supplies were sent after service. Using the metal again was too dangerous for contemplation. It might get incorporated into a starship and blink out when least expected. It wouldn't be funny to have half the hull disappear while in hyper-space. So, after they had hauled their last cargo between the planets, the old ships were swung into orbit and sent on automatic into hyper-space.

Like me the ship was expendable.

The food lockers were surprisingly well filled. I wondered about that. Did Curtis have his own ideas of what happened when a man went ghost ? And was he providing for me in case I should ? From the stores I wandered over the ship in general. As yet there was nothing for me to do, the hard part would come later when I had to sort the one specific pattern of Molendis from all the others. It wasn't easy, the differences were minute, and a mistake could emerge the ship parsecs from its destination. Remember that minutes saved on each trip could extend the vanishing time of the vessel and you know why pilots had to be well trained.

The shock came when I entered a cabin. I had expected it to be empty, it was, but not in the way I had imagined. It was devoid of human life but not of human presence. There were some garments in a locker, some things still on the bulkhead table, held by their magnetic bases. There was a photograph on the wall and a faint but unmistakable aura of perfume. The photograph gave me the answer.

It was that of a woman. Smiling, pert, brown-haired and brown-eyed. She must have been about twenty, ten years younger than myself, and she was beautiful.

I looked at it. It was the natural response of a man who had only just recently given up the idea of marriage and a normal life. I'd had big plans for my future, plans which had all gone into the discard, but I was still human and still susceptible. There was something about the photograph, something familiar, and I frowned as I stared at it.

I was still frowning when the lights dimmed, something cold touched one ear and something else brushed against one cheek.

I didn't jump, or run, or scream. Instead I stood quite still and listened to the pounding of my heart. Fear is a peculiar emotion, even when we know that there is nothing to be afraid of, still the body responds. We carry too large a heritage of the past to wholly throw off the primitive reactions. The ship was empty, I knew that, and I knew that there could only be one logical explanation of what had happened.

The ship was haunted.

Ghosts were nothing new. I stood a good chance of becoming one myself, but up to now I'd only heard of haunted ships, I'd never actually travelled in one. There were tales in plenty, of invisible crews, invisible pilots, crewmen who had gone ghost and who still remained with their ships. Most of them were obvious fabrications but it was cold fact that people had gone ghost and, if they had, was it possible that they still remained with the ships to haunt them?

I decided to experiment.

"Who are you?" I didn't expect an answer and I wasn't disappointed. "Is that you?" I pointed towards the photograph. The lights brightened and I took it to mean 'yes.' I looked around, there was nothing to see, of course, but I was strangely reluctant to leave the cabin.

"Can you hear me?" No reaction. "Can you see me?" The same result. I asked a few more questions feeling more and more foolish as I stood before the photograph and talked to empty air. The lights didn't dim again, nothing chilled or touched me, and I felt that I was wasting my time.

Sheer curiosity made me go through the things in the cabin. There were some intimate feminine underwear, a couple of dresses, some cosmetics, perfumes, a little jewellery, and a complete nurse's uniform. I touched it, it felt somehow old as if it had been hanging there for a long time and, even as I watched, it disappeared from under my hand.

Startled, I stepped back and, even as I did so, the other garments began to go ghost. The photograph went last of all, the frame hanging empty against the wall. Foolishly I stared at it, than at the items of metallic jewellery, the inorganic caps of the cosmetic bottles, the scraps of metal and wire left behind.

I decided to get back to work.

It wasn't easy. I kept seeing a pert, brown-eyed face pictured against the screens and, every time I saw it, I had a sense of familiarity. Somewhere I had seen that face before but for the life of me I couldn't tell where. It worried me a little, that sense of familiarity, and I tried to think of something else.

The ship, for instance. I knew that it had been resurrected from the graveyard but the feminine garments and other stuff in the cabin didn't make sense. It had gone ghost too soon for it to have always travelled with the ship and, thinking of it, I began to get a crazy idea. Suppose someone had deliberately stocked the ship with the possessions of someone who had gone ghost in her ? The entire vessel was near the end of its vanishing time, supplies too, and that couldn't have happened by accident. Someone had arranged for everything to be the way it was and, as far as I was concerned, there was only one man who could do that. Curtis !

Thinking of him I knew that I was right and, thinking of him, I knew where I had seen that photograph before. It was the twin to one he kept on his desk. The girl ? I'd heard something somewhere. His wife ? His sister ? I snapped my fingers. Curtis's sister had gone ghost in the early days before they knew what it was all about. The ship was haunted by Shellia Curtis.

I felt sad as I thought about it. Curtis was pushing seventy and his sister must have been born about the same decade as he was. No wonder the garments had felt old. They had probably been in store for something like fifty years.

So much for my dreams of romance.

I concentrated on my job and tried to forget the banishing hours of my life. I ate, and it didn't surprise me to find that a good half of the stores had winked out of existence. I slept a little, though sleep wasn't easy, and I forced myself to roam the creaking corridors of the ship. She was well built but she was old and, during the course of her life, had developed odd creaks and slithers unnoticeable during normal

flight, but startingly loud to a man on his own. I'm not particularly nervous, but I'm no hero either, and I was getting to the stage where I was walking about with my head on my shoulders half the time, when the alarm rang.

That would mean Molendis.

Emerging took the usual time and the usual cold-sweat of anticipation. Either we made it or we didn't. Either the ship emerged in empty space or there would be a big blue flash as two objects tried to occupy the same space at the same time. My luck held, my astrogation had been good, and I fired the main drive towards the big, green and brown planet a million miles towards the glowing, blue-white sun.

I heard the radio warning as soon as I cut in the receiver. It was short, sharp, and unmistakable. It spelt quarantine, death, and isolation. It spelt *colthin*, and, any other ship hearing it, would immediately streak away to other places. I just kept on going.

I'd hit atmosphere before the strident signals faded to be replaced by the weary tones of a man either too ill, or too indifferent to feel emotion.

"Warning. This planet is rotten with *colthin*. Do not land. Do not land."

"I'm coming in," I said cheerfully. "Stand by to receive vaccine."

"Vaccine!" He sounded as though I'd shown him the Holy Grail. "You've got it?"

"That's right."

"That's wrong!" His enthusiasm ran away like water in a punctured barrel. "It's too late."

"It can't be too late." I swung into orbit and began to lose velocity. "You're alive, aren't you?"

"Am I?" He didn't laugh but if he had it wouldn't have been through amusement. "Maybe I am. So are a few other people. Damn few. A couple of weeks ago the vaccine might have done some good but now . . ."

"Is it that bad?" I braked hard and kicked in the stabilisers. Below me the city spread in neat regularity and I headed towards the main plaza. I didn't think anyone would object to my blast searing their flower beds.

"You'll see," he said grimly, then coughed. I didn't like the way he did that.

I didn't like what I saw after I settled either.

Men aren't really dignified but when they're walking and talking and remembering that they're human, you can pretend they are. But you can't pretend when they come crawling towards you in every stage

of loathesome disease. I stared at them through the high-mag screen and I knew then why no normal ship could have been sent to Molendis.

They were rotting as they moved.

Colthin seemed to combine the worst symptoms of everything that was bad. I stared at them and felt myself wanting to be sick. I stared at them and tried to remember what Earth had looked like when I left and not what it would be like if someone ever imported *colthin* with his cargo. I felt sorry, sure, I wanted to help. Hell that was why I was here, but I just couldn't help myself.

I triggered the release and dropped part of my cargo then, with the same movement of my hand, I blasted up and away from what was below.

There were three other big cities, distribution points for the vaccine —if anyone was alive and able to distribute it. I orbited the planet too, spilling out antibotics in a fine, pervading stream so that the air-borne virus of the disease could be rendered harmless. Then, my job done, I settled down on a gentle slope close to what had once been a thriving village and took time off to think.

I was safe from *colthin* while I remained inside the ship. Once I stepped out on the planet, even with the vaccine, I only had a fifty-fifty chance. Normally I would have taken that chance but one thing stopped me. Where was I going to live ?

The cities, from what I had seen of them, were hopeless. The air, aside from the warning signal, was dead. I'd seen no ground transport, no air-transport, no one working the fields. I'd seen maybe ten thousand people in the final stages of the disease and, of them, I wanted no part.

There were others, of course, there had to be. Even with *colthin* as virulent as it was, yet there should have been some people immune. They had probably run to the uninhabited regions and were waiting for the epidemic to burn itself out and, with those, I might be able to get along. The trick was to find them.

Molendis, like all newly developed planets, had a high concentration at several key points. That was inevitable when you realise that all the initial machine tools had to be imported. The colonists would only spread slowly out to the other regions, breaking ground, developing farms, starting mines and factories as they went. Ten million people isn't a really big population for an Earth-sized planet, not when most of them lived in the cities with the servo-mechs and automatic factories providing most of the staples.

Another century would have seen the planet evenly populated, a half-century even if emigration had imcreased, but they hadn't had that time to play with. *Colthin* had caught them just at the wrong

moment of their planetary culture and their very concentration had written their finish.

And I was sitting right in the middle of it.

It took two weeks for them to find me. Two weeks in which I waited and kidded myself that the waiting served a purpose. I knew that the antibiotics I'd dropped would be busy clearing the air but I also knew it was only a prophylactic measure. The only way to beat *colthin* was to let it die out for want of hosts and, no matter how long I waited, I was still a potential host. In five years I would be safe, the quarantine period was double that for safety, but I couldn't wait five years. Not and remain sane.

The first three days it wasn't so bad—bad that is in relation to what came after. I had food, water, and an entire ship to move about in and nothing to do. That was the worse part, I had nothing to do. I tried the complete band of the radio and could only get the warning signal. I caught up on my sleep, did a few exercises, and tried to forget the ship was haunted. But the ghost wouldn't let me.

It wasn't anything she did, the episode of the dimming lights was never repeated, but I just couldn't forget a pert, brown-eyed face and the knowledge that she had gone ghost in this very ship. Telling myself that she had been born sixty years ago didn't do any good. I hadn't seen her as an old woman, no one had, and to me she was just like her photograph.

Inevitably I began talking to her.

There's a lot of nonsense talked and written about spacemen. It's a popular assumption that we are strong, silent characters who are never so happy as when we're on our own. That's pure bunk. There is enough loneliness in space without wanting more. The stars are too far away, the jouneys too long, the hyper-drive too worrying for any man not to want company of his own kind. And I was alone in a creaking old ship on a planet which, as far as I knew, was devoid of life. What else could I do ?

It helped, somehow, to hear the sound of my own voice. I talked to her when I was preparing a meal. I talked to her when I checked the instruments. It got so that I was talking to her all the time. I didn't answer myself, I wasn't that bad, but I knew that it was only a matter of time.

" I'll give them another week, Shellia," I said on the tenth day. Already I thought of her as Shellia. " If they don't come then we'll move the ship somewhere else. Yes ?"

No reply, of course, how could there be ? But somehow that didn't matter.

It didn't matter anyway because at the end of the second week they arrived.

There were five of them, three men and two women. I heard them call over the external microphones and almost broke my neck getting up to control and switching on the high-mag screen. They were rough, the men whiskered, all dirty and in rags, but they were whole and without any signs of *colthin*. I could have kissed them. Especially I could have kissed the women.

"Hey there!" One of them, a man, apparently the leader, stared up at the ship and yelled towards me. "Anyone at home?"

"Yes." I sent my amplified voice towards them. "Where are you from?"

"Nowhere. We ran out before the plague could get us. Man! Are we glad to see you."

"Me too. Any more of you?"

"No, just us." He turned and said something to the others. "Open up will you."

"Sure." I stabbed at the hatch-button and waited for the double doors to swing open. They didn't. I tried again with the same result.

"Shellia!" I was annoyed and my voice must have showed it. "Quit messing around. I want to go out."

Funny how I automatically thought to blame Shellia. There was no apparent reason for the hatch not opening, but a dozen things could have caused it from a sticking relay to a total power-loss. I stabbed at the button again and fumed, then, still fuming, I got down to tracing the fault. While I was doing it I had time to think.

I thought of Curtis, and the Chinese and their habit of sending cash and material to their dead. I thought of a ship which was due at any time to go ghost, and of myself who was in the same position. And, as I thought, I began to get the glimmering of a startling idea. Molendis was a ruined world, and Curtis must have known that I'd be too late. He must have known too that life on a disease-ridden world wouldn't appeal to me. Had he intended for both me and the ship to go ghost?

Had he intended to provide for his sister?

The concept was ludicrous and yet, was it? There had been a lot of investigation by the scientists on just what happened when men and materials went ghost. Had they found out something unknown to the majority? Curtis would know, he was in a position to know everything, and rumour had it that he had deeply loved his sister and had never really recovered from her loss. Maybe he'd had the bright idea of sending me after her to keep her company.

But I wasn't going to play.

Not when there were real, living people outside and the chance of a real, living existence. Whatever happened when a man went ghost couldn't compensate for the total loss of life as we know it. I was still young, still able to enjoy things and I had no intention of blinking out for a long, long time yet.

I found the fault, a stuck relay, and I fixed it in half a second. Why it had stuck was a mystery, there was no apparent reason for the breakdown, and I wasted no more time getting back to control. I pressed the button, the doors whined open, and, for the first time, I breathed the warm, scented air of Molendis.

I'd already loaded myself with vaccine so I wasn't really worried. It was worth taking the fifty-fifty chance in order to hear a real, human voice again. Impatiently I waited for them to climb aboard.

Carter, who was the leader, came first. He was followed by Gerald and Henson and after him came the two women. They crowded the control cabin and I led the way down to the rec-room and broke out some food. Over the meal we passed introductions and general chit-chat. The real business came over coffee.

"What are your plans, Nugent?" Carter wiped his bearded mouth with the back of his hand and stretched his legs in animal satisfaction.

"That's up to you. Do you want me to join up with you, or do you want me to move on?"

"Move on where?" Hanson picked at his teeth and watched me from narrowed eyes.

"South, north, half-way round the planet." I gestured towards the hull. "I don't know. Anywhere I can find people will do."

"There aren't any people." Gerald made as if he was going to spit on the floor. "Hell, man! You circled the world, did you see any?"

"No," I admitted. "But there must be some somewhere."

"Not on Molendis." Carter shrugged. "They all flocked to the cities when *colthin* struck. They wanted help, vaccine, anything to beat the plague. As far as I know we are the only living persons on the planet."

I believed him. I had to believe him. I hadn't seen any proof to the contrary and it was logical to assume that anyone who'd seen or heard the ship would have come running. I remembered the radio operator and what I had seen in the cities.

"How did you escape?"

"We were out on an expedition. I'd located a vein of uranium and wanted to plot it before filing claim. We had a medical kit and a little

vaccine. When we heard the news we decided to stay isolated." Carter shrugged. "There were twenty in the original party."

"And the rest?"

He didn't answer and he didn't have to. I could guess what had happened. The vaccine had been reserved for the elite. When the others had been stricken they had been left to rot and die. Nice man, Carter.

"So we're back to the beginning," I said. "Four men, two women, and isolation for the next ten years. Nice prospect."

"It could be better," said Carter softly. "You've a ship and a universe to rove in. Why don't we just up and move?"

"You mean leave here and land on some uninhabited world?"

"Sure, why not?"

"And take *colthin* with us?"

"We haven't got *colthin*," snapped Gerald. "If we had we'd be dead by now. We're clean, all of us, why the hell should we stay here?"

"You can't be sure of that," I pointed out. "You could be a carrier, anything. Damn it man! You've seen what happened here. Do you want to spread it somewhere else?"

They didn't answer that but from the way they looked at each other I could see that I was wasting my breath. Carter shifted a little in his chair and one of the women sniggered.

"Look," he said gently. "Let's not have any trouble about this. If you want to stay here no one's going to stop you. We're getting out, and no one's going to stop us. Do you help us or . . ." The pistol he slowly produced from a pocket finished the sentence for him.

"This is a one-planet sun," I said. "Where do you hope to reach?"

"Anywhere with air and water, cities and people." He gestured with the pistol. "Hell, man! I'm not particular. Just set us down on a livable world, one with some people on it, and we'll be satisfied."

"And *colthin*?"

"We haven't got it. We won't be taking it with us."

He lied and he knew it but he just didn't care. For the first time I had cause to thank Curtis. He had foreseen this and, though they didn't know it, they would never use the ship to get anywhere. It would go ghost and leave them breathing space. The trouble was that I'd go ghost too.

But the pistol in Carter's hand left me no alternative.

I warmed the main drive and strapped myself in. I sealed the ship and made the preliminary warning. I took a last look at green grass and blue sky and then, before I could weaken, I hit the buttons and

lifted us towards the waiting stars. I wasn't gentle and there was no reason for me to save fuel. I slammed us up at a nine-G acceleration and took a perverse pleasure at the thought of the damage I was causing my unwanted passengers.

Carter swore at me after I'd cut the drive.

"What the hell are you trying to do, kill us?"

"No." I leaned back in the chair. "Where to now?"

"How far's the nearest planet?"

"Fifteen light years, but they won't let us land. This entire area for thirty lights will be alerted and watching for unauthorised landings."

"That applies anywhere," he said and I reminded myself not to be too smart. "Take us to a place towards the Rim. The new worlds aren't so particular."

"Phoriphor? That's about fifty lights out."

"It'll do." He sat down and nursed the pistol. "I'm watching you, Nugent. Be smart and I'll rip your stomach open. Be sensible and you can string along with us." He grinned. "Don't forget that you're in the same boat as we are now."

He was wrong, but he didn't know that. He knew and I knew that anyone breaking quarantine would be shot on sight but that was the least of my worries. I spun the gyros as I aligned the ship on the star sights, I selected a couple at random, and then hesitated with my hand on the field drive button.

"You're sure that you want to do this, Carter?"

"Sure I'm sure." He gestured with the pistol. "Get moving."

I sighed and pressed the button.

Hyper-space swirled around us, a glittering rainbow pattern on the screens and, as I stared at it, I felt my life slipping away. Fifty hours maximum. Minus forty-three left seven and most likely two. In two to seven hours I would go ghost.

"What's the matter with you?" Carter was staring at me. "You sick or something?"

I touched my face, it was wet with perspiration, and my reflected image in the polished control panel showed me a sight I didn't like. It isn't easy for a man to count the hours of his life, it was a thing I'd lived with ever since my first starflight and, now that I'd reached the end of my vanishing time, I felt genuine terror.

Because I didn't know just what was going to happen. Death was one thing, and death was bad enough, but going ghost wasn't death as we know it. It could be anything and it could be a lot worse than the final ending we all have to come to. My imagination played hell with my peace of mind and something of what I felt came through on my expression.

"What's it like, Shellia?" I spoke to the air in a desperate effort to get some sort of comfort. "Does it hurt? Is it the end? Do you know?"

"Stop it!" Carter's hand stung against my cheek. "What the hell's wrong with you? Are you going off the beam?"

"No." I touched my cheek and remembered to act the man.

"Then quit talking to yourself." He frowned. "Shellia? Who's she?"

"A ghost." I wasn't trying to be funny but I'd said the wrong thing and I tasted blood as he struck me in the mouth. He didn't understand. No one could understand who didn't live on vanishing time. If he'd guessed what was to happen he'd have forced me to emerge from hyper-space and head back to Molendis. Or then again he might have used normal drive to try and coast within an inhabited area. I didn't know and I didn't care.

All I could do was to wait.

While I was waiting I did a lot of thinking. Little things, like the dimming lights, the stuck relay, the indefinable sense of not being alone. It had seemed so easy to talk to Shellia, so natural, and somehow it didn't seem possible that people just winked out of all form of life. An energy shift, the scientists said. A slipping from one end of the matter-spectrum to the other. Perhaps it was the acquiring of a higher entropy, a greater energy potential. If Shellia had dimmed the lights and hindered the power flow through the relay then obviously she could control greater energy than I could. Was she still alive but in a different way? And would I be alive in the same way?

Curtis must have thought so. He had arranged everything and it was safe to assume that both the ship and I would go ghost together. I sat and thought about it, knowing all the time that I was only trying to delude myself and yet, with Carter watching me, it was all I could do.

The ship creaked, the time crawled, my vanishing time disappeared like snow in the summer. Then . . .

"Nugent!" Carter jerked to his feet, his eyes wild. "Nugent! Where are you?"

I stared at him, then at the outlines of the ship, hazy and somehow unreal. I stood up and stepped forward and found that I was naked. My clothes still lay on the chair behind me. Naturally, they had been new when I left Earth, and, as I stared at them, I knew.

Going ghost was as simple as that.

I almost laughed. I almost kissed the man with the gun. Instead I grabbed at it not the least bit surprised to find that I couldn't grasp it. My hand went through it as though it had been mist. Carter stared at the spot where I had been then, even as I watched him, he vanished winked out, disappeared and all around me the ship returned to solid, vibrant life.

Curtis had timed it well. The ship had gone ghost too and, as far as I was concerned, everything was back to normal. Normal that is from my viewpoint. As far as Carter and the others were concerned the ship had simply vanished from around them and left them naked and helpless in hyper-space. I hoped that they hadn't suffered too much.

I turned at the sound of a laugh, remembering my nakedness too late, and then not worrying about it. A girl stood before me, pert, brown-eyed, slim and attractive just as she had appeared in her photograph. And she didn't look sixty years old.

She smiled at me, her eyes warm with understanding and something else. Longing? Loneliness? Love? I didn't know. Explanations could come later.

"Hello, ghost," she said, and stepped forward.

—Alan Guthrie

When a wizard sets up a pentacle and conjures a spirit into existence he must be prepared to hold the resulting daemon and use him to the best advantage. In the following case the wizard wasn't quite sure just what he had materialised—but it did do him some good in the long run.

NO FUTURE IN IT

By KEITH WOODCOTT

Nothing.

Alfieri waited optimistically for quite fifteen seconds, his hope slowly dwindling away. Then he took his second-best wand (the ivory and ebony one) and beat his apprentice. Not that the failure could by any stretch of the imagination be attributed to the latter—he simply needed some means of working off his annoyance.

At intervals between blows and the cries of the youngster he looked around hopefully at the pentacle in case there should be a residual effect; but the space between the smoking lamps remained obstinately empty. At last he let the apprentice wriggle free.

" Impurities in the bats' blood, I'll be bound," he growled. He noticed that young Monasticus was not snivelling as wholeheartedly as he should have been, and the cloud of gloom which had been hovering over him suddenly turned the purple colour of a thunderstorm. He did not suspect the boy of fiddling with his ingredients—frankly, he had too low an opinion of his intelligence, though it would have been balm to his wounded ego if he had been able to believe that. It was sorely distressing that a man with the best reputation for wizardry in half a country should not be able to conjure up so much as a small fire-demon.

And if this run of failures continued, he would have to answer to Monasticus Senior himself. At the very best, he could expect ducking and running out of town. At the worst . . .

Alfieri's blood ran cold and he hastily changed his mental subject. If he could get the boy out of the way somehow for a while, he could experiment without anyone knowing he was only trying—

The obvious solution presented itself. It had a double advantage: he could palm off some of the blame on to old Gargreen at the same time. He stormed across the room in a first-class rage (this to impress and cow young Monasticus, who was not only coming to place a most un-apprenticelike lack of faith in his mentor, but whom he shrewdly suspected of reporting all his actions to his father) and seized a quill from the rack. As an after-thought, he charged it with owl's blood. That'd show he meant business ! It would mean complete ruin if anyone knew that he was perfectly aware no blame resided in the impure ingredients he was using—only in himself.

" *To Master Gargreen, self-named purveyor of magical goods,*" (he began).

. . . I am forced to indite to thee after the above fashion, sin' it be by thine own styling of such a purveyor that men miscall thee. Be it known, natheless, that never have I, Alfieri, sometime student of the University of Alcala, found so much fault with any man's wares.

As thou hast the temerity to say, were I not pleased with thy provisions, thou wouldst reimburse to me the sum I thereon expended, do thou therefore return the silver groat I gave thee for thy vial of bats' blood. Fail me in this, and I shall make of thee a horned and warty toad.

ALFIERI.

" Monasticus !" he added aloud, folding the parchment into four and sealing it with black wax stamped with his Seal of Solomon. " Get thee to Master Gargreen and convey him my missive with no compliments. Wait there until he doth refund to thee the silver groat I gave him. And get thee back hither with all speed, else shall I beat thee again. Out !"

Monasticus took the letter and departed hastily. As soon as the door slammed, Alfieri dropped into the nearest chair and drew a deep breath. How did he come to get himself into a fix like this? Now he was going to have to be hard on old Gargreen, which was the last thing he wanted—he was a nice fellow, really, as nice as anyone could be expected to be whose life's work consisted of being out at unlikely hours of the night, gathering fennel or snaring owls in the dark of the moon, or sneaking into the church to obtain dust from a corpse.

His mind went back to the days when he had first come to this town. Then he had been no more than a happy, healthy cow-doctor. In fact, his bundles of cow-herbs were still in the old leather knapsack on the wall yonder. He regarded them with fond eyes. They, at least, worked, as he had found by trial and error.

Yet, in a sense, they had brought about his down-fall. Belphegor take the day that he had come hither and cured Mistress Walker's only heifer of the croup! If it hadn't been for that interfering old bag, he might never have been forced into wizardry.

How clear it all was, now that he looked back on it! And how foolish it had all appeared at the time. First of all, old Mistress Walker had gone around telling anyone who cared to listen how he had lifted a spell from the sick beast, and since the town already had its standard complement of one witch—old Mistress Comfrey—it had been taken as a sign that he wished to join combat.

What a fight! He hadn't done a single blessed—or for that matter a single damned—thing. Mistress Comfrey had gone around the town announcing her jealousy and her intention of destroying the intruder. Since no one had thought to tell him he was being spelled, none of her maledictions had had the slightest effect. And on top of that, the old hag had caught the whooping cough and died of it.

His reputation was made after that, naturally. It wasn't every town that had a killing-power wizard for a resident, though the countryside was stiff with second-rate witches capable of turning milk sour or drying up a stream come summertime. Of course, the local churchmen had at once thundered against him, and if he had known what was in store, he would cheerfully have let himself be run out of town—public opinion was against having him burnt at the stake. Too many people had had a grudge against old Mistress Comfrey.

A thought struck him. If only he had happened to chance on the witch standing out naked at the crossroads at midnight working her spells, he could have carried her off to bed and spared her from her last illness.

But then, of course, old Monasticus had taken him under his wing, and that was his undoing. It had looked like a very sound policy at the time. Not only was he the richest merchant in ten counties—it was whispered that he had got his name from being the illegitimate son of a priest, and it was also said that he himself was a dabbler in black arts. You don't go around offending a man like that. He had spun the tale that he was a successful practitioner of magic, and Monasticus, knowing when he was on to a good thing, had set him up in business —had even gone so far as to make his own son his apprentice. Alfieri had a shrewd suspicion that the object of this was simply to keep the business in the family, so to speak, and that the pupil was to displace the master as soon as he was proficient enough.

Alfieri cursed his lying tongue roundly, calling on names which, if the books were to be trusted, ought to have made the entire town vanish in a clap of thunder. But it did nothing of the kind. Books ! He had no faith in them any more. He had managed to talk the old man into buying him a complete library of thaumaturgy, giving the excuse that he had formerly had a false apprentice who conjured up a fire demon while he was away and let it get out of hand. But the books, though they gave recipes, didn't provide any that worked !

He glanced along the shelf. Simon Magus—ugh ! Michael Psellus —phooey ! Hermes Trismegistus—nuts !

Liars, the lot of them.

And yet—well, maybe he had been living up to his own inventions and qualifications for so long that he was even coming to believe them himself, but damn it, there must be *some* truth in the matter ! Hadn't there been that character over in Wuerttemberg—Foster ? Faustus— that was it. He'd been a pretty smart cookie, to all accounts. Wine out of tables, and that sort of thing. But he'd been a genuine wizard, after all—he'd probably been in the business a long time before he got results. Whereas Alfieri was a complete novice, with only his sharp tongue and a lot of luck—most of it bad—for assistance.

Well, might as well go through it again for practice, he supposed. He certainly needed practice more than anything. After all, even if Gargreen was trying to swindle him on the bats' blood—which was entirely possible, what with him having supplied so many local magicians who were genuine—he had made rather a boss shot at the name Eleusthis in the last spell.

Eleusthis. Eleusthis. He thought he had it right. Maybe if he articulated carefully, he would get it out this time.

He took down his best wand (the silver one with gold ends) and positioned himself carefully at the side of the pentagram. With frequent glances at the book open beside him, he re-charged the lamps, burnt another red cockfeather, scattered some more dried herbs on his brazier, squared his shoulders, and began :

" In nomine Belphegoris, conjuro te—"

There was a sudden spurt of light in the middle of the pentacle, and a figure appeared and looked around with astonishment.

Weakly, Alfieri reached out for a support, found a table near to hand and leaned heavily against it. This was all wrong ! He hadn't even reached the part about Eleusthis yet. But nonetheless—he peered with narrowed eyes through the murk—he had got something. And if it wasn't what he had been expecting, it was at any rate a genuine, twenty-four carat, unmistakable demon. What else could it be ?

He said challengingly, feigning more confidence than he felt, "Aroint thee, demon ! I charge thee to do my will !"

The flow of words which this called forth from the demon was completely unintelligible, and Alfieri's heart sank. If he had the bad luck to call up one of those Arabian things Al-Hazred mentioned—a djinnee—he would get no change out of him. He knew perfectly well his Arabic accent was appalling.

He tried again, tentatively. " Who art thou ?" he demanded. " Make thyself known."

The fitful light of the lamps made it hard for him to see exactly what his demon looked like, but by dint of concentration he made out that it was roughly the size of a man, a little on the tall side, perhaps, and had no tail, no horns, not even flames coming out of its mouth. This was a strictly second-rate manifestation. His first success seemed momently more and more like a failure. And the worst thing about it was, he was alone. No witnesses to his triumph.

But there was something definitely out of the ordinary about this—apparition. He spoke for a third time, with determination. " In nomine, Belphegoris, Adonis, Osiris, Lamachthani—"

His voice tailed away, and he was suddenly filled with a mixture of joy and terror. The demon had reached out its hand, produced fire from its finger-tips, applied it to something he held in his mouth, and was breathing smoke ! He let out a strangled gasp and clung more tightly to the edge of the table.

Abruptly, after gazing slowly around the room, the demon seemed to come to a decision. He spoke slowly, in a rolling voice that echoed from all four walls. His accent was odd, but maybe he came from a

department of the nether regions not concerned with modern English-speaking people. He said, " What an amazing thing to happen ! He's got the set-up almost perfectly. Five sources of infra-red—I suppose the molar vibrations are supplied by intoning a spell. Maybe this is the origin of the legends of ghosts and devils. Hey, you !"

Alfieri nearly jumped through the roof. " Y-yes ?" he answered meekly.

" Are you a wizard, or a warlock, or something ?"

" I'm a wizard," said Alfieri, grabbing tight hold of the remnants of his courage. In the hope of making the demon a little more impressed, he added, " I am a former student of the University of Alcala, and I command thee to serve me."

The demon disregarded the last part of his remark, and went on surveying the room. " What an absolutely perfect set-up," he repeated musingly. " I wonder if I've had the luck to meet one of the real big-timers. Are you Faustus, by any chance ?" he demanded.

" No," admitted Alfieri. " My name is Alfieri."

" Never heard of you," said the demon, with a gesture of dismissal. " My name's Al Sneed, by the way."

Alfieri felt the situation getting more and more out of control. He seized on the one comprehensible admission the other had yet made. He ventured, " Art from Araby, Al-Snid ?"

" Too low a cultural level to accept the idea of time-travel," diagnosed Sneed. " No, I'm from London. Look, we aren't going to get anywhere talking like this. I'd love to stay and have a chat, but I have a date to watch Julius Caesar land in Britain in B.C. 55, and elapsed time is catching up on me. Excuse me." He did something to a gadget hung on a belt at his waist, and Alfieri, who had been having some difficulty in following Sneed's remarks, but who had gathered that he was on the point of losing his first incontrovertible demon, grabbed his book of spells and began again with, " Conjuro te—"

The demon looked up. " All right," he said disgustedly. " I might have known it. Coincidence or not, you've got an absolutely unbreakable temporal barrier here. I can't go forward or back until you blow out the lamps. Do that, will you ?"

" Never !" said Alfieri triumphantly. " Thou-rt the first honest demon I've yet conjured, and before I let thee go, must I display thee to my patron in earnest of my ability—else will he have me dismembered and burnt."

Sneed caught a hint of desperation in his voice. He said, " Well, I guess someone else can check up on old Julius. He's waited twenty-one hundred years for me, if you look at it that way. You sound as if you're in a spot of trouble yourself."

" In very sooth," admitted Alfieri. And then, before he realised, he was telling the whole story of how he became a wizard in spite of himself.

Sneed heard him out with a sympathetic expression. He cluck-clucked at the end of it. " Now let me see if I've got this right," he said. " You've managed to lie yourself into a spot where everyone thinks you're a wizard and can conjure up demons and make gold and do things like that. You—"

" Verily can I conjure demons," asserted Alfieri, remembering. " Hast thou not answered my call ?"

Sneed looked at his elapsed time meter again with a frown. " Yes, you have got me, haven't you ?" he admitted. " Still—even though I'm not a demon, I don't want to live out my life trying to explain the fourth dimension and temporal mass-exchange. Might cause ructions on the time-line even if I did get you to understand, at that. All I'm interested in is getting out of here. Can we do a deal ?"

" Huh ?" Alfieri was becoming more and more convinced that one demon doesn't make a thaumaturge.

" I mean," said Sneed with great patience, " is there anything you want which I can give you to let me go ?"

Alfieri caught on slowly, but when he had the idea he didn't let it go. He said, " Thou hast powers ? Thou canst fulfill my wishes ?"

" Umm." Sneed considered. " Let's say yes, within limits. I can grant one or two minor wishes. I can't change history too much, but I can get by with a minor repercussion. As I see it, old Monasticus —the bod who got you up your tree in the first place—is in this strictly on a cash basis. He wants a quick return. In other words, he's out for profit."

" Thou speakest sooth," sighed Alfieri.

Sneed took out a note-book and pencil, and trod his cigarette under-foot. " Have you a table I can use to do some figuring on ?" he asked.

" Leave not thy pentacle !" said Alfieri, suddenly remembering stories of the sad fate of wizards who had made that mistake.

" I'm insulated," said Sneed carefully. " The temporal static can't go away to ground." He walked over the chalk lines and set his note-pad down on a table. Alfieri covered his eyes and waited for the house to disappear. When he had decided this would not happen, he opened them again by stages. They did not stop opening at their usual size, they kept on getting rounder and rounder till it seemed they would leave their sockets. Sneed was working out a complicated equation with the aid of a slide-rule and a pocket map of three thousand years of history.

Eventually he turned in triumph. " Would three and a quarter kilograms of gold be any use to you ?" he asked. " I can give you that much without causing more than a Stage Sub-Three disturbance in the time-line."

Alfieri seized on the operative word. " Thou canst give me gold ?" he said. " Fain would Monasticus see good red gold."

" Fine," nodded Sneed. " Got anything you don't much value ? Preferably something fairly massive—long-range transmutation is a bit beyond the power of portable equipment. Ah, the very thing !" He indicated a small iron cauldron. " May I use this ?"

Alfieri shook his head dumbly.

Sneed unhooked a small object from his belt and pressed its end. It immediately glowed with a fierce white light. " Stand back," he said over his shoulder, " or you might get burnt." He pulled a pair of shaded goggles over his eyes and began to run the beam over the cauldron.

Alfieri needed no injunction to stand back. At that moment he wanted nothing so whole-heartedly as to be well clear of the house.

Sneed worked on, humming as he did so. The beam of light bathed the dull black metal of the pot, and slowly it began to reflect back yellower. After ten minutes, he turned to Alfieri.

" Chemically pure and perfectly genuine," he said cheerfully. " There isn't better gold this side of El Dorado. That's slightly more than three and a quarter kilos, really, but I think it's still on the safe side."

Fearfully, Alfieri reached out and touched the pot. His eyes were glazed with awe.

" Now," said Sneed sternly, " do you blow out those lamps, or do I turn you into a wart-hog ?" The threat was quite empty, but it had its effect. Convulsively, Alfieri reached for the snuffer. It was a pity that no one could see his first success, but still, there was the gold.

Smack ! went the snuffer, and there was a sudden blast of air, rushing into the vacant space left by the instant departure of the demon.

Alfieri dropped into the nearest chair and breathed a heart-felt sigh of relief. *That* was over ! And he had got off amazingly lightly. The demon hadn't even asked for his soul.

A sobering thought struck him. Maybe, next time, he wouldn't be so lucky. Next time—

He came to a sudden decision. With the gold (a suitable amount being retained for his personal needs, of course), he could prove to

Monasticus Senior that he was no fake. If he took advantage of the old man's first surprise, he could be three counties away in a day or two. There wasn't going to be a *next time.*

He got up and moved purposefully towards his library.

There was a slamming noise and the door jarred back on its hinges. Monasticus Junior entered the room, talking loudly.

" Master Gargreen saith his bats' blood was good enough for Mistress Comfrey, and he will not return the groat. Prithee, shall I be about gathering herbs to turn him into a too—o-oh !"

His final word turned into a gasp of amazement as he saw the solid gold pot on the floor.

" Master, what dost thou ?" he demanded.

" No more thy master," said Alfieri proudly. " I have fulfilled my bargain with thy father. I have made him gold. That done, I shall return to my erstwhile task of curing cows of sickness."

He dropped an armful of parchments into the still-smouldering brazier, and whirled on Monasticus. " Hearken, boy !" he said. " Let not this gold beguile thee. Avoid magic—'tis a perilous calling, and there's no future in it."

—Keith Woodcott

Plenty of children receive pets as gifts, and there wasn't anything particularly special about the one in this story, except that it led a little girl through a train of thought that would be admirable in an adult.

BIRTHDAY PRESENT

By CHARLES E. FRITCH

Mlissa squealed delightedly and clapped her small hands together. The animal looked up at her, puzzled, from its narrow cage.

"Happy birthday, dear," Mother smiled.

"Happy birthday, darling," Father echoed.

"It's just what I wanted," Mlissa cried eagerly. "May—may I touch it."

"Of course, dear," Mother said. "It's your pet now. You may do with it as you wish."

"Providing," Father amended, "you take care of it properly. Remember, animals have feelings, too."

"Oh, I will, I will," Mlissa promised. "I'll feed it and keep its cage clean, and I'll make a little leash for it so I can take it with us in the rocket when we go for a picnic and—and—" She paused, suddenly out of breath. "Oh, we'll have so much fun together—all of us."

Father and Mother smiled at each other. Mlissa peered at the caged animal, and the animal stood on its legs and looked back at her. What emotion lay in those small eyes; would it love her? she wondered.

Gingerly, she pried at the latchings of the cage, brought them loose and opened the cage door. The animal leaped for the opening, but she caught it and held it tight.

" Careful," Father warned. " Don't crush it."

" I'll be careful, Father." Mlissa held the struggling animal firmly and hugged it to her. After a few seconds, it stopped its erratic movements and regarded her with solemn eyes.

" Isn't it cute," Mother exclaimed.

Father nodded proudly. " Almost human. Makes an ideal pet. Doesn't bite or scratch, very easy to keep clean. Smart, too; you can teach it all sorts of tricks."

Mother smiled. " You sound like the petshop keeper."

" I'd like to teach it tricks. Lots of tricks," Mlissa murmured. " Do you suppose I could teach it to ride a tractor beam and maybe turn somersaults and—"

" Easiest thing in the universe," Father said.

" You'll have to help me, Father," Mlissa said. " You're so smart, we could probably teach it lots and lots of tricks together."

Father hesitated, a strange, pained look on his face. " Well, Mlissa, I don't know if I'll be able to—at least right now. You see—"

But Mother shot him a warning look. " Later," she said.

Mlissa looked up, puzzled.

" Come, dear," Mother said to her, " it's almost time for the party."

Reluctantly, Mlissa put her new pet squirming into its cage and securely latched the opening. She frowned, as a new thought troubled her. The suddenly-sad faces of her parents were the same now as when the mail-tube came a few days ago with an official looking message. Mlissa didn't know what was the matter, but she felt vaguely ill at ease, and everytime someone on the televiewer mentioned the word " war " that same look appeared on her parent's faces. Whatever this thing called war was, Mlissa was sure she didn't like it.

But the birthday party was just about to get under way, and at the idea of that all other thoughts temporarily vanished. Even as she thought about it, the first guest arrived, a small brightly polished boy who handed her a package decorated with stars and comets and rocket ships of gold and silver. She thanked him for it and put it on a corner table. And then she took him into the next room to show him her new pet.

His eyes went wide. " Is it real ?"

" Of course it's real," she said proudly. " It's my birthday present from Father."

" Can I hold him ?"

" No, you can't, you might hurt it."

" I won't," the boy insisted. " I'll be careful."

" Well—" Mlissa considered. " Well, all right, but only for a minute."

The boy waited eagerly as she undid the fastenings of the cage. The animal inside crouched warily in the corner and tried to avoid her groping hand, but she caught it and brought it out. The boy took it.

" Gee," he said, holding it, " I wish I had one of these. Father says they're too expensive, though, and I can just as easily go to the zoo if I want to see them. They have to ship them way from some other part of the universe, from some other—uh—galaxy." He stroked the animal. " We can't afford to buy one because Father's going in the army again. Is your father going back in the army again ?"

" No," Mlissa said curtly. The boy's words struck a familiar note somewhere deep in her mind, but she thrust the thought aside. Angrily, she said, " Give me back my pet, you might drop it."

" Oh, I won't drop him," he said, petting it. " My father pilots a spaceship for the army," he said proudly. " He's got a uniform that's blue and gold, with red and green and silver medals on it 'cause he's a hero. Has your father got a uniform ?"

" N—no," Mlissa said.

She felt angry now, and she could feel the tears coming to her eyes as she remembered the blue and gold uniform Father had been trying on just a few days ago. She had peeked into his room as he was putting it on, and she had marvelled at how strong and tall and handsome he was in it. Now, she didn't want him to wear it, because now she knew it meant he might have to go away and pilot a space ship for whatever this thing was called war.

" Give me back my pet," she demanded. " It wants to go back to its cage."

" Just a little while more," the boy said, fondling the animal. " I'm not hurting him."

" Just the same, give it back. It's mine, and I want you to give it back."

Reluctantly, the boy released his hold, and Mlissa rescued her pet and placed it carefully in its cage. The animal seemed relieved by the change. Mlissa bolted the cage door securely.

" Is it okay if I come over once in a while and look at it ?" the boy asked eagerly.

" I'll think about it," Mlissa said, but she didn't intend to—not after what the boy had said about Father going away.

When the others came, bringing presents, all of them marvelled at the animal and wanted to hold it. Mlissa let each of them touch it, but only for a few seconds because she didn't want the animal to get hurt.

Afterwards they played games and everyone laughed and had fun. But Mlissa's thoughts clouded whenever the roar of an occasional space ship shook the house with a giant's hand.

" He's not going away," she told herself, " he's not."

But that night, when the party was over and everyone gone, Mlissa's father told her he did have to go away—but for just a little while. He said he didn't really want to leave her but he had to and there was no point in being sad or angry about it. He was going to take out his uniform again and put it on, and then he would report to the spaceport where they would assign a great space ship to him, and he would go out many, many light years into the darkness to drive away some strange people they didn't like.

" Better your Father, Mlissa," he said, " than your husband."

But Mlissa didn't understand. She had no husband. She had only Father and Mother, and now her pet, and the thought of Father going away was suddenly too much to bear. She cried and begged him to stay, throwing her arms round him as though their slight strength could prevent him from leaving. Gently, he disengaged her small arms.

" Someday you'll understand," he told her.

" Someday," Mother breathed. But there were tears in her eyes, as though even she didn't understand.

And then he was gone.

The house was suddenly quiet, as though all sound had ceased to be, as though they were cut off from the rest of the universe and suspended by a thin thread in a very dark and silent room, as though that moment had become frozen and would remain still for all time. Mlissa cried secretly that night, pretending to sleep when Mother looked in on her. But through most of the night she lay awake staring into the darkness, wondering.

The next day came, and all morning and afternoon Mlissa sat by the window listening to the low ominous rumble of the rockets as they left for the stars. If she sat and looked real hard at the horizon she could imagine she saw them sweeping upward on great tails of fire, going to places she never dreamed existed. Out there among them was her Father, she knew, big and handsome in his uniform of blue and gold, doing this great thing called war. She tried to feel proud thinking of it, instead of sad.

Her pet grew restless, as though the sounds the rockets made troubled it. Mlissa often took it from its cage to comfort it and to have it comfort her by its presence there in her arms. Always it struggled, not wanting to be picked up, and this irked Mlissa, and once she got mad

and hit it. It cried out, almost the way a child does when hurt, and Mlissa felt sorry for what she had done—and frightened when she saw the tiny trickle of blood at one corner of the creature's mouth. But gently she wiped it away, apologizing and explaining that she had to hit it if it was naughty and didn't mind. After that, it didn't struggle as she picked it up, and although it seemed to tremble slightly as though afraid, Mlissa decided it was for the best. She didn't tell Mother what she had done, though.

Only a night had passed, and yet she felt so very lonesome for Father. A great emptiness had come to the house when he left, a cavity of loneliness that could not be filled even by the animal he'd left behind as a pet. Even *it* seemed sad. Animals have feelings, too, Father had said—and Mlissa wondered if the animal felt lonesome too, being away from others of its kind. But no, that was silly, for after all *she* was here to feed it and fondle it and take care of its every need. And yet she knew that it was not the same thing at all.

She knelt by the cage and looked in at the creature. It *did* look almost human at times, something like a live doll or a miniature human being —but of course it was only an animal and nothing more. Crouched in one corner, it made small noises like the sobbing of a child, and its tiny body moved convulsively.

Suddenly Mlissa felt a great sadness come over her and she felt sorry for the animal alone in its cage. She wondered what it thought of her and of the house they lived in and the new world that was its home. The pets came from some other—what was it, now ?—some other galaxy, that was it, on a small world spinning about a small sun. And here it was now, alone on a smaller world bordered by strong metal bars. At the zoo they had a special section for these animals and they'd even replanted tiny trees and built small dwellings for them to live in and regulated the temperature and the gravity and the air just so.

She wondered if her pet would be happier there, among its friends.

Angry with herself, she thrust the thought aside—or tried to. She knew that lonesomeness was an empty and hollow feeling, a feeling of incompleteness not pleasant at all. If this animal could not take the place of Father, she thought, how then could she take the place of this animal's friends ? Animals have feelings too, Father had said. What feelings did it have now ? What feelings could it have away from others like it ? She knew the answer, was experiencing it herself.

Mlissa felt very sad thinking about it, and after awhile she went and told Mother she wanted to take the animal to the zoo.

" I can tell it's sad and lonesome," she explained, " and I don't want it to be. I want it to be happy, just as much as I want to be happy."

Then Mother held her very close, murmuring that she was very proud and that they would comfort each other until Father came home from the stars.

That afternoon they took the animal to the zoo and saw it put into the large transparent cage that would be its new home. The animal uttered a glad cry and scampered across the strange green hills toward a clump of dwellings a short distance away. Other animals came running out of houses toward it on their pink hindlegs, making tiny noises of greeting, and the creatures two small eyes shimmered mistily.

Face pressed against the transparent wall, Mlissa felt no regret. Instead she felt warm and good, and it was a pleasant feeling. Her pet would be happier here among its friends, and the green hills and the vegetation would remind it of home. It was much better this way. Cages were not very nice at all, and she remembered her father telling her that even an animal can have pride. Father was like that, kind and considerate, even to animals. He would have liked what she'd done.

Mlissa watched as her pet was gathered into one of the houses by others, and she watched several minutes after that but nothing more happened. After awhile, she turned away.

Overhead, four silver-blue moons patterned the yellow sky. She looked beyond them, into the vastness, as though her eyes could somehow probe the depths. Out there, someplace, Father was fighting a war. He was fighting strange, ugly, animal-like creatures much larger than himself—creatures who actually used prisoners for pets, putting them in a cage and treating them like animals. They didn't think she knew, but she did, and she didn't like to think of it.

"He'll be back," Mother promised, smiling, "and we'll all be together again. Then we'll buy you another pet."

Mlissa recalled the look on her pet's face as it found freedom. "I don't think I want another one," she said.

She sought Mother's arm, and together they went home.

—Charles E. Fritch

There can be little doubt that to an alien observer endeavouring to assess the pattern of our civilisation, Earthly conduct and behaviour would be most confusing—the more so from an entirely alien viewpoint. Supposing our galactic Fate rested entirely upon the outcome of an ordinary court case? Would the alien agree with the judge ?

THE PREDATORS

By E. C. TUBB

They had a new hyptrap at Glucksteins so Merrill arrived at his office ten minutes late, with a splitting headache, a foul temper, and a carton of cigarettes for which he had no possible use. He threw them on the desk and reached for the intercom.

" May ?"

" Good morning, Mr. Merrill." His secretary's voice held a determined brightness. " Did you sleep well ?"

He gritted his teeth at the artificial interest and made a mental note as to the irritant effect of misplaced cheerfulness. " As usual. Anyone waiting ?"

" There is a Mr. Wayland in the ante-room and Co-ordinator Fenwick will be calling at eleven."

" Fenwick ?" Merrill frowned. " Who's Wayland ?"

" He claims to be the legal representative of a Mr. Holman."

" Never heard of him. I want to see Weston. Get him."

" Why, Mr. Merrill !" She sounded hurt. " Is there anything wrong ?"

" No. Get Weston."

" Yes, sir." The title expressed her disapproval.

Merrill broke the connection with an impatient flick of his finger and sat scowling at the cigarettes. Now, he supposed, he would be getting a complaint from the stenographers union as to his impoliteness. To hell with it.

Weston entered the office as though he were walking on eggs. Merrill guessed that May had warned him of his mood and made an effort to recover his normal business calm. He gestured towards a chair.

" Sit down, Weston. Were you responsible for the installation of the hyptrap at Glucksteins ?"

" The cigarette vendor ?" Weston looked pleased with himself. " Yes, that was my work. Why ?"

" It stinks." Merrill waved the technician back into his chair. " Now don't start to get all hurt and offended because I give you an opinion. Syrup is all right for the general staff but we can get along better without it."

" It was your own directive," reminded Weston acidly. " Politeness pays—and costs nothing. Remember ?"

" Certainly I remember, you don't have to rub it in, but what works for them needn't be the best system for us. Anyway, what else could I have done with their unions breathing down my neck ?" Merrill opened a drawer of his desk, selected a cigar, bit off the end and lit it with a desk lighter.

" To get to the point. I stopped by to look at the new trap and I'm still wondering if you're just plain stupid or whether you're trying to sabotage the firm." He blew smoke towards the carton of cigarettes. " If my reactions are anything to go by Glucksteins are going to think that we've sold them a pup."

" I don't understand."

" Watching that thing made me ten minutes late, I've got a headache and, worst of all, I'm not happy at having bought the merchandise"

" Ten minutes ?" Weston looked puzzled. " What made you so late ? The run-through only takes fifty seconds."

" Investigation," admitted Merrill. " I wanted to test my immunity to the new medium. But that isn't the point. What's the good of making a sale if the customer resents it ? That's bad advertising."

" Is it ?" Weston looked cynical. " You bought, didn't you ?"

" I did, but it's for the last time. From now on this is one brand of cigarettes I shall never buy again—even if I smoked cigarettes, which I don't. That's not the customer-reaction we're after, Weston."

" I know my job," said the technician stubbornly. " There's nothing wrong with that trap."

" I say there is !" Merrill glowered at the man sitting opposite him across the desk. " The hyptraps are too new for us to take any chances. We're lucky in having the sole concession to licence and install them but if they are going to force people to buy and then turn them against the product, then we're asking for trouble. That's just what the other agencies would like to happen. Maybe one of them has already contacted you ?"

" I resent that !" Weston jerked to his feet, his sallow face flushed with anger. " You have no right to make such insinuations against my integrity. I give you formal notice of cessation of employment."

" Sit down." Merrill, having worked off his own temper, realised that he had gone too far. " Let's not have any talk of you quitting. For one thing your contract doesn't include a personal-dislike clause and for another I apologise, I didn't mean to cast doubt on your loyalty. But you've made a mistake, Weston, and I'd like you to admit it."

" Mistake ? How ?"

" You've used the wrong stimulus on that hyptrap. It works, sure, but its irritant value is too high. Tame it down a little and everyone will be happy."

" But if I do that we'll lose efficiency," protested Weston. " As it stands it's sixty-two percent effective. Alter the stimulus and we'll cut it down to fifty."

" Which is still pretty good for any advertising medium," reminded Merrill. " Cut it, Weston. If we don't it's liable to blow right back at us."

He reached for the intercom.

" May ? Is that Wayland character still out there ?"

" Yes, sir." Her voice was still cold and hurt and Merrill grinned.

" O.K., May, I'm sorry. Put it down to ulcers. Forget it ?"

" Why certainly, Mr. Merrill." From the tone of her voice he knew that he was forgiven. " Shall I send Mr. Wayland in ?"

" Please."

Merrill broke the connection, picked up the carton of cigarettes, and tossed them at Weston.

" Here, you can use these and I can't. Get busy on that trap right away, won't you." He smiled. " Sorry, Wes, but your irritants are stronger than you think. O.K. ?"

" Sure." Weston smiled in return. " Maybe I should be the one to apologise." He left the office, the carton under his arm as Wayland entered by the other door.

Merril recognised the type at once and, as he unobtrusively switched on the recorder beneath his desk, his mind warned of coming trouble.

" Mr. Wayland ?" He rose and held out his hand. " Sorry to have kept you waiting but I had something rather important come up at the last minute. I hope my secretary managed to entertain you."

" I didn't come here to be entertained." Wayland stared around the office, his thin nose twitching as though he were a dog on the scent. Deliberately he sat down, placing his brief case on the floor beside him, and stared at Merrill. " I am the legal representative of Mr. Holman. You should have heard of him by now."

" Should I ?" Merrill blinked. " Why ?"

" Because he is suing you for a million credits." Wayland seemed surprised. " Are you telling me that you haven't been informed of the suit ?"

" We have a legal department which takes care of such matters," said Merrill easily. He drew on his cigar and watched the writhing clouds of smoke. " Just what," he asked gently, " is the nature of Mr. Holman's complaint ?"

" He claims that you have violated his privacy and, by unlawful means, caused him to become an addict of a harmful drug with consequent loss of health and money."

" Indeed ?" Merrill set down the cigar. " And just how did we manage to do all this ?"

" That," said Wayland smugly, " you will find out in due time." He hunched himself a little closer to the desk. " Frankly, Mr. Merrill, it is my professional opinion that you haven't a leg to stand on if it came to a trial."

" And so, of course, you recommend a settlement out of court."

" It would save a great deal of unpleasantness," admitted Wayland. He ran the tip of his tongue over his thin lips. " Aside from the monetary loss there would be the damage to your business reputation. I will go so far as to warn you that, should Mr. Holman decide to prosecute you in the courts, you will be utterly ruined."

" I see." Merrill reached for the intercom. " May ?"

" Yes, Mr. Merrill ?"

" I'd like to speak to Jorgson of the legal department. Will you contact him for me please."

Merrill smiled at Wayland, not surprised to find that the man was perfectly composed, then lost his smile as he spoke into the intercom.

" Jorgson ? Have we a complaint suit filed against us by a man named Holman ? The sum was one million credits for damage resulting in drug addiction or something like that. We have ? Why wasn't I informed of this ?" Merrill frowned at the reply. " Never mind that now. Come up to my office and bring the papers with you."

He flipped the switch and smiled again at the legal representative.

" Mr. Jorgson is the head of our legal department. You have no objection to meeting him ?"

" None at all." Wayland produced cigarettes, fumbled in his pockets then helped himself to a light from the desk lighter. Jorgson entered as he was setting it down.

" What's the trouble, Merrill ?" Jorgson scowled at Wayland as he drew up a chair to the wide desk. " Someone trying to pull a fast one ?"

" That's what I want you to tell me." Merrill relaxed as the two legal men glared at each other. " First, has Mr. Holman a case against us or not ?"

" No." Jorgson was emphatic. " The entire thing is just a shyster trick to get money."

" Are you certain of that ?"

" Would I say it if I weren't ?" Jorgson unfolded a paper he carried. " Here is the complaint. Read it for yourself if you don't believe me or, better still, I'll pick out the bits that matter. The plaintive—that's this Holman character—complains that owing to the operation of various machines and devices licensed, guaranteed, passed, tested and installed by the Apex Advertising Agency—that's us—has against his will and without his agreement been forced to become addicted to a foul and noxious drug with consequent loss of mental and physical health and loss of money. He therefore claims the sum of one million credits for this injury, etcetera." Jorgson folded the paper with a snort of disgust. " The man must be crazy to even think he could get away with something like this."

" He may be," said Merrill slowly, " but I doubt that his advisers are." He stared at Wayland. " I take it that you are also his legal adviser as well as being his representative ?"

" Perhaps ?" Wayland shrugged. " Does it matter ?"

" It could. For example it would matter a great deal if Holman were merely a straw man. On the other hand, if he were genuine in his complaint, it would be poor advice to set the sum of his supposed damages so high." He paused, looking expectantly at Wayland. " In that case a settlement out of court, always providing that I could be assured his claim had a basis of fact, might be within the realms of possibility."

" Don't fall for it, Merrill," snapped Jorgson. " Once you start settling out of court you admit to a certain degree of liability. What's to stop other characters from trying to climb on the gravy train ?" He flipped the paper with his forefinger. " Anyway, Holman has no case. We've got nothing to be afraid of at all."

" In that case there is no point in my staying." Wayland rose to his feet. " Should you reconsider, Mr. Merrill, I have left my card with your secretary. Good-day sir." He glared at Jorgson and, picking up his brief case, walked out of the office. Merrill stared thoughtfully after him.

" Jorgson, that man's dangerous. I want you to get to the bottom of this, find out just what it is Holman thinks he has and, more important, find out who's behind him."

" You think that he's being used as a front for a test case ?" Jorgson looked puzzled. " But what's the point ? How can they possibly hope to win on a complaint like this ?" He gestured with the paper.

" That's what I'm asking you to find out," said Merrill mildly. " Wayland didn't come here to settle out of court. My guess is that he came to see our reactions to the suit. I . . ." He paused as the intercom hummed its attention signal.

" Yes ?"

" Co-ordinator Fenwick has arrived, Mr. Merrill." There was an odd note in the secretary's voice. " He has someone with him."

" Who ?"

" Sig Halhan—you know, the alien." She giggled. " Sorry, Mr. Merrill, but he looks so funny !"

Merrill sighed. This looked like being a busy day.

Sig Halhan wasn't really funny, just different. And yet, looking at the alien as he sat on the other side of the desk, Merrill couldn't see such a tremendous difference after all. Certainly the alien wasn't as different from himself as say, a Zulu cattle driver or one of the African pygmies. He was humanoid in that he had two eyes, a nose, two ears, one head, four limbs and a skin which, despite its slight mottling, was nearer white than yellow.

He also spoke perfect English.

Fenwick, the Co-ordinator, was an unhappy man. He looked it as he stared apologetically at Merrill.

" I hope that you have no objection to Sig Halhan accompanying me," he said hesitatingly. " You know his history, of course ?"

Which was rather an understatement. Everyone knew that an interstellar ship had landed near Tycho base and that, after the fuss and excitement had died down, a single representative of the new race had

travelled on a human short-shot rocket to make an investigation of the planet. Fenwick, obviously, had been given the job of guide and mentor to the visitor. He didn't seem to be relishing the task.

Merrill smiled. " I'm happy to meet you, Sig Halhan. I won't offer to shake hands, to you that would be a meaningless custom, but you are very welcome." He looked inquiringly at Fenwick.

" I'm conducting Sig Halhan on a tour of the planet," explained the unhappy Co-ordinator. " He has selected certain key points, industries, manufacturing plants and things like that and he's building up a composite picture of what we are and how we act. We've checked the news dissemination services and now he wants to know all about advertising."

" So you've come to us ?" Merrill smiled with genuine pleasure. "Thank you. Though I say it myself I doubt if there is anything in the field we could not tell you. Apex is the biggest agency in the world." It was a simple statement of fact.

" I am aware of that." Sig Halhan inclined his head in an obviously borrowed gesture. "That is why you were selected." He seemed to hesitate. " There is one question I would like to ask. Can you, as an expert, tell me why I have aroused so little curiosity here ? At first things were as I expected but the interest of the inhabitants of this world didn't seem to last." He spread his long, seven-fingered hands. " Yourself, for example. You seem to have accepted me as an equal."

" Naturally. We've had half a century of advertising behind us in which to sell the idea that all men, no matter what their race, colour or creed, are equal. You look very much like a man and so are accepted as one. Also, to be frank, we were a little disappointed in you. We've become accustomed to the concept of extra-terrestrial races for a long time now and so there was nothing really strange in your arrival. It was anticlimax to find that our visitor looked little different from the man across the street." Merrill smiled and rose from his desk. " Shall we start at the bottom ?"

Bottom, in this case, was the simplest form of the printed word and pictorials, either coupled together or alone. Merrill led the way to the ' museum,' a huge room the walls of which were covered with framed and painted examples of the art. He paused before a mural.

" We can quickly gloss over the preliminary stages of advertising," he said. " As far as we are concerned it only really began with the growth of newspapers. Then, usually, it was merely the simple notification that a product was for sale. Sometimes it was accompanied by a picture and sometimes not. Following that period came the first fumbling attempts to use semantics and stimuli. There was a period

of exaggerations: '*Bloggs is the Biggest*!' or '*Bloggs is the Best*!' These advertisements were always printed in huge type and usually accompanied by some form of eye-catcher."

"Eye-catcher?" Sig Halhan looked puzzled.

"Yes. Basically it is merely something to attract the attention. We still use them, of course, but now we are more scientific and can gauge the exact affinity between product and stimulus." Merrill moved towards another mural.

"Here we have the first real step forward to the present state of the art. Agencies, basically similar to Apex, had now entered the field and were using scientific methods to determine the effects of various advertisements. About this time the principle of idea-association was developed. A three part variable with the aim of wedding two of the parts and dropping the third. We call it the 'two-three' method and it depends on pure psychology for its working."

Merrill stared proudly at the mural.

"Though they were still crude in those days, they had the right approach." He pointed towards a panel. "See? A simple pictorial with the minimum of lettering. A car, a bank-book, a saving slogan. It works this way; saving = bank book; bank book = car; therefore bank book = car."

"That is false logic," protested the alien. "You cannot leave out one part of the equation and have the correct solution."

"Logic?" Merrill shrugged. "Not your sort of logic perhaps, but it's good, tested advertising logic—and it works." He moved down the mural. "Here is another. A tube of toothpaste stuck in a block of ice. Same equation; toothpaste and ice; ice and toothpaste; therefore, the toothpaste is ice-fresh."

"Not necessarily." Sig Halhan appeared disturbed. "The two objects have no real association at all."

"They have once we make that association," reminded Merrill. He gestured towards the mural. "There are dozens of similar examples each, in their way, quite effective. In the pictorial strips the idea was carried out even more. Again the equation is the same. A drink will give you a good night's sleep; a good night's sleep means that you are efficient; you are efficient and so get promotion. It is a simple step to associate the drink itself with the promotion and to forget the good night's sleep." He smiled at the alien. "Notice the emphasis on monetary reward. Yes, those old operators certainly had the right ideas."

He moved to a new set of murals.

"Here we have the logical extension of the 'carrot' form of advertisement. Up until this period the emphasis had been on reward but

now the art turned to the ' whip,' the suggestion that, unless the consumer bought the correct product, he would suffer in some way. Here is a perfect example. A man obviously suffering from a skin disease. He is shaving and the caption is simple." Merrill read it out. "Cancer? Not with Bloggs Blades." He smiled at Sig Halhan. " See ? Again the association of ideas. Use Bloggs Blades and you won't get cancer. Use anyone else's and you will. Another example: " Commies don't drink Slyo."

" What," asked Sig Halhan, " is a Commie ? And what is Slyo ?"

" Commies were members of an undesirable political party and Slyo was a soft fruit drink." Merrill sounded vaguely regretful. " We can't use this stimulus now that we have a world state but I understand that it was most effective. Still, we can use the same method, refined of course, even now. You'll learn about that later."

" Thank you." The alien stared interestedly at the wall paintings and framed examples. " Why do you have such a preponderance of the female figure ?"

" Merely as an eye-catcher. Any man will stop to look at a woman, especially if she's semi-nude. Also, there is the association of ideas again. A beautiful woman seated in a car tends to become synonomous. Get the car and you automatically get the woman too. Strangely enough it works for women consumers too. There the association is more personal. A woman tends to believe that, if she only gets the car, then she will look like the woman depicted in the advertisement." Merrill glanced up as a small, thin-faced, almost bald man entered the room. " You're late, Henderly. What kept you ?"

" Running tests on the new colour-stimulus wall-sign." The technician nodded to Sig Halhan. " So you're the alien. Interested ?"

" Very. There is much more to advertising than I thought."

" You can say that again." Merrill grinned. " Look, Mr. Henderly is probably one of the most expert semanticists in the business. I'll leave you in his charge if you have no objection. If you really want to know all there is to know about the art then he can tell you."

" Thank you," said the alien politely. " Are you sure that I shan't be bothering you in any way ?"

" Certainly not. See anything you wish, ask as many questions as you can think of, and, if there's anything you want, just ask for me." Merrill glanced at his wrist watch. " I'll be getting back to the office. You going to stay here, Fenwick ?"

" I'll come back with you if I may." The Co-ordinator seemed pleased at the chance of getting away from his charge. " Maybe we can have lunch together ?"

Merrill nodded.

They ate in a little restaurant Merrill knew, a place where they still used fresh foods and cooked them over a naked flame. Whether it was the skill of the chef or whether, despite all advertising claims to the contrary, quick-freeze and electronic ovens did destroy the natural flavour of the food, Merrill didn't know, but he did know that the place was as famous as it was expensive. He chewed the last of his steak with elaborate care, touched his napkin to his lips, and settled back replete and content.

Fenwick, busy with his own meal, finished later and, in homage to the food, neither man made any attempt at conversation until the waiter had brought coffee and brandy.

"How long does Sig Halhan intend to stay on Earth?" Merrill produced a cigar, dipped the end in the brandy, rolled it between his fingers, then lit it. Fenwick shrugged.

"I don't know. In a way the longer he stays here the better but, in another way, the sooner he goes the more comfortable I'll feel."

"Getting tired of acting as nursemaid?"

"It's not that." Fenwick paused as if searching for words. "It's the damn inferiority complex I'm getting. You know me, Merrill, and you know that I climbed the hard way. Being Co-ordinator isn't the sinecure a lot of people think it is. I'm supposed to even out the manufacture and distribution of essentials so that we never have a boom or slump but only a rising spiral of high living. Well, if you think that is easy you want to think again."

"I know," soothed Merrill. He realised that Fenwick was eager to get it off his chest.

"You think you know," said the Co-ordinator, "but you don't. No one does. What with one pressure group after the other all trying to get an increase in their allocations, the wangling and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring for priorities . . ." He sipped his brandy. "Still, I can always go back to digging ditches."

"As bad as that?" Merrill signalled to the waiter to fetch more brandy. "Do men still have to dig ditches now?"

"You know what I mean," said Fenwick irritably. "Hell! Sometimes I think that I'd be better off as a common salesman. They've only got one worry, I've got dozens."

"You're seeing in the millenium," soothed Merrill. He rolled his liqueur glass in the palms of his hands. "What with our alien friend coming to visit us with the resultant advance in technology and the inevitable widening of frontiers, well, you should be on top of the world."

"That's what you think." Fenwick drank half of the brandy and stared thoughtfully at Merrill. "Look, are you open to a proposition?"

"Such as?"

"You are. Good." Fenwick nodded. "Supposing, now just supposing, that things didn't break the way everyone expects them too, would it be possible for you to swing public opinion my way?"

"Aren't you asking the wrong man? I'm in advertising, not news."

"I know that, that's why I'm asking you. Advertising a man or a product, what's the difference? You have the know-how to do it. Can't you advertise me as a right good fellow?"

"Maybe." Merrill was cautious. "Why?"

"Never mind why. Could you?"

Merrill hesitated, staring at the intent features of the Co-ordinator. Fenwick was remarkably shrewd—shrewd enough to have spotted the real moulders of public opinion. Nowadays, with advertising at full peak, the news services had taken a back seat. They spread the news, yes, but it was the big agencies who bought radio and television time, who almost controlled the newspapers with their heavy expenditure, and who determined policy of lay-out, production and presentation.

And Apex was the biggest agency of them all.

"It might be possible," he admitted cautiously. "It would be expensive and take a little time, but it could be done. Why?"

"Insurance." Fenwick grinned as though a load had been taken off his mind. "I'm elected, don't forget, and I like to eat."

"You expect trouble," said Merrill. "You're no fool, Fenwick, and you know something. Sig Halhan?"

It was a guess but, looking at the other's expression, Merrill knew that he had guessed correctly. He leaned forward.

"It is, isn't it? Something's fishy about our alien friend. What is it, Fenwick?"

"Nothing. It might just be that inferiority complex I told you about but . . ." Fenwick bit his lips. "Listen, Merrill, I'll tell you this in confidence and because I may need your help later on. We may all need it. You know why Sig Halhan is here?"

"To look us over." Merrill shrugged. "That's obvious. What I'm interested in is getting the sole concession to advertise our products to them and theirs to us. When trade starts I want to be riding the gravy train for all it's worth."

"There may not be a gravy train," said Fenwick soberly. "Sig Halhan is here for a little more than most people think. He's an official valuator for his Federation. They've got a damn big civilisation up there, about five hundred planets scattered over half the galaxy, and he is in charge of valuating new discoveries and races."

"Valuating?" Merrill frowned. "How do you mean?"

" Classifying then, call it what you like. He comes here, looks us over, and then bases his report on what he sees. If we get top rating then we'll be accepted on equal status into the Federation. We get experts, technologies, all we need to bring us level."

" And if we don't ?"

" There are other ratings," said Fenwick tiredly. " We could draw second in which case we'll remain in contact for purposes of trade, tourist visitation, and education. We'll be allowed to travel but we won't have ships of our own and will not have full status. Or we could draw third and bottom."

" Which means ?"

" They leave us as they find us. No contact. No visitors. No help of any sort. In other words we'll be too dumb to worry about." Fenwick sounded bitter. " Now do you know why I'm getting old before my time ? I'm trying to swing the verdict our way. Can you imagine what the great big public will say if Sig Halhan walks off and leaves us flat ? They'll be screaming for blood—my blood. You can't dangle the promise of a millenium before their eyes and then snatch it away again."

" Which is why you want insurance." Merrill nodded. " It begins to make sense the way you tell it. Can he make it stick, this Sig Halhan I mean ?"

" You haven't seen the Tycho report," said Fenwick grimly. " Don't make the mistake of thinking our friend is either helpless or dumb. That ship he arrived in is no rowboat. It could volatise the planet from where it sits and us with it. They can make it stick all right." He looked at his empty glass. " This is his last stop for examination purposes. Now you know why I've got troubles."

Merrill shrugged. He had troubles of his own.

They came to a head three days later when Jorgson came into the office almost bursting with rage.

" That Holman ! Can you guess what the crazy loon is basing his action on ?"

" Sit down." Merrill waited until the lawyer had calmed himself. " Now, what's the trouble ?"

" A million credits of trouble, that's all. Holman—you remember him—is claiming that nice, round sum from us."

" I know that. What about it ?"

" I've found out just what he thinks he has." Jorgson snorted with contempt. " You remember the original complaint ? He says that we caused him, against his will, to become a drug addict. Well, guess what really happened !"

" I've no time to play riddles," snapped Merrill. " Get on with it."

" He's turned into a smoker !" Jorgson gurgled with laughter. " Think of it ! He says that he was caught by one of the hyptraps and bought a carton of cigarettes. He began to smoke them and, to quote his own words, ' fell a victim to a filthy and degrading addiction to a harmful drug.' Can you beat that for blind ignorance ?"

" Ignorance ?" Merrill shook his head. " Let's call it cunning, it sounds better that way." He stared thoughtfully at the desk lighter before him. " Has he got a case ?"

" Don't be ridiculous ! Of course he hasn't."

" No ? What gives on this Wayland character ? Who is he ? Where does he work ? Is he a hopeful shyster or does he work strictly for profit ?" Merrill glared his impatience. " Come on, Jorgson, have you been working or not ?"

" I've been working." The lawyer's face was flushed with anger at the reproof and, in self-defence, he became very officious which was just what Merrill had wanted.

" Wayland is pretty notorious in the profession. He was suspected of taking a case on a no-damage-no-fee basis and only just managed to argue his way out of it. The suspicion is that he still operates on a contingent basis but there's no proof against him. He can produce back-dated receipts and other paper proof, valueless of course, but good enough for the profession."

" In other words he is a shrewd man." Merrill nodded. " Any retainers to the big companies ? Is he a commercial lawyer ? Criminal? Civil ?"

" A little of each. Actually, Wayland is a very clever man and, if he hadn't had that suspicion against him, would be among the top-income men retained by the commercial houses. As it is he works as a free agent. He takes cases as and when he can or sees fit." Jorgson sounded a little envious.

" Then he should know whether or not he has an arguable case ?"

" Yes."

" Right. Now about Holman. Who and what is he ?"

" A janitor. White, about fifty years of age, deeply religious and unmarried. As far as I can find out he has never been in trouble and never a plaintive or defendant in any legal action of any kind."

" Does he smoke ?"

" He does now. He didn't used to."

" Did you manage to dig up anything on him ? Debts ? Women ? Vice ? Anything like that ?"

" No. I put an eye-agency to work and their report is pretty comprehensive. Holman seems to be a perfect citizen and a blameless member of society."

" Naturally," said Merrill drily. " He'd have to be." He frowned again at the desk lighter. " I wonder who is setting him up ? Consol ? Zenith ? Acme ? I don't suppose that we'll ever know."

" You think that it's a fix ?" Jorgson looked worried. " I never thought of that."

" Which is why you're still working for others instead of for yourself," said Merrill gently. " Of course it's a fix. A man like Holman wouldn't suddenly break the habit-pattern of a lifetime and start an action for one million credits in damages. A man like Wayland wouldn't take on a case like that unless he was certain of his fee well in advance. How could Holman pay him ? The case has been set up by one of our competitors. We own the licence of all hyptraps as well as being the biggest agency in the world. Knock us out and the field is wide open for the others to step in. It's obvious that is what's happening."

" But the case ! They haven't got one. What if you sue Holman for business loss caused by bad publicity ? What would happen then?"

" Holman has no money and we can't get blood from a stone. Sueing him would be a waste of time as well as bad publicity. The way things are they can't lose. Even if the case gets thrown out of court they've lost nothing, and I'm not so sure that it will be as simple as that."

" You don't think they could win." Jorgson looked shocked. " They'd never get those damages if they tried for a lifetime."

" They aren't interested in the damages, that's only to make good publicity. A million credits is a hell of a lot of money even for us but that isn't important. If we lose this case we're out of business." Merrill reached for the intercom.

" May ? You have the address of a Mr. Wayland somewhere. Will you phone him and ask him to call on me as soon as possible please."

" Mr. Wayland ?" The secretary seemed pleased. " Why, Mr. Merrill ! What a coincidence ! Mr. Wayland is with me this very minute ! Shall I send him in ?"

" Please." Merrill broke the connection and wished that his ageing secretary wouldn't try so hard to be coy.

Wayland entered as if he were coming among friends. He bowed to Jorgson, nodded to Merrill and, leaning across the desk, slipped a folded paper into his hand.

" What's this ?" Merrill stared at it. " A valentine ?"

" Something like that." Wayland sat down without waiting to be invited. " I thought that I'd deliver it myself as I was passing this way. It's the notification of trial. You'll see that the hearing takes place in three days time."

" Three days !" Jorgson looked incredulous. " Impossible !"

" Why ?" Wayland smiled at the angry expression of the lawyer. " It's a civil case and we've bought priority. Also, as it has a direct bearing on the public good, you won't be able to obtain any delay."

" You've bought priority ?" Merrill shrugged. " Someone has plenty of money to spread around to make all those others on the calendar willing to forego their turn so that you could jump to the head of the list. Where did it come from, Wayland ?"

" Father Christmas." The lawyer smiled with bland good humour. " Still willing to settle out of court ?"

" What would a janitor do with a million credits ?"

" So you've investigated, I thought that you would." Wayland seemed pleased. He looked at Jorgson. " Still think that we haven't got a case ?"

" You know that you haven't."

" No ?" Wayland smiled at Merrill. " If you'll take my advice, Mr. Merrill, you'll find yourself a new head of your legal department. Your present one will head you directly into bankruptcy."

" I'm beginning to agree with you," said Merrill drily. He looked at Jorgson. " Haven't you anything else to do ?" The dismissal in his voice was obvious.

Jorgson rose to his feet, his face flaming. " I think that you're making a big mistake, Mr. Merrill, in trusting that man. For your personal insult to me I have my own remedy."

Merrill sighed as he watched the lawyer stalk out of the office. More complaints, more apologies, somehow he couldn't imagine the old days as having been like this. He looked at Wayland.

" Let's get to the point, shall we ?" His hand dropped to switch on the recorder. Wayland smiled.

" I take it that this conversation is unrecorded and that I am talking off the record ?"

Merrill nodded but he didn't switch off the recorder. Legally the tape would be worse than useless, any attempt to introduce it as evidence after the lawyer's declaration would bring an automatic penalty, but it was as well to have it for his own files.

" You may speak freely, Mr. Wayland. Now, to get to business. Just what do you want ?"

" One million credits."

" I mean what do you really want ? You know that you haven't a case against us at all. Is someone trying to generate a little nuisance value ?"

" Not at all." Wayland appeared to hesitate. " I may as well save you a lot of work and, to be frank, what I am telling you just doesn't matter. You know the grounds of the complaint ?"

" Holman says that we started him smoking. So what ? Tobacco isn't a narcotic."

" Tobacco contains nicotine and an assortment of various tars. Nicotine is poison. Therefore, addiction to tobacco can be construed as a harmful habit." Wayland smiled as he produced a package of cigarettes and lit one. " I'm not arguing about whether smoking is, or is not, truly harmful. That, in a legal sense, isn't necessary. All we have to do is to prove that, because of your activities, Mr. Holman has fallen an addict to an undesirable habit. We claim that is so and request heavy damages for the irrepairable harm done to my client."

" Poppycock !" Merrill felt a swift relief. " No court in the world would dare to set the precedent that smoking was harmful."

" Doesn't that depend on the individual ?" Wayland dragged at his cigarette. " Holman is an intensely religious man. He feels sullied by his addiction because smoking is against nature. I might also add that his religion is extremist, but that doesn't matter. It is not for any but himself to judge of his injury. Incidentally, he had never smoked in his life before this incident and now, he states, he cannot stop himself from the habit. He feels unclean, unfit to face his fellow men, soiled by his descent into vice. He even feels that he has betrayed his life-long faith and . . ."

" Save it for the Judge," said Merrill cynically. " I'm not interested in an anti-smoking lecture. Anyway, you're wasting your time. For every expert you can produce to state that smoking is harmful, I can produce a dozen to say that it's not. I won't even have to pay for them either."

" Vested interest will protect its own," agreed Wayland. He stared thoughtfully at the tip of his cigarette. " How far are you prepared to protect yours ?"

" I was thinking," said Merrill obliquely. " Jorgson isn't really the right man for his job. We need someone a little more . . . shall we say less idealistic ? The job pays pretty well."

" I may be able to recommend someone."

" Or perhaps it would be better for us to have a good man on constant retainer in case of emergencies." Merrill smiled. " There could be others who, like Holman, think that we're a pigeon ripe for the plucking." His smile broadened. " Could you recommend a man for that job too ?"

" Contingent on your winning this case ?" Wayland pretended to think about it. " Perhaps. And the retainer ?"

" Could we discuss that at the trial ?" Merrill rose in dismissal. " After all, a blind man would hardly insure himself against loss of sight."

" Still think that you've got a fighting chance ?" Wayland rose and crushed out his cigarette. " Look at the paper I gave you, it may be of interest."

After he had gone Merrill read the notification of trial. He was frowning at the name of the presiding judge when Jorgson entered the office.

" Did you get anything ?" The lawyer walked towards the desk. " Look, if that act was for Wayland's benefit, all right, I can forget it. But if it wasn't . . ."

" It was an act," said Merrill tiredly. " I thought that you'd have guessed that." He threw the paper towards the lawyer. " We've drawn Judge Conway. Do you know him ?"

" I know him," said Jorgson grimly. " A real, tough old coot. If you're thinking of getting to him, don't try it. He's one of these old fashioned idealists. Doesn't drink, smoke, gamble, play . . ."

" Doesn't smoke !" Merrill blinked. " Are you certain ?"

" It's a fact. He's about the only judge on the bench who doesn't. Why ?"

Merrill didn't answer. He was already reaching towards the intercom.

The courtroom was a relic of the old days and, as such, still had real wooden benches and panels. Merrill arrived attended by Jorgson and a couple of his own experts and immediately went in search of Fenwick. The Co-ordinator, looking more worried than ever, allowed himself to be drawn into a private consulting chamber.

" Well ?" Merrill was impatient. " Did you arrange it ?"

" I did." Fenwick seemed uneasy. " It wasn't easy and I had to use all the pull I could. Anyway, Conway's sick and Judge Dawson has replaced him." He glanced towards the door. " What's all this about, Merrill ? Why arrange for a change of presiding Judges ?"

" This action is a fix," snapped Merrill. " I don't know who's behind Wayland and his stooge but they must be pretty big. Conway doesn't smoke, Dawson does. It might make things that much easier."

" I don't get it."

" You don't have to. All you need to know is that someone's after my hide and, if they get it, you can kiss the Apex goodbye. If we go out of business that insurance you spoke of won't be worth a damn. To protect yourself you've got to protect us." Merrill changed the subject. " How's Sig Halhan ?"

" He's attending the trial." Fenwick looked as though he wished he had never seen the alien. " I think he's about through now. He told me that he will give me his opinion after the trial. I hope to hell that the verdict suits him."

" I'm worried about it suiting me." Merrill turned as Jorgson entered the room. " Everything O.K.?"

" The tobacco combines have sent along twenty assorted experts each one of them prepared to swear that smoking is neither habit-forming, harmful, or degrading. To listen to them you'd think that tobacco was the universal panacea."

" Good. How about our own team ?"

" Two doctors, two psychologists, and three socialologists. We're ready for anything Wayland may throw at us."

" Right." Merrill took a deep breath. " Let's go and see what all this is about."

Judge Dawson was an old, withered man, with a naked scalp and a sour expression. The only thing about him which appealed to Merrill were the nicotine stains on his fingers, sure sign of a heavy smoker. The buzz of conversation died and the clerk intoned into the recorder.

" Civil case 15/3789542. May 15, 2073. Holman versus Apex Advertising Agency. Compensation suit. Damages claimed one million credits." He looked at Wayland.

" If it please the court," said Wayland with mechanical adherence to ritual. He named himself and swung into his plea. " My client Mr. Holman, a person highly regarded by his neighbours, a pillar of society and a firm upholder of the traditions of personal liberty, God fearing, decent, unsullied and untainted by vice or corruption, begs leave to demand the named sum as damages for irrepairable wrong done to him in an unlawful way by the defendants. The basis of the claim is that . . ."

" He's wasting his time," breathed Jorgson to Merrill. " He'll never convince Dawson that smoking is harmful."

He was right. Wayland ended his plea. The experts came forward and testified, the Judge nodded at both testimony and counter-testimony, and the question remained where it had been ever since the first ship-load of the fragrant weed had arrived from the new world. Jorgson was jubilant but Merrill was suspicious. He had the uneasy feeling that Wayland had merely used the initial plea as a red-herring. The real trial would come later.

It came just after the luncheon recess. Merrill frowned at the number of reporters and photographers who had suddenly appeared from nowhere and spoke to Jorgson.

" Wayland's getting ready for the final assault. Can you pull a postponement ?"

" Impossible. This isn't a criminal trial and the civil courts are geared to high speed. Complaint, defence, verdict. Also, the suit

was stated to be for the common good. We can appeal, of course, but we can't delay." Jorgson sighed as he thought of the old-fashioned system with its interminable postponements, injunctions, delays and cross-bickering. He leaned forward as Wayland began to address the court.

"I quote cases 13/654732. June 2002. Smith versus Lamkin. 13/289731. April 1992. Edwards versus The Hypnotic Institute. 14/564198. December 2011. Thorne versus Doctor Gimald."

"You wish to base your claim on precedent?" Dawson seemed surprised. Wayland smiled.

"Not wholly, your honour. The precendents I have quoted merely serve to prove my point. Mr. Holman was forced, against his will by the use of unlawful means, to first purchase and then to smoke cigarettes. As a non-smoker prior to this occurrence he claims that it was an invasion of his personal liberty. I need not argue as to whether smoking is, in itself, harmful or not. I merely state that the defendants deliberately, and with criminal intent, caused Mr. Holman to become addicted to a habit foreign to his nature with a consequent loss of money and mental health." He paused as the cyber unit spat out the duplicated sheets containing the cases he had mentioned. Dawson scanned them.

"All these cases have to do with the use of hypnotism to cause actions harmful to the patient. In each case suit was found for the complainant." Dawson seemed annoyed. "I fail to see the association."

"The association is obvious, your honour," smiled Wayland. "The use of hypnotism to force a patient or a member of the community to perform actions against his will is illegal." He looked at Merrill. "Mr. Holman was forced to become a cigarette smoker by the use of just such illegal means."

He smiled blandly into the flashing cameras.

Merrill wasn't too surprised. He had guessed what might be coming and had prepared for it. Jorgson had produced his experts and then Wayland had quoted more precedents. Unfortunately, no matter what Jorgson said, the fact remained that Wayland was right in what he claimed. The use of hypnotism to make a subject do something against his will was illegal and had been for a long time now. Merrill knew that he had to think and talk fast in order to save both his money and his business. He stood up, overriding Jorgson's objections, and stared at Wayland.

"You are claiming that the advertising medium known as a hyptrap is illegal?"

"I am."

" Aren't you getting confused with the popular definition of the word ? A hyptrap has nothing to do with hypnotism as generally understood."

" No ?" Wayland shrugged. " I would prefer an expert to answer that." He appealed to the judge. " With the court's permission ?"

" Granted," snapped Dawson. He glared at Merrill. " I must remind you that, if you are represented by counsel, you are not permitted to waste the time of this court with interruptions and personal cross-questioning. We have no time or need for histrionics or emotional outbursts. This case, as all such cases, will be decided by logic." He nodded to Wayland. " Continue."

Abashed, Merrill sat down then stiffened as he saw who Wayland's expert was. " Henderly ! What's he doing here ?"

" He was subpoenaed," said Jorgson unhappily. " He had no choice."

" He could have gone sick," snapped Merrill bitterly. " Or vanished, or anything rather than appear at court." He stared towards the smiling lawyer. " Wayland's clever, he's going to make us prove his own point."

He did.

It was simple, efficient, and ingeniously unsubtle. All the lawyer did was to get the technician interested in his subject. He then sat back and let Henderly hang both himself and the business he represented.

" A hyptrap," explained Henderly, " is basically very simple. We have first to catch the attention, hold it, and, at the same time, indoctrinate a suggestion to purchase. The first we do by means of a blast of perfume, a shriek, a yell, a chord of music, anything to make a passerby stop and look. Then we have a visual device, a whirling disc, a series of flashing lights, female movement, something like that to hold the attention. While the prospective customer is watching we begin the rest of the run-through. A moving visual coupled with a whisper-speaker and some form of stimulus is the usual combination."

" I see." Wayland smiled at the court. " Could you give us an example ? For instance, how would a cigarette vendor work ?"

" The usual attention-catcher. The one at Glucksteins uses perfume with a coiling cloud of coloured smoke as the visual. The run-through consists of a female figure smoking a cigarette and staring lovingly at the man who has just lit it for her. The whisper-speaker implants the suggestion that no one who doesn't smoke is socially acceptable, that it is a good thing to smoke—the usual advertising procedure. The stimulus, in this case, would be a combination of scents containing cigarette smoke, perfume, steak, and body-odour."

"What?" Dawson leaned forward, he seemed surprised. "Steak? Body-odour?"

"Yes. Stimuli depend on basic attraction. Steak has an appeal to hunger and body-odour to sex. This, coupled with the scent of tobacco and perfume forms an association between smoking and the satisfying of appetites. The visual, of course, is similarly designed." Henderly shrugged. "You understand that the details are too involved for more than a brief explanation."

"Of course." Wayland seemed thoughtful. "Tell me, Mr. Henderly, is it true that you are considered to be an expert in semantics?"

"I am."

"That means that you are qualified to select words or combinations of words which will have a predictable emotional effect?"

"Basically, yes."

"You are then, something of a psychologist?"

"I received my degree in advanced psychology ten years ago," said Henderly stiffly.

"My apologies. You are fully aware then of the emotional impact of visual images?"

"Yes."

"In order to obtain your degree was it necessary for you to study hypnotism?"

"Naturally."

"I see." Wayland paused. "You have seen the plaintive, Mr. Holman. Would you, as an expert, say that he would make a good subject for hypnotic techniques?"

"I would. Everyone is susceptible to hypnotism."

"Please remain with the question, Mr. Henderly. I was referring only to Mr. Holman. Would you say that he was susceptible?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." Wayland smiled blandlly towards Merrill." Just one last question. Would you, as a qualified psychologist testifying on oath, say that the advertising medium known as a hyptrap has certain hypnotic qualities?"

"Of course." Henderly seemed surprised. "All advertising has."

His qualification was lost in the sudden uproar.

"We're going to lose this case," said Merrill grimly. It was night, the court had been adjourned, and he and Jorgson were holding a conference. "Henderly was bought, of course, and those newspaper men . . . the whole thing was stage-managed by Wayland."

" I don't think that Henderly sold out," said Jorgson thoughtfully. " After all, he told the truth as he knew it. It wasn't his fault that it sounded like a confession."

" He should never have testified." Merrill sounded savage. "Damn it ! Wayland's got us on the one weak point. If we try to retract Henderly's testimony he'll demand a lie-detector examination. We know that Henderly told the truth as he knew it. The trouble is that the court doesn't recognise degrees; either a thing is or it isn't and we can't help but admit that advertising is hypnotic in nature. It has to be in order to be successful."

" We can claim precedent," said Jorgson thoughtfully. " Every item used in the hyptraps has been used before. All we have done is to combine them into a single combination and added some modern techniques of presentation. If the whole is the sum of its parts then we are legally blameless."

" Legally as well as otherwise the whole need not be the sum of its parts," snapped Merrill. " It's the sum plus their inter-relation to one another which is something else again. Try pleading that and Wayland will tear you apart and make you look foolish."

" Perhaps." Jorgson didn't sound convinced. " We're dealing with legal matters, don't forget, and we have to go on precedent. If two things are harmless apart then they can be harmless together."

" Don't mention precedent to me," said Merrill bitterly. " If we rely on that then we're sunk. Wayland quoted three cases and there are probably a dozen more. Each of them contains an anti-hypnotism ruling and each of them can be made to fit our own circumstances. Holman, like it or not, was conditioned by our hyptrap to buy and smoke cigarettes. Why he did so doesn't matter. For all we know he was convinced that, if he smoked, he would meet and marry a glamorous heiress, or perhaps he'd get promotion, increase his height, grow young, cure disease, anything. How do I know what passes through the minds of all our customers ? But Holman states that he was persuaded against his will and we've got to prove otherwise."

" You may have a point there," said Jorgson thoughtfully. " Can a man be forced to buy something against his will ? If he bought it then he must have bought it willingly. No one was standing over him with a gun. He was caught in the hyptrap, sure, but what of it ? Not everyone who gets caught buys, and those that do, buy because they want to."

" Not necessarily." Merrill looked uncomfortable. " I've been caught myself. Weston had the stimulus set too high on the trap at Gluckstein's and I wound up with a carton of cigarettes I didn't want and couldn't use. The point is that I didn't want to buy them at all."

He frowned down at his hands. " The trouble is that Holman isn't a genuine plaintive. He's been hand-picked for the job and that means we're up against more than just a janitor with a grievance. But that isn't what's worrying me."

" It should worry you," reminded Jorgson. " It should worry you a million credits worth."

" If he wins the case we can appeal against the damages. Legally he can only claim for actual monetary loss. That's the cash he's spent on cigarettes, the money necessary for a complete cure from the habit, his expenses for the action and some compensation for his trouble and loss of time. The most he could hope to get away with is about ten thousand credits. I'm not worried about the damages."

" Then what are you worried about ?"

" The repercussions. Suppose Holman wins and the hyptraps are declared illegal. The first thing Holman will do is to sue the store where he got caught by the trap. In turn they will sue us for loss of profit, the penalty clause in our guarantee, and as much as they can hope to get away with for loss of goodwill and damage done to reputation. Then the cigarette manufacturers will jump on us for much the same reasons. That's just one man starting things rolling. Can you guess what will happen if Wayland or some other shysters really get down to business ? What with direct actions for damages, plus the stores sueing us for broken guarantee, the stores being sued in turn and the manufacturers jumping on us too . . . hell ! We'd be better off dead."

" We'd be out of business anyway," agreed Jorgson. " Have you any plans ?"

" I've sent for Fenwick, he should be arriving at anytime now. I've sent for Wayland too, but I doubt if he'll come. He's on a winning pitch and he knows it. The publicity alone will almost bury us." Merrill bit nervously at the tip of a cigar. " You'd better get off now and see what you can cook up for tomorrow. It'll take some pretty hard pleading to swing the verdict our way. Concentrate on public welfare, the integrity of advertising as a whole, and as a suggestion, use the good intent and desire to please gag. It might even work."

He didn't sound too hopeful.

The courtroom was packed for the morning session. The publicity had aroused interest and, glancing over the crowd, Merrill could recognise the representatives of every big advertising agency in the business. He wondered which of them were behind this attempt to secure his downfall, then forgot them as Fenwick clawed at his arm.

" Merrill. I want to speak to you." The Co-ordinator seemed nervous. " Privately."

They went into the same consulting room they had used before.

" It's Sig Halhan," said the Co-ordinator. " I've been up all night with him trying to pursuade him to grant us equal status." He blinked his tired eyes. " Sleep's something our friend doesn't seem to need."

" Any luck ?"

" I don't know. He's like a sponge, sucks it all in and gives nothing out. He did say though that he'd give me his verdict after the trial. I think he wants to see which way it will go." He gnawed at his lower lip. " Maybe you should lose the case, Merrill."

" Lose it !" Merrill looked as though he couldn't believe his ears. " Lose a twenty million credit business just to please a lousy alien. Are you out of your mind ?"

" Well, perhaps not lose it then. Can't you settle out of court ?"

" No. To do that would be to leave us wide open for the next shyster with a bright idea. We've got to prove that hyptraps, and advertising in general, is safe, harmless and beneficial." He shook his head at the Co-ordinator. " You must be tired, Fenwick. Don't you see that, unless we win the case, Sig Halhan's going to have a pretty poor idea of our integrity ? We've got to win it—and you've got to help us."

" I've done my best," said the Co-ordinator. " I've seen Dawson and applied some pressure. He can't throw it out of court but he'll lean over backwards to give you the benefit of any doubt. How about Wayland ?"

" I've been working on him. I've circulated the other agencies and hinted that, if I win, there may be an opening for them to operate hyptraps under licence. I'm hoping that they will gang up on the people behind Wayland and force them to withdraw the action. A sort of mutual self-preservation. That's why Jorgson's going to defend advertising as a whole and not hyptraps in particular. Weston helped with the semantics and it should be good."

" It had better be," said Fenwick feelingly. " Don't forget that I've still got Sig Halhan and his valuation hanging over my head." He shrugged. " Anyway, let's go and see how your boy's getting on."

Jorgson was doing fine. He stood in the centre of the courtroom and scientifically tore Holman' to shreds.

" Have you ever bought anything as the result of advertising ? You have ? Did you bring an action against the agency for pursuading you to buy ? No ? Why not ? You were satisfied with the product. Good. Now, Mr. Holman, what have you against smoking ? Filthy ? Degrading ? A vice and an abomination to all decent men ? Thank you. Are you aware that ninety-two percent of the population above

the age of sixteen smoke some form of tobacco ? No ? Are you aware that Judge Dawson smokes ? No ? Would you call all those people filthy and degraded ? Vice ridden and immoral ?"

" I protest," said Wayland. " We are not arguing on the basis of whether or not tobacco is an undesirable habit."

" Protest granted," said Dawson wearily. " Defendant will please keep to the point."

" If we hadn't switched judges," whispered Merrill to Fenwick. " Wayland would have let Jorgson carry on as long as he liked. Conway would have swallowed that talk like a cat lapping cream."

Fenwick nodded. He was staring across to where the alien sat a little to one side of the crowd. As usual Sig Halhan looked utterly impassive but Fenwick knew that his eidetic memory was busy filing away data, correlating it, and forming a verdict as to humanities' position in the outside scheme of things. Fenwick wondered what that verdict would be. He turned his attention towards Jorgson again.

" Advertising has always been above reproach," announced the lawyer. " But, as Mr. Henderly pointed out, it cannot be divorced from suggestion. The basis of good advertising is to make the customer want to buy the product advertised. How else can we do that except by suggestion ? Everytime anyone reads a statement that ' Something is good for you,' or that ' Something is best,' that is a form of suggestion. The argument here seems to be whether that suggestion constitutes hypnotism or not. I say that it does not, and cannot, be so construed."

" If it please the court." Wayland rose to his feet. " The hyptraps are expressively designed to hypnotize the customer. Mr. Henderly, an expert in his field, admitted as much. Also, according to definition, to hypnotize is to dominate the mind by suggestion. Councillor Jorgson has admitted that advertising depends on suggestion. I submit that the case of the plaintive has been proved by the defendants."

It had too. Merrill knew as much but, while Wayland could demand truth-tested testimony, Jorgson daren't try any obvious evasions. Instead he pleaded good intent.

" Advertising is the medium which teaches the consumer the best and proper way to live," he announced grandly. " If, to achieve that aim, we have to use suggestion, then we feel justified in so using it. It is impossible to teach a child without the use of suggestion; it would have been impossible to arrive at a world state with full equality for all men without suggestion, and it would be impossible to continue our high standard of life without advertising. Is it wrong to suggest that a man should wash himself ? And, if that is not wrong, is it then wrong to suggest that he should use a certain brand of soap ? Is it wrong to suggest that a man should strive harder in order to purchase

a car that will provide work for other men and the dependants of those men? And, if that is not wrong, they why should it be wrong to advise him as to what we consider the best make of car? Can it . . ."

On and on. The old three-two method. The association of two parts of the equation and the forgetting of the third. Advertising; product; high standard of living. It was simple to skip the middle part and think in terms of advertising — high standard of living. Even Merrill, immune though he was, began to feel that the advertising agencies were benevolent crusaders intent only on the common welfare.

". . . and is all this to be cast aside because a man, a man who by his own admission, is prejudiced and dogmatic towards the welfare of others, whines in a childish way because he has bought a carton of cigarettes. Cigarettes, remember, which he didn't have to smoke. He could have thrown them away, given them away, but no, he was too mean for that. He smoked them, and now . . ."

Jorgson was still going strong. He had swung from lauding the overall benefits of advertising to personal affront. He was making Holman out to be a despicable figure, again by association of ideas, because he'd had the temerity to complain at the very advertising which had brought him and the world such a high standard of living. It was emotional claptrap, illogical thinking, and unfair accusation. It was almost pure semantics. It was advertising at its highest.

It won the case.

Merrill was riding high and didn't care who knew it. He sat at his desk, a cigar in his mouth, and grinned at Jorgson.

"Well, we won. You did a good job and I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." Jorgson smiled in return. "The credit really goes to Weston. I was a little surprised at Wayland backing down the way he did. I'm wondering why he didn't demand truth-tested testimony. If he had we'd have lost the case for sure."

Merrill smiled through a cloud of smoke. He knew but he wasn't telling. Idly he wondered what Jorgson would say when he found himself taking orders from his new boss. Merrill had been wrong. The only one behind Holman had been Wayland himself. Having deliberately proved his nuisance value he had sold out at the right moment and joined Apex's staff. In short Wayland had done a perfect job of self-advertising.

"We're going to be busy from now on," said Merrill. "Now that the hyptraps have been proved legal everyone will be wanting to use them. You'd better get to work on a new form of contract so that we're protected against any come-backs."

" Right." Jorgson rose to his feet. " Are you getting Weston and Henderly to increase the power ?"

" Yes. Weston has a theory about increased strength of stimulus and I know that it works. Henderly is working on the visuals and the whisper-speaker dialogues." Merrill chuckled. " From now on the consumer won't stand a chance."

He sat smoking after Jorgson had gone, his mind busy with pleasant images. The hum of the intercom snapped his back to reality.

" Yes ?"

" Co-ordinator Fenwick is here, Mr. Merrill. He wants to see you at once."

" Send him in."

Merrill grinned as the Co-ordinator slumped into a chair and pushed forward a box. " Cigarette ? Cigar ? Help yourself."

" No thanks." Fenwick looked almost physically ill. " Merrill, you've got to help me."

" How ? Why ? Are you in trouble ?"

" Plenty of trouble. You remember that insurance I spoke to you about ? Well, now's the time to use it. Sig Halhan's given me his verdict and, in a way, it's all your fault."

" I don't see that," said Merrill slowly. He squinted through a writhing cloud of cigar smoke. " What have I done ?"

" You won that case, that's what. Sig Halhan didn't like the verdict, said that it was unethical, illogical, and biased all to hell."

" He said that ?"

" Yes, or words to that effect anyway." Fenwick grimaced. " His meaning was pretty plain."

" So our alien friend doesn't like us." Merrill shrugged. " So what ? Even if he has decided against giving us full status it doesn't really matter. Once we get to work out there we'll soon alter that." He put down his cigar. " Did you make any arrangements for Apex to get sole rights to extra-terrestrial advertising ? Never mind the status, did you fix a monopoly ?" He licked his lips. " With the hyptraps in every store and alien goods to advertise we can clean up every loose credit in the world. Well ?"

" I didn't get a monopoly," snapped Fenwick. " I didn't get anything. The rating was way down, the lowest grade possible. No contact, no trade, no visitors, no nothing. And it's all your fault. Up to the time of the verdict there was a chance that we could just scrape home. Not top grade, of course, but second." Fenwick dabbed at his sweating forehead. " I don't know how I'm going to explain all this to the Board, let alone the voters. " It's up to you, Merrill,

to start your advertising campaign to make me the blue-eyed boy again."

"I'll do more than that," promised Merrill. For some reason the alien's verdict had annoyed him. "We'll concentrate on swinging public opinion to extra-terestrial travel. If we managed to put over the idea of the world state I can't see why we should stop there." He warmed to the idea. "See? It's simple. Every hyptrap can have a permanent suggestion as well as the normal commercial dialogue. Within ten years we'll have the public screaming because we're still planetbound. Within twenty the pressure to develop a stardrive will be so great that the world state will have to make it a top priority and, believe me, when a planetful of technicians start to work on a problem, that problem is going to be beaten one way or another."

He grinned up towards the ceiling.

"We'll show that smug little valuator how wrong he can be. Sig Halhan and his friends are due for a big surprise one day. Not good enough, eh? Well, we'll see about that." He looked at Fenwick. "Just what did he have against us?"

"A lot of things, but the big one was that he said we were too predatory to be trusted among the other races of his Federation."

"Predatory?" Merrill blinked his surprise. "I don't get it. What did he mean?"

—E. C. Tubb

Immortality—the Elixir of Life—has for long been a shadowy goal at the end of the rainbow. Authors often ask in their stories whether such a gift would be of any great advantage to Mankind, or whether it would be such a burden that Man would be unable to carry the load. James White presents herewith a little cameo centred about such an idea.

DYNASTY OF ONE

By JAMES WHITE

The throne-room was vast, the empty throne itself a golden speck glowing against the sombre background drapes. Diminishing perspective made a blood red pyramid of the processional carpet, which seemed to stretch for miles. Tate thought that a moving way would have been easier on his suddenly shaky legs, but that would have been an offence against tradition. Thirty-seven times he'd gone though this, and a lot of traditions had grown in those four hundred odd years which he wanted to uphold. Especially as this time might be his last.

He couldn't win forever.

You're getting old, Tate told himself wryly as he stepped across the threshold, then everything else was driven from his mind as the fanfare crashed out and Harwood went into his eulogy. Tate felt his scalp begin to prickle in spite of himself; the Court Psychologist was good.

". . . Emperor of the Dominions of Myra; the Protectorates, Dependencies, and Mandated Territories of Fomulhaut, of Cregennsil, and of Dubh; Lord of the Magellanic Hosts . . ."

Stern and declamatory, the voice reached into the very bones. Subsonics were responsible for that effect, just as the subtle use of thought amplification put the non-humans in the audience chamber into a similar state of suggestion. As a result, the long and imposing catalogue of titles sounded neither flamboyant nor exaggerated, but a true and stirring account of his powers and achievements. According to Harwood, the starclouds of Andromeda were a saintly nimbus around his brow, and in his strong hands he held the life and destiny of every intelligent being in the Empire.

The Court Psychologist's voice became sterner yet with the implication that those mighty hands could punish as well as protect, then it went on: ". . . Saviour of Helgach; Defender of . . ."

Helgach, Tate thought as he paced outwardly calm and unafraid between twin rows of beings who bowed low at his passing—or if physically incapable of that form of obeisance, twisted or twitched their respect in some other way. It had happened two hundred years ago, but he still felt guilty about Helgach. And he would feel much worse about it in a few minutes. It was a terrible thing to wipe out a race, to cut the teeming population of a planet down to a mere handful, but he had done just that.

The population of Helgach had been close to four millions. One hundred and three had survived, thanks to his direct, forceful, and blindly stupid handling of the situation. Now, as befitted the representative of his most fanatically loyal system, Helgach's ambassador occupied a coveted position barely four yards from the throne. Racial memory could be extremely short at times.

The great voice filling the chamber began to quicken, and Tate was aware that he had almost reached the throne. He made the traditional pause to enquire of the Helgachian ambassador the number of that worthy's offspring, then he mounted the low dais and turned.

". . . The Just, the All-powerful, the All-knowing, His Celestial Majesty, Tate the First !"

He sat down.

Nobody moved, anywhere. This was no ordinary function, where he granted audiences or issued the decrees which could alter the destiny of whole stellar systems. This was the time when he had to prove his fitness to rule, or die. In utter silence he pressed one of the two studs set in the arm of his throne, and tried to relax as golden bands of beautifully-worked metal closed around his limbs, chest, and head, holding him rigid.

Craig, his Chief Advisor, moved quickly to face him; Craig the ascetic the intellectual, and almost, the fanatic. The young man's mouth

was a stern and silent line, his features carefully neutral, but he was trying to say so much with his eyes that Tate had to look away. Craig was also Heir Apparent.

As he thought of the mass of electronic equipment hidden by the drapery behind the throne, with its point of focus his rigidly-held head, Tate felt vaguely uneasy. It was so sensitive, so delicate; so many things could go wrong. Just how badly did Craig want to be immortal. Could the other be so stupid as to think . . .?

But no—Craig had trained hard for just the merest chance of attaining kingship, and must certainly know that there were no short-cuts. Disgusted with himself, Tate forced the suspicion out of his mind. That sort of thing invariably happened before a treatment. It was a mental stalling for time, and he would have to curb that failing or soon find himself backing out. Not too obtrusively, he pressed the second button on his chair-arm. Immediately, Craig turned.

" The King," he said gravely, " is dead."

Before he'd finished speaking, Tate was fighting for his life.

When given before the age of forty and renewed every twenty years, the Immortality Treatment prevented the disease of senility and death from occurring in life based on the carbon series of compounds—which meant practically all forms of life. There were thousands of dogs, cats, and monkeys to prove that it worked. But in beings of high intelligence—human or otherwise—it did not work at all, unless the being in question was mentally very, very tough.

The radiation which stimulated the regenerative centres produced other effects as well, some of them good, others quite fatally bad. The treatment increased the IQ, and gave to the mind a perfect, eidetic memory. It also, for the few seconds duration of the treatment, so intensified the effect of what had come to be called the ' area of conscience ' that any being having sufficient intelligence to base his actions on a moral code had to take three seconds of the most frightful psychological torture ever known. He had to live with the cruel, debased, and utterly nauseous creature that was himself.

Many preferred to die rather than take three seconds of it. Most had no such choice—their life-force was obliterated with the first, savage blast of self-knowledge.

This secondary effect of the treatment was experienced as a complete re-living of the past, with each incident diamond-shaped in visual auditory, and tactile sense recall. But not only that. The mind was given a terrifying insight into the end results of that being's most trivial-seeming actions. Unthinking words or gestures made over the years and forgotten, when blown up by the triple stimulus of perfect

memory, increased I.Q., and a hyper-sensitive ' conscience ' became lethal as a suicide's bullets. The mind just could not take such an overwhelming blast of self-guilt, even for three seconds, so it, and the body containing it, died.

Only one person had successfully undergone the Immortality Treatment.

Tate, though he had lived—with thirty-seven previous treatments—for seven hundred and sixty-eight years, still took only three seconds. And there was no blurring or telescoping of events. Each incident was complete, and though it occupied only micro-seconds of time, each bore its charge of guilt potential.

Tate had been lucky in his early years. Working constantly with his father on the circum-Pluto biological lab, his life had been one bright, long dream of helping Mankind towards its destiny—and he had somehow escaped doing too many of the things which he might have suffered for later. That shining altruism remained after his father had discovered and administered the first Immortality Treatment to him and his increased I.Q. enabled him to co-ordinate the development of the hyper-drive which gave Man the stars. It was dulled considerably when his father and a large number of other eminent men died while undergoing the Treatment, but it grew quickly bright again.

A solitary immortal man was in a peculiarly good position to make his dreams become reality.

Seven Treatments and one hundred and forty-two years later, when the first wave of Earth colonists impinged on a non-human civilisation, he was able to avert what looked like certain war. Ten years later the Earth was part of a Federation embracing five solar systems, and he was its chief advisor. When the Federation grew to eight, ten, then fifteen solar systems, he decided that something stronger than a President was needed to keep the unwieldly mass from falling apart. There were surprisingly few objections when he created himself Emperor, and the Federation his Empire.

Then, in his four hundred and second year, had come Helgach.

He had meant it to be a great and magnificent gesture—a miracle of co-operation and co-ordination that should bind the Empire even more tightly together. But the denizens of Helgach were subtly different from the octopoids inhabiting similar worlds within the Empire, and he should have realised that. But he'd had to act ao fast . . .

Tate re-lived that mad dash at the head of the greatest fleet of starships ever known to the Helgach system, the shock tactics which tore the natives from their homes and cities before they half-realised that

anything was amiss, and he felt again the almost palpable hatred that struck him because there had been no time to explain. And he felt proud—justifiably, he thought—at his getting the last of the Helgachians away before their suddenly unstable sun blew itself up. But his too-perfect memory was bringing back things which he should have noticed; small indications which could have averted the disaster to follow. If he hadn't been so busy patting himself on the back he might have suspected that the suspended animation tanks were not perfectly suited to their occupants, and he would not have arrived at New Helgach—after a trip half across the galaxy—with a fleet filled with decomposing corpses.

Little over a hundred Helgachians had survived to re-populate their new planet. It was, therefore, much more than politeness that made him enquire the number of the native ambassador's sons.

Tate was sorry about Helgach, desperately sorry. But that did not ease the crushing sense of guilt he felt over it. And each time he went through a treatment, that killing pressure returned in full force. The murdered population of a world rose up and cried for his blood. In previous treatments he had barely held his agony-torn mind together, and his luck, he knew, couldn't last. One of these times—maybe *this* time—he would prove that he was only a mortal man after all.

To live forever you had to fight for life. Tate had long-term plans and projects which he desperately wanted to see to completion. They, together with the other more or less good things he had already done, kept the ripped and tattered rag that was his mind in one piece. But he was getting tired of the struggle—tired, and terribly, achingly lonely. His constantly increasing I.Q. cut him off from all other beings, though he pretended that it didn't, and made it so frighteningly easy to be cruel through sheer thoughtlessness. And those thoughtless acts had to be paid for at the next Treatment, and with a shocking rate of interest.

There were other things, but Helgach was the worst. Helgach was a white-hot spear that stabbed and gouged at his mind, then returned to stab again. In vain he writhed and screamed in mental agony for it to stop, that it hadn't been his fault and he had been acting for the best. It was always there. Four million beings dead. Through negligence. His.

Suddenly his thoughts seemed to dissolve and fly apart, then slowly and painlessly to collect themselves and trickle back into his brain. Tate opened his eyes.

"The King is dead," his Chief Advisor was repeating; then triumphantly, "*Long Live the King*!"

Craig turned, beaming widely, but with concern and sympathy in his eyes. The crowd and the royal trumpeters were making it impossible for his voice to be heard; he mouthed, " You'll be told officially later. Two Helgachians have successfully undergone Immortality Treatment !"

Somehow Tate endured an hour of congratulations and renewed vows of loyalty, but his mind was far away. If two non-humans could become immortal, he told himself, then everyone could do it. He *must* live on now, because the news meant two things: he was no longer alone, and the dream he had had for centuries looked like coming about. He sighed and had to blink his eyes.

These trappings of Royalty and Empire that were necessary to hold the variegated and often quarrelsome children of the galaxy together would soon become superflous. The children were slowly growing up. One day their ethical standards would be so high that they would have nothing to fear from the Treatment, and the galaxy would at last be populated with truly civilised beings. Meanwhile, if Tate expected to see that day, he would have to live the life of a saint, and be very very careful not to do any of the petty little things which could so easily kill him during treatment. He *had* to live now.

He came fully out of his daydream only as he was leaving the great audience chamber. The trumpeters—live on this occasion instead of being recorded—were having a wonderful time, and almost drowning out the din of whistling, chirping, and cheering from the beings in the room. Somewhere, someone began to chant. Quickly others took it up. It became thunderous, ground-shaking. The last great fanfare paled into insignificance.

" *Long Live the King* !"

Tate, the Wise, Merciful, Just, and well-loved Father whose benevolent tyranny forced a galaxy to live together in peace, nodded once gravely in acknowledgement. " You bet," he swore silently to himself. " You bet I will."

—James White