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One of the most fascinating subjects for discussion amongst most fantasy readers is whether the course of our normal life is predestined or whether we are the masters of our Fate. Author Kippax treats his subject in an extremely interesting and sympathetic manner—in fact, it is one of the best stories he has yet written.

DESTINY INCORPORATED

BY JOHN KIPPAX

' It may now be admitted that the inhabitants of Sol III are of a kind for which we were utterly unprepared. Not in all the galaxies is there another race more confident, more pushful, more brash, or more capable of making use of the intelligence it possesses. It is to the everlasting credit of the predestinators who first lit upon this planet that they continued to struggle with so many problems so well, when they had little support from Central. It is with the case of Matsumura Tomokatsu that affairs for Sol III began to change for the better; if this man and his too-brilliant superior had gone out of control, one can only speculate upon the terrible fate of the one race clearly destined *to reach the stars* !'

—From an address by the Chief Predestinator.

I

The road was straight and the old Buick sounded healthy, if a little loud. Matty kept her at a steady forty-five, not wanting to go any faster, for he was a mild young man who liked to travel at reasonable speeds in order to think of other and more important things. And Matsumura Tomokatsu, twenty-eight, Japanese-American, and science graduate, had a lot to think about. He was thinking about Muldry, his odd employer, and how he had been sent on this holiday which was more of a mission than a rest.

The road was straight and baking in the afternoon heat He was in real desert country now, with scrub and cactus. Forgetting Muldry for a moment, he smiled as he thought of the Sato family in 'Frisco ; they were waiting for him. They were so kind, and they were his own people.

The gas station, blistered and cracked, announced, " Last Refuel For 100 miles." He filled up but before he set off again, he took a glance at the back seat to see that the brief case was there. Yes, all safe . . .

The road curved and dipped, and instantly he gave more attention to what he was doing, for the great straight distances lulled him into the false security of a sun-soaked daze if he did not take care. He took a curve, and read a sign as he passed. It said, " Bruton Springs, 10 Miles."

A hotness seemed to fill him ; Bruton Springs. Where had he known that name before ? He thought of the brief case, and then as he turned his attention back to the main road, he shouted with alarm. Though he knew that it all happened rapidly, yet he could visualise the accident as though it occurred in a slow-motion film. A child, a little girl of about eight in check shirt and jeans, darted across the road, seeming to appear from nowhere. The moment, full of alarm and violent action, seemed to hang infinitely in his mind, and in that moment it appeared to him that he had someone sitting beside him, a girl who was small and slim and dark. As he wrenched at the wheel the car slewed off the road, bumped over a shallow ditch, and rammed a boulder with a harsh grating roar of metal. His head hit the door handle with great force, and blackness descended upon him.

Matty had been grateful for Aidan Muldry. He did not believe that his employer could thoroughly understand all the

social taboos and suspicions which surrounded a Japanese-American, especially in a small town like Pearlburg, where Matty was instantly conspicuous the moment he showed his nose outside Muldry's laboratory. But Muldry was kind and sympathetic, and he really tried to do his best for Matty. Muldry was a short round man of nearly fifty, with a mild face, untidy red hair and a scrubby beard, gold rimmed spectacles, and a sad soft way of talking. It was certain that Muldry appreciated Matty's ability ; in the five years that the young man had worked for him they had grown quite close. They sometimes went for weeks without speaking to anyone else except the woman who cooked and cleaned.

Then, suddenly, there came great changes. Matty had been busy doing routine work in the lab, when a small light began to wink over the little storeroom where they kept the chemicals. Matty stared at it for a moment without fully understanding. Then he remembered how he had smiled when, months ago, Muldry had said, " I've installed a little gadget which may come in useful one day. See here : if you see this little light go on and off, go into the store room and behind the big winchesters you'll find a little earphone. Use it, and you'll be able to overhear what goes on in my study." And Matty had wondered then what could be worrying his employer . . .

He went into the storeroom and took up the phone. He could hear the voice of the visitor better than he could that of Muldry.

" Mr. Muldry, we hope that by this time you have fully considered the offer we made three months ago." The voice was rough and dominating.

Muldry answered mildly, " No, I've not considered it. Not for a moment."

" But could it have been any better ? What terms we offered you ! And the offer is still open."

" For anyone who was interested, the terms could not have been better, I admit."

" Well then—"

" Mr. Carran. Once and for all, I am *not* interested. All my life I've been a freelance. I have four hundred and eighty patents, and they give me enough money for my—other work."

" Mr. Muldry." The voice was controlledly persuasive. " What do you make, really ? Eight, ten thousand a year if you are lucky ? And we offer you position, prestige, and every

possible facility. Twenty-five thousand dollars a year for a start !"

" The offer has gone up, eh ? Why ? Have you been spying on me, and so think that you'd better increase your price ?"

" Now really—"

" I'd not put it past Holtzmann-Schneider. You've so *much* money. I tell you no ; in any case, I'm not ready to disclose anything yet. There remains a lot of work to be done. And I'll do that work in my own way and time, without any assistance from your people."

There was silence for a few moments. Then Carran said, " There is another aspect of this, you know."

" What's that ?"

" I—hesitate to tell you, because you might interpret it as a threat."

" Well ?"

" National security comes into it. If your work is such that an ill-advised disclosure were against the national interest you might be—taken over."

Muldry said quietly, " Go on."

" As has been made partly public, we have the basis of the technique of *warfare by illusion.* The British were the first with a glimmer of this, at the end of World War Two, though they never used it. Might not the work you are doing be complementary to this ?"

Matty heard the scrape of a chair. Muldry said, " So, I *am* being spied on. Get out !"

" Mr. Muldry—"

" Get out !"

Again, the sound of a chair. A door slammed, and there was silence.

Matty strolled back into the lab. Muldry had never let him see into the little lab, which was separate from the main one. Sometimes, even, he did not allow Matty to do the routine work of developing and printing when there were photographs to be seen to.

Muldry walked into the lab with his head down and his hands behind his back. He looked at Matty, and his face was pinched. He stopped and drummed his fingers. He rapped, " You heard that ?"

" Of course."

"Okay. But that'll do. Let's not discuss it, not at all, see ?"

" Okay," said Matty quietly.

Muldry said, " You ought to take a vacation." While Matty was digesting that, he took a walk round the laboratory and asked, " Who cleaned these windows ?"

" I did," said Matty, " But—"

Muldry made a noise indicative of deep disgust. " It makes me ashamed. I'm a bad man." He took off his spectacles and breathed noisily upon them, polished up and replaced them too far down his stubby nose. " You need a holiday. You get among those people of yours again. Take your golf clubs and your fishing tackle and your tuxedo and have a good time. Forget that there are people who wonder what the hell you're doing in these United States. When you've gone, I'll give myself a rest too."

Matty's dark eyes rested thoughtfully upon the other. "But I feel okay. I'm all right, really. I thought you were all wrapped up in your private work ; sometimes I don't see you from first thing in the morning until last thing at night. I don't mind, I just get on with the routine work. I don't see how you can manage both. This stuff which you're on—"

" —And won't let you see—"

" Aidan, you sound almost quarrelsome."

" Do I ? I'm sorry."

Muldry walked up and down the lab, gesticulating with his cigarette. " After all, the men who discovered how to make an atom bomb had a few anxious moments of self-examination I think. Not," he added bitingly, " that they didn't manage to stifle those feelings in the end."

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

Muldry walked up to him and stared at him with kindly concern. " I think I detect an implied reproof. Matsumura Tomokatsu, you feel left out in the cold, eh ?"

" No, I—"

" Graduate, University of California, and you're doing a lab technician's work, hah ? That's bad for your ego."

" Damn my ego," said Matty fervently, " But I wish sometimes that . . . I worry about you Aidan, not about myself. I'm quite happy here. I get more time for my own reading than ever I would at a teaching job."

Muldry continued his prowl. He stopped and fingered some bottles of nutrient solution at the far end of the lab, and then said, almost as though talking to himself, " Did you near what Hotzmann-Schneider are supposed to have done to Perry, in Philadelphia ? He made some discoveries about friction on ICBM warheads, and wanted to keep them to himself and continue work before disclosing his findings. When he wouldn't sell out at once Holtzmann-Schneider are said to have blacked him."

" Blacked—?"

" Yes. Disloyalty probe. Beautifully engineered, so I'm told. Now Perry's working for someone in Wilmington in a minor job . . ." Muldry's voice trailed off, and he stood gazing out of the window, and drumming his fingers.

Matty walked to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. " You're the one who needs a holiday."

When Muldry turned, his round face showed his weariness. " No, you need one. Then I'll have one at the same time. I know that you need one, Matty."

" How ?"

Muldry walked the length of the lab, eyeing with care the delicate pumps and solution bottles in the warmed cases which kept alive the hearts of chickens and goats, and a selection of tissues from other animals. Then he turned, and spoke gently. " Look here, Matty. You might as well know that during the past week I've come after you, checking your work. It I hadn't done so there would have been five of these specimens here that would have died."

Matty gave him a straight stare of plain disbelief, which Muldry proved unable to return. Matty was sure that his statement was false. So he said nothing and let the other go on.

" See," said Muldry, " you need that vacation."

Matty was quite sure now that Muldry was trying to get rid of him.

Muldry said, " I'll have a vacation just doing this routine work. I've got a feeling that I'm at the stage where it might be beneficial for me to be alone for a while."

" I see—" said Matty, flatly.

" I know some of the things that have happened to you, socially, round here, and it's not good. I like to see minds in good shape, yours and mine both."

For a moment Matty thought that he was genuine. He said, " Aidan, I think that you want me out of the way."

Muldry stubbed the cigarette with a sharp gesture. He seemed to sag. " Is it as plain as that ?"

" Yes. I've thought for some time—"

" What ?"

" You look to me," answered Tomokatsu very slowly, " like a man who had travelled a straight road for some time, and then found that the byroad was more interesting, so he followed the byroad."

Muldry looked a shade startled. " Byroads feed the high-road, don't they ?" He gestured at the cases of living tissue, watched the rhythm of a tiny heart balanced among the glass tubes and feeders in its case. " The byroad can lead back you know, many miles further on."

" What are you afraid of, Aidan ? Can't you tell me ?"

" I'm afraid of what I'm discovering. This chicken heart here is thirty years old, and it's still healthy. We can supply all the correct biological answers as to why that should be. But all the *questions* are not biological. We have, in fact, altered the destiny of this scrap of life. The destiny of things; that was my byroad, Matty."

" And that's why the man from Holtzmann-Schneider came ?"

" Yes."

" And so I take a holiday."

Muldry pounded his fist into his palm. " There's no one I'd rather tell than you. But I don't want to tell anyone right now. You can trust me, can't you ?"

Marry grinned and nodded. Muldry said, "Wait a moment." He left the lab and returned with a massive leather briefcase, and slapped it down. " I want you to take this with you. Keys too. Here they are." Matty took them.

" Keep the case locked," said Muldry.

" Aidan, won't you tell me what you're afraid of ? Do you think they'd try and get this off you by force ?"

Now that his assistant had consented, Muldry did not look the harrassed man of a few minutes ago. But his brows knitted as he said, " I think perhaps the man I'm most afraid of is myself." He thrust a hand into his breast pocket. "Here, you'll want some money." He passed over some bills.

" But there's a thousand here. You only owe me six hundred."

Muldry waved a hand. " I want you to have it. Let me have your address in 'Frisco, will you ?"

Suddenly his manner was curt. Matty wondered what it had cost him to seem casual up to this point, but it was clear now that Muldry wanted the conversation to end.

Muldry said abruptly, " Now, I had to make a phone call. But who was it to ?" He rubbed his beard and lit another cigarette. " I can't remember." He walked the length of the lab with the palm of his hand pressed to his forehead in a characteristic gesture. " Phone, phone." He thumped his head with the heel of his hand. " Sure I had to, sure." He came back and grinned at Matty. " Go on kid, off you go and pack. I may remember later. It couldn't have been very important."

Matty took the briefcase to his room.

II

' The number of Earthmen to whom we can delegate any form of responsibility is still fantastically small, and once more it is urged that there should be no stint whatsoever in the treatment of this planet's people. At the risk of letting other worlds carry on as best they can, it is felt here that only the best . . .'

From a report to the Chief Predestinator.

He awoke from a deep tangled world, peopled with flickering and changing figures, all of which dislimned or vanished before he could make any identification. He thought that he heard the Sato family asking why he was so late, and it seemed for a moment that Muldry had called him. Then a golden light began to swim before his eyes and he opened them, blinking. A handsome woman of about forty, clad in a white coat, was standing by the bed. Near her stood a nurse. For a moment they regarded each other, the bandaged man in the bed and the doctor.

He said weakly, " Hello."

The woman smiled, and the nurse came forward with a clip board and handed them to the woman. " Here are the details, Dr. Lundquist." She glanced over the papers.

Matty asked, " How long have I been here ?"

The doctor answered, " More than a day." She had a voice that was professionally calm and distant in tone.

" I've been unconscious all that time ?"

" Yes."

" I had an accident." He wrinkled his brow, and it hurt.

" I can't remember what it was now. I wish I could."

" Don't bother about it for the present, Mr. Tomokatsu."

But he could not help bothering. He knew that he had been going to San Francisco, that he had had an accident. He asked, " What hospital is this ?"

She replied, " The Holtzmann-Schneider foundation, Bruton Springs."

He felt that the hyphenated name ought to mean something to him, but he couldn't remember what.

The nurse said, " If we could have details, we will let your relatives know where you are."

Matty decided that it would be wise to let the Sato family know that he would be delayed, but he thought that there was no need to bother Muldry. Muldry—if his boss had not insisted that he should take this vacation, he would not be here. Still, it was no good worrying about that now. He gave the nurse the address of the Satos.

His head hurt him suddenly, and he lay back, panting. He shifted a little, and he groaned at the sudden scarifying pain that enveloped his ribs.

" What's broken, doctor ?"

" Two ribs only, but the whole thoracic cage is severely bruised. And you had a severe blow on the head, of course. You'll be all right in a few days."

Matty tried to recall the events of the crash. He could not. He began, " Tell me about the accident, doctor—" But she held up a hand.

" You are not to think about it." She beckoned to the nurse who had gone to a table by a window. Matty had the impression that he was in a small ward. The nurse came forward with a white liquid in a small glass, and handed it to him. He drained it and handed it back.

" Doctor, my car, and my luggage—"

" It's all taken care of. You must rest."

For a short space of time, a hundred questions danced and bubbled in his mind, and then he slept again.

When he awoke, the ward was quiet, and it was night. The other two beds were still unoccupied, and the only light was the small shaded one by the side of his own bed. He turned

with difficulty and leaned on one arm, noticing that the ceiling was high and that the windows were long.

The windows. There was something queer about the windows. His eyes seemed to have difficulty in focusing. He eased himself up in bed, and then he sat still and listened. There was not a sound to be heard, anywhere. He did not know how big this hospital was, but he thought it queer that there should be no noise at all. But the silence was absolute. Slowly, he swung his feet out of bed, tried to stand, and then sat down again groggily; a spring gave a dull clang. Then he managed to stand, and, with careful steps, he gained the wall. He could now see the window clearly. The lower part was of frosted glass, but the upper portion was clear, and showed a night sky peppered with stars.

But the thing which held his attention was the steel grill over all the window. What sort of a ward was this that he was in? A look round showed him that all the other windows were the same. He must be a prisoner! What had he done?

He went back to his bed on uncertain feet. He looked at the locker by the side of it, and was grateful to find a pack of cigarettes there. He was about to light one, when a sound made him put down the cigarette.

It was someone whistling the blues.

For a moment he sat listening to the melody line as it tootled easily round the chords, and then he remembered. Muldry used to whistle like that. He walked to the door, and the whistling seemed to be just the other side of it.

He heard Muldry's voice.

"I had to make a phone call; now, who was it too? Oh, yes, I remember. Pearlburg General Hospital. There's someone there you can do a good turn to Matty—"

Matty tried the handle. It was locked. He rattled it, and the voice faded.

Again, the silence was absolute.

"Muldry!" whispered Matty. "Aidan, was that you?" All at once fear took hold of him and he cried out, "I'm here, I'm here!"

And when he stopped and listened again, there was only the silence. Not quite, though. He heard the sound of a woman's footsteps, distant, going click, click, click, in a place which echoed sharply. The footsteps were coming nearer. He tried to get back to his bed, but he stumbled, and as he lay with the pain twisting at his ribs, he heard the door open behind him.

A moment later someone was helping him into bed, someone whose voice was tender, and who had a perfume to which he did not feel that he was entirely a stranger.

The nurse said, " We shall have to tie you in; whatever were you trying to do ?"

She was small and neat and dark, and she was a Japanese. She said, " You'll get me fired."

He did not answer ; he was studying her face. By totally Western standards she was very attractive. By his, she was perfection.

He blinked and said, " I haven't seen you before."

" I'm the night nurse."

He had a sudden picture come to his mind ; it was that at some time in his journey, she had been sitting in the car beside him. He asked, " What's your name ?"

" I'm Nurse Mishina. I was christened Yoko, but my friends call me Shirley. Here, let me make you comfortable." She arranged the pillows. " Ribs, isn't it ?"

" Yes." He could not take his eyes off her. " Nurse, there are so many things I can't remember. What made me have the accident with the car ? Why are these windows barred ? Am I a prisoner ?"

She gave a small, musical chuckle. " Now don't worry. As far as I know, you were put in here as a matter of convenience. And as for the other things, I just don't know. How does that feel ?"

He gave in and murmured, " Fine, thanks." He found that he had a great regard for her, and that he did not want to press his questions.

She said, " I'm going to leave you now. Try to sleep ; there's nothing to worry about."

And then she was gone.

III

' An added hazard was our lack of knowledge of the deep springs of their behaviour. Nevertheless, it is to the credit of the resident predestinators that they made some remarkably intelligent guesses, which in some respects compensated for the lack of equipment and the criminally bureaucratic attitude of the headquarters staff of that time . . .'

—From an address by the Chief Predstinator.

In the morning Dr. Lundquist came in to see him after he had had some food. She examined him, and expressed herself satisfied with his progress. There was something about her manner which puzzled him ; it was as though she disliked him, and was at the same time keeping a tight hold on her feelings. He told himself that he was imagining it.

Half an hour later the day nurse came back into the ward, and with her was a stocky dark man of about forty, carrying a big metal bound case which he set upon the floor as he talked to her by the open door. The corridor outside was full of life, trolleys being wheeled, and hospital staff and some patients walking about. Above the murmured conversation of the nurse and the visitor, Matty heard someone say, " Here, boy, paper," and a few seconds after that a kid of about fourteen with a sack of papers stopped at the door where the nurse and the visitor stood.

" Paper, mister ?" he asked. Then, before the other could reply, the boy had looked into the ward and had taken a step inside. His thin round face hardened and a look a distaste appeared. " Hey," he said, " that's him ain't it ? That's the Jap who killed Rowena ? You got somp'n coming to you, mister—"

The man grabbed the boy and pushed him outside. " Go peddle your papers outside !" he snapped, and Matty heard no more, for now his memory was jolted, and the scene at the Bruton turning was being played in agonising detail in his mind. He sweated as the whole thing flooded back into his consciousness . . .

When he opened his eyes again, it was to look up at the nurse and the dark man.

Matty whispered, " I heard what that boy said. But it wasn't my fault, I swear it. She just appeared from nowhere, and I didn't have a chance to avoid her. I can see it all now. Did she die—at once ?"

The man spoke. He had a deep, rather kindly voice. "We think so."

Matty felt desperately alone. " If I could have avoided it . . . I'd have given anything . . ."

" Don't excite yourself, Mr. Tomokatsu," said the nurse. " This is Lieutenant Ellison, from the police department. He wants to talk to you." She turned to Ellison, nodded and left.

Matty watched him as he hefted the case on to a small table, took off the lid, and revealed a recorder. He plugged in, talking as he did so.

" How do you feel now ?"

" Not—too bad. But I feel bad about the accident."

" Sure. I can understand." Ellison threaded a tape.

" What that kid said—" began Matty.

" Don't take too much notice of that. He's young."

" But wasn't that—"

" See here," Ellison sat, holding the microphone, " you let me ask the questions first, and then you can ask a few. Ready?"

" Go ahead."

Ellison began. " Statement from Matsumura Tomokatsu, twenty-eight, Japanese-American, on accident at the junction of highway 443 and road 41a on the morning of twenty-second August. Now, just tell us how it happened."

Matty told his story as straightforwardly as he could. Ellison did not ask many questions. When the other had finished, he switched off the recorder. He accepted a cigarette from Matty.

Matty asked, " The name of this hospital—?"

" It's a Holtzmann-Schneider foundation gift."

He remembered. That was the firm which had contacted Muldry. " They're very big, aren't they ?"

" Sure. Do a lot of money throwing, like Carnegie."

" How many people in Bruton Springs ?"

" About five thousand. Why ?"

" I wondered why there should be a Holtzmann-Schneider hospital here."

" Holly Schneider was a local man."

" Oh." Then he remembered something else. " Is there a Japanese nurse works in this hospital ?"

Ellison looked rather surprised. " Can't be certain, but I'd very much doubt it," he answered.

" Are you sure ?"

" Almost. Why not ask the nurse ?"

" I will. Where's my car, do you know ?"

" Police department had it first, then they passed it to Cal Seward's garage. Just a little beating and straightening to do."

" Does the damage tie up with what I've just told you ?"

" Seems to," said Ellison warily. He was looking at the other with a fixed, compassionate sort of expression. "We'll do our best for you."

Matty did not understand. " Do your best ?"

Ellison hesitated a moment. " Did you hear what that kid said ? Well, it was true. That is what they're saying about you. That little girl was the adopted daughter of Chris Temple, who's a local World War Two hero. He got badly treated by the Japs, and he's half crippled. He collected a lot of medals, and he's very well thought of. With his war wounds, he couldn't have children of his own, and so he adopted them. Rowena was his third adoption. So you see, there's a pretty strong local prejudice around here against Japanese, American or not. There are a lot of people got you fixed in their minds as the killer, and—well, you know the mob mind."

" The mob," breathed Matty.

" There might be a charge of manslaughter," said Ellison.

" I tell you that kid ran right in front of me ! I didn't have a chance !"

" All right." Ellison held up a hand. " I believe you ; but mine's a reasoned belief. Out there in Bruton Springs, there's a blind *un*reason."

Ellison prepared to go. Matty lay and stared unseeingly.

" What ought I to do, Ellison ?"

The policeman asked, " Such as— ? "

" When I get out of here. Should I go and see Temple ?"

Ellison stood close to the bed. " Brother, you should just collect your car from the garage, some of your gear from us, and then you should make tracks while the going's good. Believe me." He picked up the tape recorder. " We don't know how Temple feels about this, yet. He's pretty overcome with grief."

Matty said quietly, " I can understand that."

" Okay," said Ellison. " Hope I'll see you just once more. 'Bye."

During that long and aching day, Matty asked the dad nurse if there was a Japanese girl working at the hospital, any was told that there was not. He tried to pump Dr. Lundquist into admitting that he had been put into the barred room so that he would be a prisoner, and she would make no such admission. The only piece of comfort that he derived from the events since the accident was the inward contemplation of the nurse who had visited him, whose name was Shirley—what was it ?—Mishina, and who emphatically *was* a Japanese. It would be something, he reflected, to meet such a girl, to get to know her well . . .

When he awoke, it was night again, with the lamp glowing softly beside the bed, the only illumination of his white prison. For a while he lay quite still, thinking, and with his ears striving to catch the slightest sound from outside.

But again, the silence was absolute.

Slowly he swung his legs out of bed, groaned a little at the pain in his ribs, and then, sitting on the edge of the bed, he listened again. And as he listened, he thought he heard the sound of high heels clicking through an echoing place. But then he knew that it was only his imagination which made him hear. The warm night was silent as the grave, and it was as though he alone was the sole inhabitant of the building.

He wanted to see out between those bars, he wanted to make some sort of contact with the material world outside. He stretched his arms, breathing carefully as he did so. The pain was not so bad. Then he stepped to the end of his bed and he took a chair, planting it close to one of the windows. Now, if he mounted the chair, he would be able to see above the frosted part of the glass, and he would get some idea of what Bruton Springs looked like. He found himself yearning for the sight of a lit main street, and people and cars going up and down.

A little groggily, he mounted the chair, and, taking hold of the bars, he looked out. He saw the night sky, sprinkled with the glowing dust of a million stars, but nothing else.

Nothing.

For several seconds he was unable to believe the evidence of his own eyes. But nowhere in the velvet night which seemed to be on all sides, above *and below*, was there any indication that he was not the only man in the world. There was, in fact, no indication that he was in the world at all. He strained his eyes and his mind, peering and craning this way and that to the very limits of vision imposed by the window, and there was no light but the glitter of the stars.

He stumbled off the chair, and went to the door. He tried to open it, but it was shut fast. He tugged at the handle senselessly, and when the pain of no-reason seemed about to take him and to cast him down, he heard those footsteps again.

They sounded as before, clicking and smart and approaching. The ward and the glowing lamp and the shapes of the windows distorted suddenly . . .

Once again, someone was helping him into bed, and he was not surprised when a serene face looked down at him. He was almost hysterically glad to see her. Foolishly, he had forgotten her name again.

She said, " My goodness, what were you trying to do ?"

" Who are you ? Who *are* you ? "

" I told you. Yoko Mishina. On night duty. Call me Shirley. Surely you remember ?"

He panted. " Yes, I do, now." He held her hands. He wanted to sob with relief. Then he asked a question in puzzled tones. " But I asked them—Ellison and Dr. Lundquist and the other nurse, and they said that there was no Japanese here."

She smiled sadly. " Do I look real ? And what were those other—that other name ? Dr. Lundquist ? You must be thinking of some other place. You'd better think again, or maybe you'd better not think at all."

He asked urgently, " Move the light so that I can see your face."

She smiled, " All right," and she did as he asked. The glow lit her fine regular face with the small nose and the high cheek bones and the dark lashed eyes.

" Well ?" she asked.

" I—just wanted to make sure that you were real."

She smiled. Matty began to think that it would be so easy for him to fall in love with her.

He said, " I feel safe with you, Shirley."

She answered, " We Americans who do not look like most Americans sometimes find that we lack security, don't we ? Where do your family live ?"

" I've none of my own. But the Satos, they're almost as good. I was going to see them in 'Frisco, when this happened."

She said, " I come from 'Frisco. I went to nursing school there. Then I came East—"

She stopped, and her brow wrinkled. Matty said, " But we're not all that distance away from 'Frisco here. You can't call this East . . ."

Shirley held up her hand. " That's funny. You made me think of such strange things, then. There was something I had to tell you." Her face became intense. " Yes, I know. Now, when I have said this, promise that you will try to go to sleep again, and not disturb yourself with anything at all."

" Very well."

" Matty." She spoke softly, and very earnestly, and as she bent nearer, he could smell that perfume again. " If at any time in the future you find yourself thinking that our ways will not cross again, make the right decision, and they will."

" Yes, but— I don't understand—"

" You made a promise. Now go to sleep."

When she had gone, the strange no-world outside did not seem to matter any more, and he turned carefully and slept.

VI

' The most praiseworthy decision of this difficult time was the way in which Tomokatsu's character was noted as being outstanding. If he had received any but the treatment which was so wisely given him, he would have been denied the thing which makes him so valuable to us—his ' free will"

From an address by the Chief Predestinator.

As he drifted into consciousness in the light of a new day, he began to be sure that he was a victim of the thing of which Carran had spoken to Muldry ; he was certain that Holtzmann-Schneider agents were operating a war of illusion against him. They were somehow on his wavelength, they were getting at him. If he went insane then he could no longer claim his possessions, and the taking of the briefcase would be easy.

But he would not go mad, not now that he was sure of what was happening.

After he had washed and eaten, he was allowed to dress and go out. All was normal outside the door, with a bustle of people passing and repassing in the corridor. Only occasionally did someone bother to glance at him as he made his way through a big white hall, through double swing doors, and on to a terrace, in the sunshine.

From a slight rise on which the hospital stood, he could see all Bruton Springs before him. It was as he had imagined it; there was a main street with shaded sidewalks, and three or four larger public buildings, two of them four stories high, made of white stone. The railway line came in from the north, touched the town on the north-east side, and then curved away eastward. He could see where three desert roads converged in the town centre, and the one from the north, which

for a while ran parallel to the railroad, was the one which he thought led to the main highway, where the accident had taken place.

He stared in front of him, and he thought about the accident. He felt so sorry about it, and there was nothing that he could do. He tried to imagine what Rowena Temple had been like, but he had never known the child; he wanted to go and see Temple himself, but if he did there was nothing he could do, and all he could say was, " I'm sorry I killed your daughter," —and how did *that* sound ? He could only hope that there would be no charge of manslaughter brought against him. Then the only thing he could do was to get out of Bruton Springs as fast as he could, and never come near the place again.

He could not leave off thinking about the accident. He remembered the turning, the strange springing up of the child, and the feeling that as it happened, Shirley Mishina had been there beside him. The picture of the Japanese nurse was clear in his mind; did dream girls—that was a laugh !—did dream girls give their names ? He shook his head. He had little doubt, in this clear morning light, that she had been but the projection of his desires, of his needs. Of course, he must marry one of his own people, and outside the big towns they were not to be found. He was twenty-eight; he needed someone like Shirley. His inward eye fastened upon the clear attractive picture of her, he pondered on the last thing she seemed to have said to him. What was it ? . . . ' If at any time in the future you find yourself thinking that our ways will not cross again, make the right decision, and they will.' What decision ? Perhaps he would know it when it came; until then, the meaning of her words was quite obscure.

On the terrace, people walked and talked, or sat and rested in long chairs. No one came to speak to him. He was used to that. His mind had long been blunted to the passive ostracism which the ' whites ' practised in the matter of simple social intercourse. He hardly resented it, for he knew how good they could be, when there were men like Muldry around. Matty thought about his decision not to let Muldry know that he had had an accident, and felt that the decision had been a right one. There was the question of the briefcase ; he had the keys in his pocket, and he assumed that the police had the thing in their custody. From one point of view he

ought to ask about it, and then again, the least he said the better. When he was clear of Bruton Springs, then he could have a good old worry. He stared at the distant railroad track, where it ran straight and shining into the blue. He'd better not tell Dr. Lundquist about the lack of stars all around the hospital at night, or he might be held there in a ward with padded walls.

Suddenly he started, and peered at the distant track. All at once there was a train on it, locomotive, cars and all. It had not come out of a tunnel; it was instantly and completely visible, with a section of track behind it He thought of mirages, but the thing was real enough He heard the sound of it as it drew nearer, heard it sound its whistle as it approached. He watched in wonder as it curved in to the station. Just an ordinary passenger train, which had appeared from nowhere. He began to think that the experiences of the night were being transferred to the daytime. He watched a car travel along the road by the track. After a couple of minutes it disappeared; one moment it was on the road, clearly visible, and the next, it seemed to sail through an invisible curtain and was no more.

But Matsumura Tomokatsu believed that he was still sane. Whatever they're trying to do to me, he thought, they won't succeed. I know who *they* are. But they're feeding me with dreams and illusions, they're trying to wear me down to some point where I'll be easier meat than—than I used to be. He began to run over all the things which had happened, trying to sort them out, to see a pattern.

One of the illusions was diabolically clever. Whoever or whatever it was, they knew that to one of his race the widening of his circle of friends by one such as Shirley Mishina was a thing of first-class importance. It was fairytale stuff, and his people had a genius for fairy-tales which were not quite so childish as they first seemed.

" Projection," he said, then repeated it louder, " Projection. It's my doing ; I'm fooling myself—"

" Did you say something ?"

It was a passing nurse ; she stopped and regarded him curiously. He had never seen her before.

" No, thank you, it was nothing. Nurse," he added as she made a move to go, " is there a Japanese-American girl works in this hospital ?"

" No, I don't think so. No, I'm sure there's not."

" Thank you."

She passed on. He had known it before he had asked, but now he must accept it, live with it. But the feeling persisted that Shirley Mishina was a real person.

A gruff voice called his name. He looked up and saw a square, heavily-built man gaining the top of the terrace step He was about fifty years old, dark browed and jowly, wearing a grey business suit and a wide-brimmed hat. He carried a brief case.

Matty said, " Yes ?"

" May I talk to you for a few minutes ?"

" Of course." Matty watched the man as he sat down. A lawyer ? Maybe he was an ambulance chaser. Still, he thought, maybe I need a lawyer of some sort. A pity Ellison doesn't let me know what is going on. I could trust Ellison.

The man removed his hat and showed a fine thick head of grey hair. He wiped his forehead, and then the inside of the hat, with a handkerchief.

" Warm this morning. Glad I found you." His manner was rather abrupt, but not unkindly. " How do you feel now ?"

" Not so bad. They have looked after me very well here."

The other offered his cigarette case, and Matty accepted.

" My name is Ulbrick, Mr. Tomokatsu."

" Are you a lawyer, Mr. Uulbrick ?"

He smiled. " Yes ; does it show as much as that ?"

Matty said, " I can't say whether or not I shall need representation. Maybe there won't be a charge of manslaughter. On the other hand, I guess a little advice wouldn't hurt me."

Ulbrick looked rather surprised. " You misunderstand me, Mr. Tomokatsu. I'm not here to defend you from any charges arising, though I could arrange to have it done, if necessary."

" What is it then ?"

" I am here to make you a business offer in connection with the work you were doing with Dr. Aidan Muldry."

Matty took some few seconds before replying. He said carefully, " I don't think that I could be of any assistance to you. I did the routine work in his laboratory. What firm do you represent, Mr. Uulbrick ?" He had guessed, even as he asked the question.

" I work for the Holtzmann-Schneider group of companies."

" I thought you did, Mr. Ulbrick. And haven't you already had one refusal from Aidan Muldry? Isn't that enough? Why come sneaking to me to see if you can get to know anything that way?"

" But, obviously we must do business with you. As you know, our group of companies play a vital part in the country's defence programme, and we think that Muldry's work could be of considerable importance to us."

Matty snapped, " How did you find out? How—" then he said, " but why me? Why not ask Muldry again, if it's all that vital?"

Now it was Ulbrick's turn to look surprised. " You didn't know? Muldry is dead."

Matty sprang to his feet; he stared at the man for a few seconds, then he lowered himself again slowly. His mind was filled with pictures of his late employer, good, kind, understanding man that he was, simple and untidy and quite lovable.

" How did it happen?"

" A fire. Extraordinary thing. It started up very suddenly, so we understand, and when they got him out he was quite dead. His clothing was just a little scorched, but death was due to asphyxiation."

" The laboratory, what about that?"

" Quite destroyed."

Matty got up and walked the length of the terrace. Then he came back. " How are you sure that you must deal with me?"

" Muldry's lawyer says that you are the one to whom he left everything."

Matty smiled sadly. " It won't be much, if you count it in money."

" Have you no notion of what he was working on, Mr. Tomokatsu?"

Matty remembered that thick, heavy briefcase. He said truthfully, " I have only the slightest idea."

Ulbrick looked eager. Matty said, " I do not propose to discuss it."

Ulbrick looked at him with a hard expression. " I'm thinking of the briefcase which he gave to you on the day you left him."

So, thought Matty, they, *they* come out into the open now. They no longer feed me with illusions at night, or in daylight. They come right out and say it !

" How do you know about that ?"

" Come, Mr. Tomokatsu, it is our business to know."

" The only way would have been by having a microphone planted in Muldry's place. Was that it ?" The young Japanese was angry.

" I don't think we need talk about it," said Ulbrick, "except for me to say that we would like to make you an offer for that case, unopened."

" You stand to lose a great deal."

" We think it contains something which may help the country's defence programme."

Matty shook his head. " If Muldry is dead, then I want to see inside it first."

" Would you know what you were reading ? I mean," he added hurriedly, " that you might not—that—"

" We'll take this thing slowly," said Matty. " How much were you thinking of offering ?"

" A million dollars." Ulbrick spoke the words in a hushed whisper. He revered money.

For Matty that settled it. " I'll not sell, Mr. Ulbrick. I want to know about the work Muldry was doing, myself."

Ulbrick became most persuasive. " We have reason to believe that the work was of such a nature that it might be dangerous for—"

The expression on Matty's face stopped him. " Yes ?"

" That it might be unwise for any more people than is necessary to see the contents of the briefcase."

Matty kept his temper under control. " And who is to judge, Mr. Ulbrick ? You say that this case is now my property ; are you trying to tell me what to do ?"

" Oh, no, no. Mr. Tomokatsu. But we, in our firm, have had much experience of such things, and I hope that our word is worth something."

Matty answered evenly, " I hope that mine is too. I think I have sufficient knowledge to be able to tell what Muldry was up to."

" It is a very good offer," said Ulbrick. His smoothness was wearing thin.

" I'll still think about it," said Matty. His eyes strayed again to the long road by the side of the rails. Another car had just passed through the invisible curtain.

" I beg you," said Ulbrick, " To remember that the Holtzmann-Schneider corporation is a very large organisation. We are vastly experienced. You could not do better than work with us."

" What you mean is," said Matty, " that I'd better not try to work against you, isn't it ?"

" I never said—"

" You made your meaning quite clear, Mr. Ulbrick, and you can save your breath. I loved Aidan Muldry ; he was one of the finest men I ever knew, and I shall try to do what he would have wanted me to do. I don't think that we've any more to say to one another."

For a moment the heavy man stood scowling, and then he turned and strode away.

V

. . . . *' It was at this point that I returned to Central and received the urgent message that I was wanted on Sol III. The resident predestinators were desperately blunt about it ; either I must come or . . .'*

From an address by the Chief Predestinator.

A taxi from Seward's garage in the town called for him ; he had sat on the terrace waiting for it, filled with a mixture of grim thoughts. Over a week now, since Muldry's death two days since Ulbrick had called, and no more illusions. No word from the police department, no word from the Satos, and worst of all, no communication from Shirley Mishina. He attempted to fix her in his mind, but doubt was gnawing at him, and already he was thinking that he imagined her. Introspection was a deadly thing, like trying to turn on the lamp quickly to see what the darkness looked like, and he was sure that, as he needed someone like Shirley, then his mind had created her. He had said his goodbyes to the hospital staff, and there had been no bill to pay.

Now the taxi was at the bottom of the steps, and he walked down to it. The driver was a gangling youth who eyed Matty with extreme disfavour, and made no move. Matty got in and said, " Police headquarters."

The youth vouchsafed the barest of nods, and they set off. As they went through the hospital gates, Matty caught a

glimpse of the long road, with a car upon it, and he wanted very much to ask the driver to stop, so that he could watch the car and see if it disappeared.

Suddenly he felt angry. He did not know what he would have to face in the town or on that road, but all he wanted was to get out, *out*, and never see the damned place again. There was no savour in this holiday now. Already he felt lost, without Muldry, and without—he had to admit it—without Shirley Mishina, a girl whom he had never met ; not in this world, anyway, he thought.

He had to think about finding another job, too.

The cab pulled up. The police headquarters was a white two storey building within a neat fence, and a large notice-board at the side by the drive where the cars came in and out. Matty asked the driver to wait and went into the building. He said to the desk sergeant, " I'm Tomokatsu. You have some property of mine which was picked up after the accident."

The man at the desk was big and impassive. " Okay. But Lieutenant Ellison wants to see you before you go."

Matty liked Ellison ; he had seemed a sane, reasonable person when first they had met. He went into the office as indicated, and Ellison rose to greet him.

" I'm pleased to see you," said Ellison. " Sit down, have a cigarette."

Matty accepted. The office was the sort of place he might have expected ; it was quite normal. But his experiences over the past few days had made him look out for—abnormality, both in himself and others. But Ellison was completely normal and, he had no doubt, a good policeman.

" How do you feel ?"

" Pretty good. I'll feel better when I'm out of this place."

" I can imagine."

" Has there been anything more said about the little girl ?"

" Accidental death."

" I'm really free to go then ?"

" That's right."

" I wish that there was something I could do—"

" There isn't." Ellison's manner was abrupt, but he meant it kindly. " I'm as glad as you are that the charge of manslaughter didn't stick." Ellison's face creased into a grin. He pressed a button and a police officer appeared. " Take this

gentleman to the locker and have him sign for his briefcase." He said to Matty, " Will you go along with him ?"

Matty rose and followed the man. They stepped into a gloomy corridor, with the officer leading. About ten yards along a door was open, the sort of door which led to a cupboard where a cleaner might keep brooms and polishes. He looked inside.

He was looking into a neat bed-sitting room, the sort of bachelor-girl place which Shirley might have, which suited her exactly. She sat at a small table, writing a letter. Now he thought, now, *now*, NOW ! Now I will ask the questions, now I will break down the illusion, now I will take hold of her and make her answer all those questions which she knows I'm burning to ask !

But as he stepped into the room and she looked up and smiled, he knew that he would never ask them. He could not, for he feared that if he did she might vanish, or change, and then he would not be able to see her and to feast upon the sight of her. Real or illusion, he knew that she was wholly good.

She looked up and smiled and said, " Ah, so you came to see me before you left. That was kind of you."

He took a step nearer ; he could smell her perfume. He had smelled it before—in the hospital where she said she did not work. He returned her smile, knowing that pleasing her was the one thing he found worthwhile.

" Of course I came."

She rose. How simply she dressed, with her plain dark skirt and white blouse, and how graceful was her every movement. " So you're off to the Satos now, for that delayed vacation."

" That's right." He kept his eyes fixed upon her. " Where in San Francisco do you come from ? Perhaps I could take a message to your people ?"

" Well." She glanced at the letter in her hand. " Perhaps you could post this for me."

" Glad to."

She handed him the letter. A shadow seemed to pass over her face. " Matty—you won't forget about the decision I mentioned ?"

" No, I—"

The officer called, " Mr. Tomokatsu."

He turned to see the man looking at him with a curious expression.

" I'm coming," said Matty, and he felt sickened as a parting glance showed him that the door was indeed that of a large cupboard in which cleaning materials were kept. She's my creation he thought, and nothing more. If only I could meet her, and if only I could have avoided that little girl . . .

He followed the man into a room where there were rows of steel bins and lockers. The man took the briefcase from one of these, and Matty signed for it, feeling terribly alone when he thought that this was all he had of Aidan Muldry. The little girl, the grown girl, the middle aged man : his life revolved round them interminably, as though the lines of his existence were irreparably snarled up, as if every move he made was for the worse.

He was escorted back to Elilson's office. As he entered, he noticed that there was a murmur of voices from outside.

Ellison said, " You have some friends waiting for you."

" Friends ?"

He listened. He heard confused shouts. " Get that Jap out a town !" " Hand him over Ellison !" Just you let us run him out !" and similar threats were shouted.

" Come and look through the window, here," said Ellison, drawing him aside.

Matty saw about fifty citizens, some of them outside the white fence of the police building, the others in what little shade they could find over the other side of the road. Prominent among the noise makers was the youth who had driven him from the hospital, and whose cab was still there. It was a typical small town baiting mob, noisy, of low collective intelligence and of great mischief-making possibilities. They continued to shout, and one hammered on the door. Ellison called to the officer who had escorted Matty. " Thomson, wait a minute, then go out and involve yourself with them in an argument. I'll get our friend out in a police car. Come on," he said to Matty.

They went out into the yard at the back, where a big black car waited. Ellison motioned him inside, and they were out and into the street, bypassing the mob before anyone realised what was happening. After a hundred yards, Matty sat up. " Thanks," he said. Ellison grinned. They continued on for half a mile, and then turned left to draw up at Sewards' garage. Matty got out and began to thank Ellison again, but

the policeman said, " No, I'm going to see you into your car and out of this town."

Matty said, " There's my personal belongings still in that cab."

" I'll get them and send them on to you," said Ellison," if you'll give me your address. Come on, let's find your car."

The Buick was ready. Ellison chatted a moment to Seward, and as they stood outside, a man walked from the gloom of the big hangar. He was clad in a cream summer suit, and he wore a broad-brimmed hat. He was about forty-five, handsome in a ravaged kind of way ; his shoulders seemed slightly bowed. He regarded Seward and Ellison, and when he saw Matty, he stiffened, and stood still for a moment. Then he seemed to make up his mind and he walked towards the car. He leaned on the side and he looked carefully at Matty.

Matty said, " Good afternoon," and the man continued to look at him. Matty heard Ellison break off his conversation with the garage proprietor and walk up.

Ellison said, " Hello, Chris."

The man replied, " Hello, Tod." His voice was low, and his eyes were sad. " Oh, you needn't think I'm going to start any trouble. I couldn't, not the way I feel ; and now I've seen him "—he nodded at Matty—" I guess he feels pretty bad, too."

Ellison said, " This is Chris Temple."

Matty could find no words at once ; he nodded.

Temple said, " When it first happened, I wanted to kill you. I was full of blind rage. I loved that kid. But now she's buried, there's a kind of peace come on me. I never had anything like it before. I guess it's as you said. You couldn't have prevented it."

" If I could have done anything—" said Matty. " I'm so very sorry, Mr. Temple," he said.

" I'm sure," said Temple. " When I listen to myself talking gently, like this, it seems like someone else. I like to think that it's the real me, though."

Matty said very quietly, " If I could live that moment over again—"

" If," said Temple, " If, if." He held out his hand, grasped Matty's, and looked at him steadily as they shook. Then he released his grip, muttered a word to Ellison, and shambled off. They watched him go.

" Poor guy," said Ellison.

Matty said, " I think it will remain with me as long as I live."

" Let's go."

They stopped the cars outside the town. Ellison got out, and came up to Matty's. "This is where we part."

" I don't know what I'd have done without you."

" That's okay." They shook hands. " Now, don't get lost. There's your way. Left for 'Frisco, when you reach the highway."

Matty looked up the road which for part of the way ran by the rail tracks. " I shan't forget."

Ellison said goodbye and drove off.

VI

As soon as the Lieutenant was out of sight, Matty dived for the briefcase, opened it and began to read.

Muldry, with all his other patents, had not patented this. Muldry had evolved a system of mind control based on the latest discoveries in encephalography, plus a whole field of new work about which only Muldry had more than a glimmer. Muldry's discoveries, and the invention which had developed (on paper at least) from those discoveries, shed a blinding and terrible light upon so many things in this field of research which so far, had only been glimpsed. Now, here the thing was, almost complete. The minds of great numbers of men were within reach of absolute control, of complete domination by one person or group, and they would think that their thoughts and reasoning were their own ! Matty knew that he who owned the briefcase could rule the world.

And he felt better, and angry. He, Matsumura Tomokatsu, did not want to rule the world. But now that he knew, and understood, *how ever would he rid himself of the knowledge* ? This was Pandora's box ; this was forbidden fruit ! Matty was a Christian ; the not entirely foolish thought came to him—had Muldry died because he had eaten of the forbidden—?

Slowly, he put the papers away and locked the briefcase. Filled with a sense of oppression, he started the car. For a while he drove slowly, and then as the feeling began to lose its grip a little, he increased his speed, until he was bowling along by the side of the railroad. He kept his eyes fixed grimly upon

the road ahead. He could see no change at all in the highway. It seemed to lead on in a completely normal manner . . .

But fifteen minutes later, he was driving back into Bruton Springs. Nowhere had the road seemed to loop or change in any way at all, but now the town was ahead of him, with rancho style homes on each side, behind low and brilliantly flowering hedges. With jaw set, he determined to try the south road which led past the hospital, and to gain it he skirted the town. There was not much traffic. If I were to tell them, he thought, that I set out from the town and the road brought me back into town, they'd take me in again as a different sort of patient ! They ? Whom do I mean by ' they '? At first I mean the hospital authorities, but I also know that there is another 'they' that I can't see, that I can't meet or get at. Holtzmann-Schneider trying to drive me mad, he thought, something is trying to drive me mad, he thought, something is trying to send me out of my mind. I won't let it happen, *I won't let it* !

And then he almost thought that his avowal was in vain. At the side of the road, just outside the main gates, a girl, simply dressed and carrying a suitcase, was waiting.

It was Shirley Mishina.

So, he thought, I'll play along. I'll find out ; I'll be very careful here. And yet, while one part of him made stern and careful resolutions, the other part was taken with serene beauty, the utter desirability of her.

She said, " I didn't get to see you before you left, but I'm glad you got my message."

" Yes," he said slowly.

" I knew that as you were going to 'Frisco, you wouldn't mind my coming."

He forgot the caution he so earnestly wanted to impose upon himself. " Mind !" He laughed, and wondered at his laughter. " Get in."

She got in. Watch her, he thought, watch her. Watch for the signs.

But he smiled at her, and then cursed inwardly at his own thoughts, and they set off again, skirting the town, and once again they struck the straight road north. One mile. Two and three and four and five ! And still they bore onward, along a perfectly normal road, towards the junction with the main highway. They chatted the while, and all the time he listened for flaws and the gaps in her talk, for the rifts in the pattern,

which would give her away. And still they bore on, until the turning on to the main road was almost in sight. He was charmed by her, yet he felt repelled by the knowledge that perhaps she was an agent of evil. But how *could* Holtzmann-Schneider do all this ?

He had been cunning, in the way they talked ; he had let her tell mostly about herself, about her early days in 'Frisco, and so on. It had all sounded so genuine. They reached the turning, and as they swung on to the main road she remarked, " It must be very satisfying to work for a man like Dr. Muldry."

" Yes," said Matty. And then it hit him that he had never mentioned his boss, not once !

" How did you—" he began, but then she cried out, " Oh, look out !"

A child, a little girl of about eight, in check shirt and jeans, darted across the road, seeming to appear from nowhere. The moment, full of alarm and violent action, seemed to hang infinitely in his mind. As he wrenched the wheel the car slewed off the road, bumped over a drainage ditch and rammed a boulder with a harsh grating roar of metal. His head hit the door handle with great force, and darkness descended upon him.

It was night, and the three-bed ward was silent. The lamp glowed and cast high shadows upon the walls, and all around on each window the bars showed clearly silent taunts to his puny strength.

He was sitting, dressed, on the bed. He did not remember if they had put him to bed or not. And he did not bother to climb upon the chair and look out at the night sky, for he knew with complete certainty that there was no Bruton Springs outside.

The briefcase, where was it ? He found it on the chair by his bed. It was locked. He unlocked it, looked inside, and all the documents seemed to be there . . . and he knew with absolute certainty that he would not give in, that he was a strong man, and that he would do battle for what he thought was right.

He locked the case, picked it up and went to the door. It opened. He stepped through, and he found himself in the office of Ellison. The policeman sat at his desk, looking quite unperturbed. He did not look up at once when the other

entered, but murmured, "Sit down, Matty," and continued to read a paper.

Matty sat down, feeling, as he did so, that extraordinary compulsion that he must preserve the illusion for the benefit of other people. Perhaps, he thought, they do not know that it is false, all this. Perhaps they really believe in it. And then he wondered if he was thinking such things merely to keep up his courage.

Ellison looked up and said, " I had a feeling that we might meet again, Matty." He glanced at the paper again. " Tell me about the contents of that brief case."

" Why ?"

" I am informed that it might be dangerous for you to continue to have that thing with you."

" Did a man named Ulbrick inform you ?"

" Yes."

Matty told Ellison about Ulbrick. " So you see, it may be just a trick, because I won't sell to his firm."

" Ulbrick says that you have information which might be vital to the security of the country. Considering the source of the statement, I can't afford to ignore him."

" But you can't take it from me by force, Ellison. And I don't think that you would do that." Of course, the real Ellison would not do that, he was sure. But was this the real Ellison ? Was it any good asking. ?

" No, maybe not. But there is another thing here which might give me the right to take that case from you."

" What's that ?"

Ellison answered, " Muldry's death. I have a message here from Pearlburg. The matter of the fire at the lab has been gone into. They think that it was arson—and murder."

" Murder ?"

" Yes, with you as the number one suspect. You are wanted for questioning."

And now an anger began to stir in Matsumura Tomokatsu, and his smooth and normally quite mobile face became impassive, and he pinched his lips tightly together. He said, " Answer me a few questions. Tell me how I got here, what I'm doing here."

" Eh ?" Ellison seemed genuinely puzzled.

" *Tell me* !"

" All right. You ran over a little girl at the corner where the byroad joins the highway. She died. You were in hospital here. Now, though the possible charge of manslaughter has been dropped, you are under questioning over the death of your former employer, and over the matter of certain confidential matters contained in that case."

" Is that all ?"

Ellison eyed him steadily. " Yeah, that's all."

Matty decided to seem to accept it. He said, " Suppose I said that I did not know what was inside this case, and that I would consider Ulbrick's offer ; what then ?"

It was as though a mask had dropped from Ellison's face. He suddenly seemed covetous, eager, greedy, and his eyes glittered. " Well, now, that's reasonable. Just a minute. I'll get someone—" and he went to the door, and held it open. Ulbrick walked in. Matty, stood gripping the case firmly. He noted the position of the desk light, the only illumination of the room, and saw a large paperweight on the desk, a long thing in the shape of a night stick.

Ulbrick said, " Well, so you changed your mind, eh ? That was very sensible—"

" What about this charge ?"

" We'll talk about that later," said Ellison. No, he was not the man that Matty thought he was. The face of incorruptibility was gone ; Ellison revealed himself to be as venal as anyone.

Matty began to position himself carefully. He said, " There's one little favour I'd like to ask, Ellison."

" Yes ?"

" Take me outside," said Matty carefully, " And show me the main street."

" Why should I do that ?"

" It's a—whim. I want you to do it. Handcuff me if you like, but take me out and show it to me." He thought how mad his next words sounded. " I want you to be sure that it's there."

And now he was sure that this Ulbrick and this Ellison existed only in his own mind.

" There's no reason—" began Ellison, and then Matty acted. He smashed the lamp, pushed the heavy Ulbrick straight at Ellison, and ran for the door. He heard Ellison shout, and then he was outside, running and running, with his steps echoing, He ran for a minute, and then he stopped.

There were no pursuers. There was no light, there was nothing.

He stood quite still, and the only sound was his own breathing.

" Well," he said, and his voice echoed, and echoed again, travelling in an infinity of space.

" Come on," he said, louder, " I'm not dead yet."

Only the echoes answered.

" I've come this far," he shouted, " And I'll go on, if you like. Damn the lot of you, whoever you are ! I'm still sane and I'll still fight !"

It was as though he was in a vast hall whose confines stretched beyond the horizons of Earth. Then the sounds he had made died away, and there was only the silence, and the impenetrable blackness.

Somehow he knew that he had to wait.

At length, he was rewarded. The sound was of a cough, and a rustling of papers, and a cultured voice said, " I think we're ready, eh ?" He thought that he recognised the voice of Doctor Lundquist.

Murmurs of assent came from a small number of people ; the sounds echoed and re-echoed to nothing. Then a light, seemingly suspended in the blackness, began to spread its ever-strengthening glow upon him, and upon a long table at which sat dim figures. The light grew stronger, and developed into a directionless effulgence which at last showed him the faces of those seated. There was Ellison, and Ulbrick, and one of the nurses from the hospital, and Chris Temple.

Matty stood unafraid.

She who appeared to be Dr. Lundquist said, " You see and hear one person, but this guise is just a matter of convenience." Her tone was kind, persuasive. " I am the Chief Predestinator."

Matty waited.

" We are forced to recognise, Mr. Tomokatsu, that you are the most intractable, and the most promising subject we have ever tried to handle."

" We ?"

" The predestinators, or call us *Destiny Incorporated*, if you like. We guide the destinies of the people of countless worlds, according to their abilities and needs. We thought we knew our job, until we discovered the people of Sol III."

" What do you want with me ?"

" The two representatives we had here, in this remote corner of the galaxy, did their best with Man, improvising, bodging, at the same time sending home calls for help to deal with you complicated creatures. They mapped the broad lines of the destiny of Sol III as well as they could, and then you, and Aidan Muldry, began to meddle seriously with that destiny."

" Couldn't you have killed me ?"

" Easily." The calm rich contralto of Dr. Lundquist's voice had never sounded more beautiful. " But we have found that Man can help himself more than any other life form we have known, provided he is guided by us, and provided that we can pick and train those men who are specially gifted. You are one of them."

The others at the table said nothing, hardly stirred. He felt that the scene had been ' dressed ' for his own peace of mind.

" You read the contents of the briefcase, didn't you ?"

" Yes."

" And you must realise that you are therefore a dangerous man. You could rule the world—a ridiculous idea."

Matty said, " I do not want to rule the world."

" We know. And so we set out to test you in as many ways as we could manage. You suffered, I'm afraid."

" With one—illusion—I suffered greatly."

" Yes. We will talk about that later. The hospital at Bruton Springs is our control centre, and that centre exists on many levels. Sometimes we mix with the Earth people, other times we take the Earth people to our particular plane of existence, sometimes we mix the two. For example, the last time you seemed to meet Ulbrick and Ellison, they were not the normal Earth people at all."

" I guessed that."

" Exactly ; and you have just told yourself another reason why we need you. You have great intelligence, as well as some precognition. But at this moment there is a matter of great urgency to deal with. Matsumura Tomokatsu, Man's destiny as we see it, is the stars ; literally, the stars. But events begun by Muldry and continued by you make it almost certain that this will not be so if you continue upon the path upon which

you now travel. We ask you to see that man cannot have the knowledge which you now possess and fulfil his rightful future."

" Suppose that the discovery was sold to the Holtzmann-Schneider group ?"

She shook her head. " So that one country could control the destiny of Mankind, *as part of a defense programme* ? Man cannot control the hydrogen and the atom bomb. What do you think a country, *any* country, would do with truly unlimited power ?"

Matty nerved himself for the next question. " Is Muldry dead ?"

" In the now, as you understand it, he is dead."

" Did you kill him ?"

There was a pause.

" No, Matty, we did not kill him. But the accident should have happened with the case containing the details of his discovery inside the building."

" Then couldn't you make—"

" There are many things we could force to happen. But we do not want that. We need to have your understanding and co-operation ; you, a human being who must help to guide your people."

" Well ?"

" Do you see that Muldry's discovery is something that man must not have ?"

" Yes. What then ?"

" Then we want you to go back to your intended path. On that path Muldry still dies, but Rowena Temple lives."

" Ah !" Matty smiled at the face of Chris Temple, and saw that he was smiling back. He was filled with joy.

" That is your future Matty, without that dream of power, without the accident, but also with—this."

She rose with a sweeping gesture, and by the side of the table, another pool of light spilled down. Matty saw Shirley Mishina, packing a suitcase.

" First of all," said the Chief Predestinator, " you glimpsed her. Then we used her to influence you. But she is real, and she is part of your normal future. If you go back to the bifurcation of your life-path caused by this unfortunate accident, you will have your normal happy future, with her, and with the promise that in time you will be helping us shape the destiny of the one kind of creature in the whole of creation,

so far as we have discovered, whose destiny is *illimitably* high."

Matty watched her ; she was all he desired to make him happy.

" When—if—I go back, shall I know anything of what has happened ?"

" A strange sort of memory may linger. But it will not bother you."

" I see."

" I will go back."

Complete darkness descended like a curtain.

Matty walked from the darkness of the developing room into the laboratory. Muldry was walking round with his hands behind his back.

" That's all the negatives now," said Matty.

" Right," said Muldry, " Glad you did those for me. Now, don't you worry. I'll be all right on my own." He laughed. " You took some convincing." He rubbed his forehead with the ball of his hand. " Got some results and tabulations in there,"—he gestured towards his own private lab,—" that I thought I'd have you take for me, but I think I'll hang on to them after all." He marched away up the lab and returned. " You just about ready to go ?"

" In about an hour." Matty took off his white jacket.

Muldry said abruptly, " Now, I had to make a phone call. But who was it to ?" He rubbed his beard and lit another cigarette. " Ah, of *course* ! The matron at Pearlburg General Hospital. She's an old friend of mine. Listen, Matty, I clean forgot this. There's a Japanese-American nurse there named —oh, Shirley something or other. She wants to go to 'Frisco, and I said that that was where you were going too. You could take her, couldn't you ?"

" I guess so," said Matty amiably.

So Shirley Mishina became Matty's travelling companion for the long cross-country journey. Matty liked her at once, and soon there was no shyness between them, and they chatted like old friends. And Matty thought that he had never met such a girl in all his life.

They were in desert country now, with the old Buick bowling along at about forty-five ; it was fast enough. They passed a turning which said, ' Bruton Springs, Ten Miles.' Then Shirley

cried, " Look out !" and he swerved as a little girl of about eight, in check shirt and jeans ran across the road as though she had appeared from nowhere. He wrenched the wheel and missed her, then wrenched it again.

They stopped, and look back. Shirley stood up and looked down the road, shading her eyes. " I can't see her, Matty."

He got up to look too. From somewhere deep within a flicker of memory stirred, and was gone. " I guess it's all right," he said. " Whoever she was, we didn't hurt her."

He found that Shirley was smiling at him.

—John Kippax

Although New York author Lester del Rey is best known for his science fiction stories, it is surprising the number of outstanding fantasies he has to his credit. It is therefore no surprise that the following story saw first publication in America's Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, *internationally noted for high quality fiction.*

LITTLE JIMMY

BY LESTER DEL REY

I've always thought that meeting a ghost would be a pretty comforting thing. By the time a man is past fifty and old enough to realize death, anything that will prove he doesn't come to a final, meaningless end should be a help. Even being doomed to haunt some place in solitude through all eternity doesn't have the creeping horror of just not being !

Of course, religion offers hope to some—but most of us don't have the faith of our forefathers. A ghost should be proof against the unimaginable finality of death.

That's the way I used to feel. Now, I don't know. If I could only explain little Jimmy. . . .

We heard him, all right. At Mother's death, the whole family heard him, right down to my sister Agnes, who's the most complete atheist I know. Even her youngest daughter, downstairs at the time, came running up to see who the other child was. It wasn't a case of collective hallucination, any

more than it was something that can be explained by any natural laws we know.

The doctor heard it, too, and from the way he looked, I suppose he'd heard little Jimmy more that once before. He won't talk about it, though, and the others had never been around for a previous chance. I'm the only one who will admit to hearing little Jimmy more than that single time. I wish I didn't have to admit it, even to myself.

We were a big family, though the tradition for such families was already dying at the turn of the century. Despite the four girls who died before they had a chance to live, Mother and Dad wanted lots of children. Six of us boys and three girls lived, and that justified it all to Mother. There would have been more, I guess, if Dad hadn't been killed by an angry bull while I was away saving the world for Democracy. Mother could have had other husbands, maybe—the big Iowa farm with its huge old house would have guaranteed that—but she was dead set against it. And we older kids drifted into city jobs, helping the others through college until they had jobs of their own. Eventually, Mother was left alone in the old house, while the town outgrew itself until the farm was sold for lots around it.

That left her with a small fortune, particularly after the second war. She didn't seem to need us, and she was getting " set " in her ways and hard to get along with. So little by little, we began visiting her less and less. I was the nearest, working in Des Moines, but I had my own life, and she seemed happy and capable, even at well past seventy. We're a long-lived, tough clan.

I sent her birthday and holiday notes—or at least Liza sent them for me—and kept meaning to see her. But my oldest boy seemed to go to pieces after the second war. My daughter married a truck driver and had a set of twins before they found a decent apartment. My youngest boy was taken prisoner in Korea. I was promoted to president of the roofing company. And a new pro at the club was coaching me into breaking ninety most of the time.

Then Mother began writing letters—the first real ones in years. They were cheerful enough, filled with chit-chat about some neighbours, the new drapes on the windows, a recipe for lemon cream pie, and such. At first, I thought they were a fine

sign. Then something in them began to bother me. It wasn't until the fifth one, though, that I could put my finger on anything definite.

In that, she wrote a few words about the new teacher at the old schoolhouse. I went over it twice before realizing that the school building had been torn down fifteen years before. When that registered, other things began connecting. The drapes were ones she had put up years before, and the recipe was her first one—the one that always tasted too sweet, before she changed it ! There were other strange details.

They kept bothering me, and I finally put through a call. Mother sounded fine, though a little worried for fear something had gone wrong with me. She talked for a couple of minutes, muttered something about lunch on the stove, and hung up quickly. It couldn't have been more normal. I got out my clubs and was halfway down the front steps before something drove me back to her letters.

Then I called Doctor Matthews. After half a minute identifying myself, I asked about Mother.

His voice assumed a professional tone at once. She was fine—remarkably good physical condition for a woman of her age. No, no reason I should come down at once. There wasn't a thing wrong with her.

He overdid it, and he couldn't quite conceal the worry in his voice. I suppose I'd been thinking of taking a few days off later to see her. But when he hung up, I put the clubs back in the closet and changed my clothes. Liza was out at some civic betterment club, and I left a note for her. She'd taken the convertible though, so I was in luck. The new Cadillac was just back from a tune-up and perfect for a stiff drive. There'd also be less chance of picking up a ticket if I beat the speed limit a little ; most cops are less inclined to be tough on a man who's driving one of those cars. I made good time all the way.

Matthews was still at the same address, but his white hair gave me a shock. He frowned at me, lifting his eyes from my waistline to what hair I had left, then back to my face. Then he stuck out his hand slowly, stealing a quick glance at the Cadillac.

" I suppose they all call you A. J. now," he said. " Come on in, since you're here !"

He took me back through the reception room and into his office, his eyes going to the car outside again. From somewhere, he drew out a bottle of good Scotch. At my nod, he mixed it with water from a cooler. He settled back, studying me as he took his own seat. " A. J., heh ?" he commented again, sounding a sour note here, somehow. " That sounds like success. Thought your mother mentioned something about your having some trouble a few years back ?"

" Not financial," I told him. I'd thought only Liza remembered it. She must have written to Mother at the time, since I'd kept it out of the papers. And after I'd agreed to buy the trucking line for our son-in-law, she'd finally completely forgiven me. It was none of Matthew's business—but out here, I remembered, doctors considered everything their business. " Why, Doc ?"

He studied me, let his eyes sweep over the car again, and then tipped up the glass to finish the whisky. " Just curiosity. No, damn it, I might as well be honest. You'll see her anyhow, now. She's an old woman, Andrew, and she has what might be called a tidy fortune. When children who haven't worried about her for years turn up, it might not be affection. And I'm not going to have anything happen to Martha now !"

The hints in his remarks too closely matched my own suspicions. I could feel myself tightening up, tensing with annoyance and a touch of fear. I didn't want to ask the question. I wanted to get mad at him for being an interfering old meddler. But I had to know. " You mean—senile dementia ?"

" No," he answered quickly, with a slightly lifted eyebrow. " No, Andrew, she isn't crazy ! She's in fine physical shape, and sane enough to take care of herself for the next fifteen years she'll probably live. And she doesn't need any fancy doctors and psychiatrists. Just remember that, and remember she's an old woman. Thirteen children in less than twenty years ! A widow before she was forty. Lonely all these years, even if she is too independent to bother you kids. An old woman's entitled to whatever kind of happiness she can get ! And don't forget that !"

He stopped, seeming surprised at himself. Then he stood up and reached for his hat. " Come on, I'll ride out with you."

He kept up a patter of local history as we drove down the streets where corn had grown when I last saw this section.

There was a hospital where the woods had been, and the old spring was covered by an apartment building. The big house where we had been born stood out, sprawling in ugly warmth among the facsimile piano-boxes they were calling houses nowadays.

I wanted to turn back, but Matthews motioned me after him up the walk. The front door was still unlocked, and he went in, tilting his head toward the stairs. " Martha ! Hey, Martha !"

" Jimmy's out back, Doc," a voice called down. It was Mother's voice, unchanged except for a puzzling lilt I'd never heard before, and I drew a quick breath of relief.

" Okay, Martha," Matthews called up. " I'll just see him, then, and call you up later. You won't want me around when you see who I brought you ! It's Andrew !"

" How nice ! Tell him to sit down, and I'll be dressed in a minute !"

Doc shrugged. " I'll sit out in the garden a few minutes," he told me. " Then I'll catch a cab back. But remember—your mother deserves any happiness she can get. Don't you ruin it !"

He went through the back door, and I found the parlour, and dropped on to the old sofa. Then I frowned. It had been stored in the attic in 1913, when Dad bought the new furniture. I stared through the soft dimness, making out all the old pieces. Even the rug was the way it had been when I was a child. I walked into the other rooms, finding them the same as they had been forty years before, except for the television set in the dining room and the completely modern kitchen, with a pot of soup bubbling on the back of the stove.

I was getting a thick feeling in my throat and the anxiety I'd had before when the sounds of steps on the stairs brought my eyes up.

Mother came down, a trifle slowly, but without any sign of weakness. She didn't rest her hand on the banister. She might have been the woman to match the furnishings of the house, except for the wrinkles and the white hair. And the dress was new, but a perfect copy of one she'd worn when I was still a child !

She seemed not to hear my gasp. Her hand came out to catch mine, and she bent forward, kissing me on the cheek.

" You look real good, Andrew. There, now, let's see. Umm-hmm. Liza's been feeding you right, I can see that. But I'll bet you could eat some real home-made soup and pie, eh ? Come out in the kitchen. I'll fix it in a minute."

She wasn't only in fine physical shape—she was like a woman fifteen years younger than her age. And she'd even remembered to call me Andrew, instead of the various nicknames she'd used during my growing up. That wasn't senility ! A senile woman would have turned back to the earliest one, as I remembered it—particularly since I'd had to work hard to get her to drop the childhood names. Yet the house . . .

She bustled about the kitchen, dishing out some of the rich, hot soup. She hadn't been a good cook when I was a kid, but she'd grown steadily better, and this was superlative. " I guess Doc must have pronounced Jimmy well," she said casually. " He's gone running off somewhere now. Well, after two weeks cooped up here with the measles, I can't blame him. I remember how you were when you had them. Notice how I had the house fixed up, Andrew ?"

I nodded, puzzling over her words. " I noticed the old furniture. But this Jimmy . . . ?"

" Oh, you never met him, did you ? Never mind, you will. How long you staying, Andrew ?"

I tried to figure things out, cursing Matthews for not warning me of this. Of course, I'd heard somehow that one of my various nephews had lost his wife. Was he the one who'd had the young boy ? And hadn't he gone up to Alaska ? No, that was Frank's son. And why would anyone hand over a youngster to Mother, anyhow ? There were enough younger women in the family.

I caught her eyes on me, and pulled myself together. " I'll be leaving in a couple of hours, Mother. I just. . . ."

" It was real nice of you to drop over," she interrupted me, as she had always cut into our answers. " I've been meaning to see you and Liza soon, but fixing the house kept me kind of busy. Two men carried the furniture down, but I did the rest myself. Makes me feel younger somehow, having the old furniture here."

She dished out a quarter of a peach cobbler and put in it front of me, with a cup of steaming coffee. She took another

quarter for herself and filled her big cup. I had a mental picture of Liza with her vitamins and diets. Who was senile?

"Jimmy's going to school now," she said. "He's got a crush on his teacher, too. More pie, Andrew? I'll have to save a piece for little Jimmy, but there are two left."

From outside, there was a sudden noise, and she jumped up, to walk quickly toward the back door. Then she came into the kitchen again. "Just a neighbour kid taking a short cut. I wish they'd be a little nicer, though, and play with Jimmy. He gets lonesome sometimes. Like my kitchen, Andrew?"

"Nice," I said carefully, trying to keep track of the threads of conversation. "But it's kind of modern."

"That and the television set," she agreed cheerfully. "Some new things are nice. And some old ones. I've got a foam rubber mattress for my bed, but the rest of the room. . . . Andrew, you come up. I'll show you something I think's real elegant."

The house was clean, and no rooms were closed off. I wondered about that as we climbed the stairs. I hadn't seen a maid. But she sniffed in contempt when I mentioned it. "Of course I take care of it myself. That's a woman's job, ain't it? And then, little Jimmy helps some. He's getting to be mighty handy."

The bedroom was something to see. It reminded me of what I'd seen of the nineties in pictures and movies, complete with frills and fripperies. The years had faded the upholstery and wallpaper in the rest of the house. But here everything seemed bright and new.

"Had a young decorator fellow from Chicago fix it," she explained proudly. "Like what I always wanted when I was a young girl. Cost a fortune, but Jimmy told me I had to do it, because I wanted it." She chuckled fondly. "Sit down, Andrew. How are you and Liza making out? Still fighting over that young hussy she caught you with, or did she take my advice? Silly, letting you know she knew. Nothing makes a man more loving than a little guilt, I always found—especially if the woman gets real sweet about then."

We spent a solid hour discussing things, and it felt good. I told her how they were finally shipping my youngest back to us. I let her bawl me out for the way the oldest boy was using me and for what she called my snootiness about my son-in-law. But her idea of making him only junior partner in the trucking line at first wasn't bad. I should have thought of it myself.

She also told me all the gossip about the family. Somehow, she'd kept track of things. I hadn't even known that Pete had died, though I had heard of the other two deaths. I'd meant to go to the funerals, but there'd been that big deal with Midcity Ashphalt and then that trouble getting our man into Congress. Things like that had a habit of coming up at the wrong times.

When I finally stood up to go, I wasn't worried about any danger of a family scandal through Mother. If Matthews thought I'd be bothered about her switching back to the old furniture and having this room decorated period style—no matter what it cost—he was the senile one. I felt good, in fact. It had been better than a full round of golf, with me winning. I started to tell her I'd get back soon. I was even thinking of bringing Liza and the family out for our vacation, instead of taking the trip to Bermuda we'd talked about.

She got up to kiss me again. Then she caught herself. " Goodness ! Here you're going, and you haven't met Jimmy yet. You sit down a minute, Andrew !"

She threw up the window quickly, letting in the scent of roses from the back. " *Jimmy* ! *Oh, Jimmy* ! It's getting late. Come on in. And wash your face before you come up. I want you to meet your Uncle Andrew."

She turned back smiling a little apologetically. " He's my pet, Andrew. I always tried to be fair about my children, but I guess I like Jimmy sort of special !"

Downstairs, I could hear a door close faintly, and the muffled sounds of a boy's steps moving toward the kitchen. Mother sat beaming, happier than I'd seen her for years—since Dad died, in fact. Then the steps sounded on the stairs. I grinned myself, realizing that little Jimmy must be taking two steps at a time, using the banister to pull himself up. I'd always done that when I was a kid. I was musing on how alike boys are when the footsteps reached the landing and headed toward the room.

I started to look toward the door, but the transformation on Mother's face caught my attention. She suddenly looked almost young, and her eyes were shining, while her gaze was riveted on the door behind.

There was a faint sound of it opening and closing, and I started to turn. Something prickled my backbone. Something was wrong ! And then, as I turned completely, I recognized

it. When a door opens, the air in the room stirs. We never notice it, unless it doesn't happen. Then the stillmess tells us at once the door can't have really opened. This time, the air hadn't moved.

In front of me, the steps sounded, uncertainly, like those of a somewhat shy boy of six. But there was no one there ! The thick carpet didn't even flatten as the soft sound of the steps came closer and stopped, just in front of me !

" This is Uncle Andrew, Jimmy," Mother announced happily. " Shake hands like a good boy, now. He came all the way from Des Moines to see you."

I put my hand out, dictated by some vague desire to please her, while I could feel cold sweat running down my arms and legs. I even moved my hand as if it were being shaken. Then I stumbled to the door, yanked it open, and started down the stairs.

Behind me, the boy's footsteps sounded uncertainly, following out to the landing. Then Mother's step drowned them, as she came quickly down the stairs after me.

" Andrew, I think you're shy around boys ! You're not fooling me. You're just running off because you don't know how to talk to little Jimmy !" She was grinning in amusement. Then she caught my hand again. " You come again real soon, Andrew."

I must have said the right things, somehow. She turned to go up the stairs, just as I heard the steps creak from above, where no one was standing ! Then I stumbled out and into my car. I was lucky enough to find a few ounces of whisky in a bottle in the glove compartment. But the liquor didn't help much.

I avoided Matthew's place. I cut on to the main highway and opened the big engine all the way, not caring about cops. I wanted all the distance I could get between myself and the ghost steps of little Jimmy. Ghost ? Not even that ! Just steps and the weak sound of a door that didn't open. Jimmy wasn't even a ghost—he couldn't be.

I had to slow down as the first laughter tore out of my throat. I swung off the road and let it rip out of me, until the pain in my side finally cut it off.

Things were better after that. And when I started the Cadillac again, I was beginning to think. By the time I reached the outskirts of Des Moines, I had it licked.

It was hallucination, of course. Matthews had tried to warn me that Mother was going through a form of dotage. She'd created a child for herself, going back to her youth for it. The school that wasn't there, the crush on the teacher, the measles—all were real things she was reliving through little Jimmy. But because she was so unlike other women in keeping firmly sane about everything except this one fantasy, she'd fooled me. She'd made me think she was completely rational. When she'd explained the return of the old furniture, she'd wiped out all my doubts, which had centred on that.

She'd made me take it for granted that Jimmy was real. And she had made me expect to hear steps when her own listening had prepared me for them. I'd been cued by her own faint reactions to her imagination—I must have seen some little gesture, and followed her timing. It had been superbly real to her—and my senses had tricked me.

It wasn't impossible. It was the secret of many of the great stage illusions, aided by my own memories of the old house, and given life by the fact that she believed in the steps, as no stage trickster could believe.

I convinced myself of it almost completely. I had to do that. And finally I nearly dismissed the steps from my mind, and concentrated on Mother. Matthew's words came back to me, and I nodded to myself. It was a harmless fantasy, and Mother was entitled to her pleasure. She was sane enough to care for herself, without any doubt, and physically far better than she had any right to be. With Matthews' interest in her, there was no reason for me to worry about anything.

By the time I pulled the car into the garage, I was making plans for setting up the trucking concern again, following Mother's advice about making myself the senior partner. It hadn't been a wasted day, after all.

Life went on, pretty much as usual. My younger boy was back home for a while. I'd looked forward to that, but somehow the Army had broken the old bonds between us. Even when I had time, there wasn't much we could talk about. I guess it was something of a relief when he left for some job in New York ; anyhow, I was busy straightening out a brawl the older one got mixed up in. My daughter was expecting again, and her husband was showing a complete inability to co-operate with me. I didn't have much time to think about

little Jimmy. Mercifully, Liza hadn't asked me about my trip ; there was nothing to keep me from forgetting most of it.

I wrote Mother once in a while, now. Her letters grew longer, and sometimes Jimmy's name appeared, along with quite a bit of advice on the trucking business. Most of that was useless, naturally, but she knew more than I'd suspected about the ways of business. It gave me something to write back about.

I paid a fat fee to a psychiatrist for a while, but mostly he only confirmed what I'd already reasoned out. I wasn't interested in some of the other nonsense he tried to sell me, so I stopped going after a while.

And then I forgot the whole thing when the first tentative feeler from New Mode Roofing and Asphalt suggested a merger. I'd been planting the seed for the idea for months, but getting it set to put in my control was a tricky problem. I finally had to compromise by agreeing to move the headquarters to Akron, tearing up my roots overnight and resettling. Liza made a scene over that, and my daughter flatly refused to come. I had to agree to turn the trucking concern over to my son-in-law completely, just when it was beginning to show a profit. But the rift had been coming ever since he'd refused to fire my oldest boy from the job of driving one of the trailers.

Maybe it was just as well. The boy seemed to like it. We'd be in Akron, nobody would know about it, and he'd be better off than he was hanging around with some of the friends he'd had before. I meant to write Mother about that, since she'd suggested it once, and I suspected she'd had something to do with it. But the move took all my attention. After that, there was the problem of organizing the new firm.

I decided to see Mother, instead of writing to her. I wasn't going to be fooled again with the same hallucination. The new psychiatrist assured me of that, and advised the trip. I had already marked off the date on my calendar for the visit next month.

It didn't work out. Matthews called me at two o'clock in the morning with the news, after wasting two days tracing me down through acquaintances. Nobody thought of looking me up in a business directory, of course.

Mother had pneumonia and the prognosis was unfavourable.

" At her age, these things are serious," he said. His voice wasn't professional this time. " You'd better get here as quickly as you can. She's been asking for you.'

" I'll charter a plane at once," I told him. This would raise the deuce with the voting of stock we'd scheduled, but I couldn't stay away, obviously. I'd almost convinced myself Mother would go on for another twenty years. Now. . . . " How'd it happen ?"

" The big storm last week. She went out in it with rubbers and an umbrella to fetch little Jimmy from school ! She got sopping wet. When I reached her, she already had a fever. I've been trying everything, but. . . ."

I hung up, sick. Little Jimmy ! For a minute, I wanted him to be real enough to strangle.

I pounded on Liza's door and got her to charter the plane while I packed and roused out my secretary on the other phone. Liza drove me to the airport where the plane was warmed up and waiting. I turned to say good-bye, but she was dragging out a second bag from the back.

" I'm going," she announced flatly.

I started to argue, saw her expression, and gave up. A few minutes later we took off.

Most of the rest of the family was already there, hovering around outside the newly-decorated bedroom where Mother lay under an oxygen tent ; huddles of the family and their children were in every other room on the second floor, staring at the closed door and discussing things in the harsh whispers people use for a scene of death.

Matthews motioned them back and came over to me at once. " No hope, I'm afraid, Andrew," he said, and there were tears in his eyes.

" Isn't there anything we can do ?" Liza asked, her voice dropping to the hoarse whisper of the others. " Anything at all, Doctor ?"

He shook his head. " I've already talked to the best men in the country. We've tried everything. Even prayer."

From one side of the hall, Agnes sniffed loudly. Her militant atheism couldn't be downed by anything, it seemed. It didn't matter. There was death in the house, thick enough to smell. I had always hated the waste and futility of dying. Now it had a personal meaning, and it was worse. Behind

that closed door, Mother lay dying, and nothing I could do would help.

" Can I go in ?" I asked, against my wishes.

Matthews nodded. " It can't hurt now. And she wanted to see you."

I went in after him, with the eyes of the others thrusting at me. Matthews waved the nurse out and went over to the window ; the choking sound from his throat was louder than the faint hiss of the oxygen. I hesitated, then drew near the bed.

Mother lay there, and her eyes were open. She turned them toward me, but there was no recognition in them. One of her thin hands was poking at the transparent tent over her. I looked toward Matthewss, who nodded slowly. " It won't matter now."

He helped me move it aside. Her hand groped out, while the wheezing sound of her breathing grew louder. I tried to follow her pointing finger. But it was Matthews who picked up the small picture of a young boy, put it into her hands for her to clasp to her.

" Mother ! " It ripped out of me, louder than I had intended. " Mother, it's Andy ! I'm here !"

Her eyes turned again, and she moved her parched lips. " Andrew ?" she asked weakly. Then a touch of a smile came briefly. She shook her head slightly. " Jimmy ! Jimmy !"

The hands lifted the picture until she could see it. " *Jimmy*!" she repeated.

From below, there was the sound of a door closing weakly, and steps moving across the lower floor. They took the stairs, two steps at a time, but quickly now, without need of the banister. They crossed the landing. The door remained closed, but there was the sound of a knob turning, a faint squeak of hinges, then another sound of a door closing. Young footsteps moved across the rug, invisible, a sound that seemed to make all other sounds fade to silence. The steps reached the bed and stopped.

Mother turned her eyes, and the smile quickened again. One hand lifted. Then she dropped back and her breathing stopped.

The silence was broken by the sound of feet again—heavier, surer feet that seemed to be planted on the floor beside the bed. Two sets of footsteps sounded. One might have been

those of a small boy. The others were the quick, sharp sounds that only a young woman can make as she hurries along with her first-born beside her. They moved across the room.

There was no hestation at the door this time, nor any sound of opening or closing. The steps went on, across the landing and down the stairs. As Matthews and I followed into the hall, they seemed to pick up speed toward the back door. Now finally there was a soft, deliberate sound of a door closing, and then silence.

I jerked my gaze back, to see the eyes of all the others riveted on the back entrance, while emotions I had never seen washed over the slack faces. Agnes rose slowly, her eyes turned upwards. Her thin lips opened, hesitated, and closed into a tight line. She sat down like a stick woman folding, glancing about to see whether the others had noticed.

From below, her daughter came running up the stairs. " Mother ! Mother, who was the little boy I heard ?"

I didn't wait for the answer, nor the thick words with which Matthews confirmed the news of Mother's death. I was back beside the poor old body, taking the picture from the clasped hands.

Liza had followed me in, with the colour just beginning to return to her face. " Ghosts," she said thickly. Then she shook her head, and her voice softened. " Mother and one of the babies, come back to get her. I always thought. . . ."

" No," I told her. " Not one of my sisters who died too young. Nothing that easy, Liza. Nothing that good. It was a boy. A boy who had measles when he was six, who took the stairs two at a time—a boy named Jimmy. . . ."

She stared at me doubtfully, then down at the picture I held —the picture of me when I was six. " But you—" she began. Then she turned away without finishing, while the others began straggling in.

We had to stay for the ceremony, of course, though I guess Mother didn't need me at the funeral. She already had her Jimmy.

She'd wanted to name me James for her father, and Dad had insisted on Andrew for his. He'd won, and Andrew came first. But until I was ten, I'd always been called Jimmy by Mother. Jimmy, Andy, Andrew, A. J. A. man's name was part of his soul, I remembered, in the old beliefs.

But it didn't make sense, no matter how I figured it out by myself. I tried to talk it over with Matthews, but he wouldn't comment. I made another effort with Liza when we were on the plane going back.

"I can believe in Mother's spirit," I finished. I'd been over it all so often in my own mind that I had accepted that finally. "But who was Jimmy? We all heard him—even Agnes' daughter heard him from downstairs. So he wasn't a delusion. But he can't be a ghost. A ghost is a returned spirit—the soul of a man who has died!"

"Well?" Liza asked coldly. I waited, but she went on staring out of the plane window, not saying another word.

I used to think meeting a ghost would offer reassurance to a man. Now I don't know. If I could only explain little Jimmy. . . .

—Lester del Rey

THERMOMETER

Another new author to our pages presents a lightly entertaining story in the guise of a rather unusual prediction—and the peculiar circumstances around which that prediction came into being. There is also a somewhat complex puzzle awaiting you towards the end.

BY MAX SHRIMPTON

Perhaps it was just as well that the editor of the famous daily had no premonition of what the day had in store for him as he entered his private office on that bright and sunny May morning, surveyed his heaped-up desk with a sigh, and pressed the bell for his personal assistant, Mr. Michael Burke. That worthy gentleman also was in equal ignorance of the baffling events in which he was shortly to participate as he answered the bell promptly—the staff had learned from experience that it was most unwise to keep the editor waiting. Although Mr. Trescall drove his employees hard and himself even harder, he was, nevertheless, one of the most brilliant editors of the day, a fact of which he was well aware.

" Morning, Burke," he said as his assistant entered. " Let's see if we can clear some of this little lot."

" Yes, Mr. Trescall," replied Burke, and for a while the two men dealt with the editor's private mail which Burke had earlier sorted into neat little heaps ready for the great man's attention.

Then, and with no inkling, no foreboding, that it was perhaps the most momentous action in his career, the editor picked up a letter marked in large capitals, " Strictly Personal."

" Hm," he muttered studying the postmark, " and where the deuce is Frellingham ?"

" On the Windsor line, somewhere near Staines I believe, sir."

Meanwhile Mr. Trescall had opened the letter and read it in that incredibly speedy way acquired by editors. " Well I'll be damned," he exclaimed, throwing it over to his assistant. " Just read that, Burke."

" *Dear Mr. Trescall,*" (Burke read), " *I have been an ardent admirer of your paper for very many years. For the most part the information and news you disseminate is reasonably accurate but I am in a position to advise you that your London Area weather forecast for Monday (fine and dry for the next few days) is incorrect. In reality it will be pouring with rain in London by* 4.30 !

I would like to pin-point it even closer than that and would appreciate your assistance in a little experiment. Your window sill measures 40" x 9" *If you would be good enough to place a thermometer in the centre thereof you will find that it will register precisely* 59° at 4.26 *p.m., at which time the first spot of rain to strike your sill will fall about an inch to the right of centre.*

So that you will not feel that you are wasting your time over a crank I enclose a cheque for one hundred guineas for disposal how you will in case the experiment fails.

I will call upon you at 4.20 *to witness the experiment with you.*

Yours sincerely,

(sgd) M. Kirby.

P.S. Such a nice man—what a pity he'll have to run all the way down those awful stairs again !"

" Good Lord !" exclaimed Burke. " What do you make of it, sir ?"

" He's mad !" said Mr. Trescall decisively.

" And yet there are one or two curious things about this letter," said Burke. " For instance, how did he know what weather forecast we were going to print this morning ? His letter was posted last Saturday and Saturday's forecast was

quite different. Also there's the window sill "—he picked the ruler off the editor's desk and went over to the window—" yes, he's dead right. Then again—"

" Now look here," broke in the editor heatedly, " I'm a very busy man and it's part of my job to see that you are too. We've neither of us time to pander to imbeciles. You can see he's insane from that meaningless postscript. Throw the letter away and forget it."

" And the cheque too, sir ?"

" Ah, I see what you mean. Yes, I suppose the cheque does make a difference. Very well then, take it up with the Bank and see if it's okay. Also check the postmark on the envelope and get a line on this Kirby fellow. Don't waste too much time on the job though."

After Burke had gone, the editor turned his attention to the heap of material on his desk but, for the first time in his life, found it difficult to concentrate. His mind kept reverting to Mr. Kirby and his strange letter. How could he have guessed the Monday's forecast—and word perfect, too. He had also hit the bull's eye about the window sill, although any good reporter could have found that out. Nevertheless it was curious. Mr. Trescall was, first and last, a newsman and if by any chance there was anything in it . . . but there couldn't be, there were only a few hours to go, the barometer was rock steady and there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Immediately after lunch he rang for Burke. " Got that report yet ?" he demanded.

" Yes, sir. The Post Office confirms that the letter was franked on Saturday afternoon, the cheque's all right and there's nothing queer about the man. Used to be an accountant. Now runs a bookshop at Frellingham. Spoken of as a man of integrity but nothing special about him. About 50, married, no family. Typical hum-drum type."

" This is getting more absurd as we go along," said the editor. " The letter's quite out of character. Sort of thing you'd expect from a cranky scientist. The point is—if there *is* anything in it (which there obviously can't be) we, as newspapermen, can't afford to miss it. If there isn't, we get the one hundred guineas. My suspicion is that somehow we're the victims of a gigantic leg-pull and I don't like it. However, I suppose we'd better play along so put out a thermometer and give instructions for this comedian to be admitted when, or if

he calls. Oh, and you'd better stand by at four-fifteen and in the meantime keep all this under your hat."

When Burke had gone, Mr. Trescall strolled over to the window and decided he'd seldom seen a more perfect May afternoon in his life. There was hardly any breeze and the sun shone from a cloudless sky. According to his wall clock there were still two hours to " zero hour " and the barometer was steady. No, it wasn't though, it had dropped a little since he'd looked at it this morning. Mr. Trescall frowned and tapped the glass, when it promptly dropped a bit more. " Dammit !" observed Mr. Trescall and, deciding that concentration was impossible, departed on a totally unnecessary tour of the works.

When he returned about an hour later he observed that Burke had put a thermometer on the sill. He inspected it eagerly—61°, hmm, full sun too ; should go higher yet ; that will make Kirby's guess look a bit silly. What about the barometer—down a little more in the last hour—hmm. Mr. Trescall found concentration even more difficult than it had been in the morning and merely succeeded in working himself up into a bad temper. Consequently when Mr. Burke came in soon after 4 o'clock he was somewhat surprised at his reception.

" Have you noticed the barometer, sir ?" he asked.

" Of course I have, Burke," snapped Mr. Trescall, " and have you noticed that there isn't a cloud in the sky ? And also I would point out . . ."

He paused, the room had turned perceptibly darker. Without a word both men went over to the window. To the south the sky was clear but huge black clouds were looming ominously over the building and their advancing streamers had already hidden the sun. The editor and his assistant stood at the open window in silence watching the rapidly approaching storm clouds.

" Well," said Mr. Trescall, " it seems as though our forecast was wrong after all. The blighter's right to that extent anyway. Let's see if . . . ah, here he comes."

They heard footsteps along the corridor, there was a gentle tap, and the door opened.

Looking at Mr. Kirby the editor thought how well Burke's description of him as a " typical hum-drum type " fitted. He was about five feet ten inches tall, walked with a slight stoop, and was neatly dressed although his suit had obviously seen

better times. He stood in the doorway looking rather bewildered and peering round the room short-sightedly through his horn-rimmed glasses.

Mr. Trescall advanced to meet him and shook hands.

" Good afternoon, Mr. Kirby. This is my assistant Mr. Burke. Do sit down. Cigarette ? No ? Mind if I do ? Thanks. Now then, that was a most remarkable letter of yours."

Mr. Kirby brightened up visibly. " Ah, the letter. May I see it please ?"

The editor handed it over and Mr. Kirby seized it eagerly. " Most remarkable," he murmured as he read it, " and this measurement . . .?" he looked up.

" Bang-on," put in Burke, "the sill measures forty inches by nine exactly."

Mr. Kirby became immersed in the letter again.

" Anyone would think you'd never seen it before," commented Mr. Trescall sourly. A thought struck him—" Mr. Kirby," he said, " would you let me have a sample of your writing ?"

Mr. Kirby took the proffered pad and scrawled his signature and a few words. One glance was enough to satisfy the editor.

" Half a minute to go, sir," said Burke.

Mr. Trascall led the way to the window. The sky was now completely overcast and the gentle breeze had given way to a cold northerly wind. He looked at the thermometer—59°. Burke was counting off the seconds.

"—5-4-3-2-1-Now !"

The click of his stop watch and the appearance of a large raindrop at exactly the position indicated were simultaneous.

" Bang on !" exclaimed Burke, delightedly. He grinned at Mr. Kirby, who grinned back affably. Burke was beginning to enjoy himself.

Not so the editor, who was now more convinced than ever that there was something wrong. The whole thing was fantastic, impossible. It just could not have happened. It must be an illusion . . . he turned slowly and found Mr. Kirby looking at him mildly through his glasses. The solution burst in upon Mr. Trescall like a flash of light. *Hypnotism* ! Somehow this meek looking blighter . . . but he'd soon fix that !

Mr. Trescall went quickly over to his desk and flicked a switch on his intercom.

" That you, Russell ? Bring a flash-camera up to my office as quickly as you can. Most urgent." He regarded Mr. Kirby balefully. " You can probably hypnotise us," he said, " but you can't hypnotise a camera."

Mr. Kirby looked surprised. " Hypnotise ?" he exclaimed. " Oh, no, Mr. Trescall, I assure you, there's no hypnotism."

" We'll soon see about that," said the editor, " you're deceiving me somehow and I'm going to find out how."

Mr. Kirby looked even more surprised. " Oh, no, you're not being deceived . . ." he paused. " And yet," he murmured, almost to himself, " I suppose there is an element of deception from your point of view. Hmm, I hadn't looked at it in that light. Hmm." He lapsed into deep thought.

A patter of running feet along the corridor and a tap on the door heralded the appearance of Mr. Russell, a cherubic looking young man, considerably out of breath, carrying a large camera.

" Phew," panted Mr. Russell, " why do they always locate the poor photographer in the basement ?"

" Why didn't you use the lift ?" snapped the editor.

" Jammed. Electrical fault," answered Mr. Russell, " Sparks thinks it will take him an hour or more to fix it."

" Well, never mind about that." Mr. Trescall went over to the window and laid his watch beside the thermometer. " I want a picture showing the time and the temperature. And buck-up before the rain comes down any faster."

Mr. Russell slipped a card behind the thermometer, focussed his camera and pressed the trigger. There was a click but no flash. Mr. Russell produced a mild expletive and, after a quick examination, turned to the editor.

" Sorry, sir," he said, " I shall have to nip down for a new flash, this one's had it."

He hurried out of the room and they heard him run along the corridor and down the stairs.

The editor sat behind his desk and turned pale.

" My God !" he whispered, " that's the postcript."

Mr. Kirby nodded. " Yes, that's the postcript." He grinned at Burke. " And, as you say, you can't hypnotise a camera !"

Burke was looking startled. " No, of course not." He looked over at Mr. Trescall. " Where do we go from here, sir ?"

The editor was obviously thinking deeply. After a few moments silence he looked up. " Well, Mr. Kirby, you've certainly shaken us this afternoon. Will you tell us how you do it ?"

Mr. Kirby shook his head. " No, I'm afraid I'd rather not at this stage. You see, I have some further experiments to carry out before I can regard the technique as perfected. This one has been a preliminary canter, so to speak."

" I see," said Mr. Trescall. He paused, " Burke, just ring down to Russell and tell him he needn't bother to come up here again. Mr. Kirby, you've given a most remarkable demonstration but the time and place were of your own choosing. Would you be prepared to repeat your experiment and let me choose the time ?"

Burke grinned to himself as he put the phone down. Trust the Boss never to miss a trick. He would sure to make it sticky for the poor blighter !

Mr. Kirby, however, was quite unperturbed and nodded affably. " Certainly, any time you like—except Saturdays " he added as an afterthought, " that's my busy day in the shop."

Mr. Trescall could hardly restrain a smile at the naivety of that remark. " How about eleven o'clock, here, tomorrow morning ?"

Burke looked surprised and tried to catch the editor's eye but Mr. Trescall frowned at him.

Mr. Kirby beamed. " Oh, that will suit me splendidly. You see, my wife is travelling up to Lincolnshire tomorrow to visit her relatives and I shall be able to put her safely on the train at Kings Cross and come on here afterwards. Kill two stones with one bird, so to speak." He grinned at his weak pun.

The editor smiled politely and stood up. " Very well then. We'll see you in the morning, Mr. Kirby."

Mr. Kirby stood up to go. " There's just one thing, Mr. Trescall . . . what about my cheque !"

As soon as the door had shut behind Mr. Kirby, Burke turned to Mr. Trescall. " Don't you think you've made it too easy, sir ? I was surprised when you suggested tomorrow. I should have thought you'd have made it really hard for him. Say a fortnight or so."

" Hard ?" grinned Mr. Trescall. " You've only seen the half of it. I'll cook the blighter's goose for him this time. Just watch this." He depressed a switch on the inter-com.

" Is MacDougall in ? Good ! Put him on." A pause. " That you, Mac ? Listen carefully. A Mr. Kirby has just left my office. Tall, slight stoop, horn-rimmed glasses, no hat, fawn raincoat, looks shabby. Follow him, Mac, and *don't lose him.* He'll probably make for Waterloo. If so, he'll be going to Frellingham. He has a bookshop there. He'll be coming out to post a letter soon after eight and I want to know exactly what he does between now and then. See if you can get a look inside his house. Ring my private office number whenever you can—Burke or myself will be waiting here for your calls. Treat this as the most important job you've ever done for me, Mac. Good hunting !"

He neutralised the switch and turned to Burke.

" Now do you get it ? I figure it this way. It's now five o'clock. I imagine the latest time for posting letters in Frellingham would be eight-thirty, probably sooner. He's got to get home, do whatever he has to do, write me a letter and post it. In just over three hours. He's got to move fast. And he's got Mac on his tail. My guess is he'll grab a taxi and make a bee-line for Waterloo. We shall be hearing from Mac in about twenty minutes."

In actual fact Mac phoned in less than five.

Mr. Trescall received his short report in silence, remarked, " Okay, Mac, stick close," put the phone down and turned to the eager Burke.

" The blighter's quite unpredictable," he said. " Would you believe it, he's popped into the Restaurant opposite and he's consuming tea and toast as though he hadn't a care in the world. Mac says he doesn't seem to be in any hurry." He paused irresolutely. " Oh, dammit, I'm going to have my tea too. You stay by this phone meantime. I don't expect to be long."

When the editor returned about an hour later he could see from Burke's expression that there had been a further development.

" Mac been on again ?" he queried.

" Yes, sir, from Waterloo a few minutes ago. Says he went into the cafe and had tea and toast same as Kirby. Says Kirby contacted no one. Spent his time reading some trade mag about stationery !" Burke grinned. " Left cafe soon after six and went to Waterloo by underground. Got into a number 18 on the Windsor line due to leave at 6.42. Mac's taken a ticket for Frellingham and will travel on the same train."

" Good," said Mr. Trescall, " our little pigeon's flying home at last. Mac's next report should be most interesting. Go and get your tea now and join me here again when you've finished."

Mac phoned from Frellingham station at 8.20. His report was a long one and the editor listened in silence, his growing expression of stupefaction and sheer incredulity leaving Burke in no doubt that to describe Mac's report as " most interesting" had been an understatement of some magnitude.

The editor jumped up in excitement, " You have it with you, Mac ? What time ? Right. No, don't come to the office. I want that letter quickly. We'll meet you at Waterloo. Goodbye."

He slammed the phone down. " This is the most amazing thing I've ever come across," he said. He grinned at Burke, " I don't know about hypnotising cameras but he's certainly hypnotised Mac. Mac likes him !"

" So do I," said Burke.

" Funnily enough, so do I," said Mr. Trescall.

For a moment Burke was puzzled, then he saw the reason for the editor's changed attitude. Previously he had been convinced that he was the victim of some super practical joke and no one likes to feel that he is being made to look ridiculous. Mac's report had obviously shown that Kirby was quite sincere and accordingly Mr. Trescall could throw his suspicions overboard and accept Kirby's experiment as genuine.

" After Mac had phoned you," said Mr. Trescall, " he got into the same carriage as Kirby and, would you believe it, Kirby comes across and joins him ! Apparently he'd spotted him. Said it would make it much easier for Mac if they travelled together and he was sure I wouldn't mind. The sheer cheek of it took all the wind out of Mac's sails. Anyway, they got talking, found several topics of mutual interest and, to cut a long story, short when they got to Frellingham he invited Mac in for a cup of coffee."

" I'll bet Kirby was really enjoying himself," said Burke, " I should say he's got a terrific sense of humour."

" Undoubtedly," agreed the editor, " that's one reason why I thought he was pulling our legs earlier. Not now though. The old boy's genuine all right."

" What did Mac find in Kirby's house ?" prompted Burke.

" That's just the point—absolutely nothing ! There's just a bookshop-cum-stationers with a flat above. Mac was introduced to Mrs. Kirby who produced coffee and sandwiches and they all sat round chatting as friendly and sociable as you please." He grinned. " I can just imagine Mac wondering exactly what I was getting so het up about when I put him on to shadowing Kirby."

" Anyway," he continued, " Mac thought he'd precipitate matters so, shortly after eight, he mentioned to Kirby that I was expecting him to post a letter. Kirby chuckles, walks over to a bureau, writes a few lines on one of his bill heads, seals it in an envelope, addresses it and hands it to Mac *with the ink still wet* and says, ' Perhaps you'd be kind enough to deliver it for me. I'm sure Mr. Trescall won't mind. Particularly as he'll get it tonight instead of in the morning '."

" But it's impossible," cried Burke.

" Quite," nodded the editor, " Mac swears he wasn't out of his sight for more than ten seconds the whole evening." He looked at the clock. " Mac's train gets into Waterloo at nine so grab your hat and coat and we'll meet him. That letter should be most interesting !"

It was. Mac handed it over to Mr. Trescall on the platform at Waterloo, pointed out that he'd smudged the wet ink with his thumb to ensure identification, and departed for home. The editor opened the envelope, read the letter and passed it to Burke without comment.

Burke took it eagerly.

" *Dear Mr. Trescall,*" he read, " *Your paper's forecast for tomorrow (sunny periods and light showers) is ' Bang on ' as the worthy Burke would say. Temperature at eleven will be* 50°.

Kind regards,
Yours sincerely,
M. Kirby."

He passed it back to the editor. " We're coming on," he said, " I get an honourable mention and you now get a kind regards. What do you think of it, sir ?"

" I have no doubt whatever that he'll be right again," said Mr. Trescall, " but how he does it I haven't a clue. There's nothing more we can do now so we'll call it a day. It's funny though that this blighter knows more about what's going into my own damn paper than I know myself ! Good night, Burke."

When Mr. Kirby entered the editor's office next morning he was surprised and gratified at his friendly reception. Mr. Trescall began by apologising for having had him shadowed, enquired after Mrs. Kirby, now en route for Lincolnshire, and they chatted on general subjects until Burke reminded them that it was almost eleven o'clock.

" Right," said Mr. Trescall leading the way to the window, " We'll just see what the thermometer is registering, although I haven't the slightest doubt, Mr. Kirby, that your forecast will be . . ."

" Bangon !" said Mr. Kirby and Burke simultaneously.

Mr. Trescall joined in the laughter that followed, reflecting silently how far from laughter he had been the previous day under similar circumstances.

" You're a remarkable man, Mr. Kirby," he said a few moments later. " I've never been so completely baffled in all my life. I presume you approached me in the first place because you will need the resources of my paper behind you in due course ?"

Mr. Kirby nodded, " Yes, that is so." He paused : " Will you and Mr. Burke come over to Frellingham tomorrow morning and see how simple the thing really is ?"

" Rather ! We'll be there," said Mr. Trescall.

But they weren't !

Late that afternoon Burke rushed into the editor's office. " Mr. Trescall," he cried, " there's been an explosion and fire at Frellingham !"

The editor jumped up. " Not . . .?" he said, aghast.

Burke gulped and nodded. " Yes, Kirby—blown himself up. House and shop burnt right out."

Mr. Trescall swore loud and long. " Is he dead ?"

" No, they got him out and rushed him into the West Middlesex Hospital. Can't live long though and he's asking for you."

Mr. Trescall was noted for fast (some people called it reckless) driving and Burke will long remember that furious drive from the heart of London to Isleworth. There, in a darkened room, they found Mr. Kirby, unrecognizable under a swathe of bandages.

He managed a feeble grin, " I've done it this time," he said weakly. " My own fault too, I should have known." There was a long pause. " Look," he continued, " I haven't got much longer and there's so much I wanted to tell you."

" Take it easy, old man," said Mr. Trescall gently. " Can you tell us how you made those wonderful forecasts ?"

Mr. Kirby grinned again, " Oh, that was easy. They weren't forecasts, really. I call it Sequence Projection."

" Ye Gods !" cried Burke, excitedly, " Time Travel !"

" Oh no," said Mr. Kirby, " there's no such thing as time travel. It isn't possible. Several reasons."

Mr. Trescall frowned at his assistant. " Shut up, Burke." He turned back to the bandaged figure in the bed. " Right, Mr. Kirby, we'll accept that. Would you explain what you mean by Sequence Projection ?"

" I was intending to let you and Burke have a try at it yourselves tomorrow. It's quite easy. Look, a person's life is a series of events. He normally lives them in order 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and onward. But if he found a way to alter that sequence into, say, 1, 4, 2, 3, 5, he'd have achieved sequence projection. It's as simple as that."

He paused, but Mr. Trescall said nothing.

" There's no very satisfactory analogy," Mr. Kirby went on after a while, " obviously there can't be, as sequence projection has never been done before, but imagine a cinematograph film. The audience sees the events in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, order but it is *never* taken in that order, although the sum total of events is the same. Or think of the film on the reel. If an actor could travel along the radius he could get to any scene he wanted that hadn't been shown yet, and by-pass all the intermediate ones, returning later along the same radius to the exact place he started from. And that is precisely what I did !"

" On the first occasion on the Saturday afternoon, I projected to the time I was entering your office on the Monday afternoon, lived through that little scene with you and returned immediately afterwards. Now this is the point. There was no physical disappearance—there couldn't be, you can't disappear and leave a vacuum—I projected at 3.15 exactly and I returned at 3.15. It took no time at all ; there was not even discontinuity of thought. *But,* I retained the memory of all that had happened and so was able to write that letter."

There was a long pause. Mr. Kirby was obviously weakening. After a while he continued : " When in due course of time I reached Monday afternoon again, I simply missed that little scene and took up again at the point I'd previously left

off. The changes are instantaneous and not perceptible, which is why Mac noticed nothing. The total time lived is identical whatever order you take the events in."

" How did you manage the second one ?" asked Mr. Trescall. " Mac swears you weren't out of his sight more than ten seconds."

" Fourteen," said Mr. Kirby, "Poor Mac, he was so puzzled. Didn't know what he was supposed to be looking for. I excused myself to go to the bathroom and fourteen seconds was plenty. The projection takes no time at all."

Mr. Trescall was thinking deeply. " The point I find impossible to understand is how you could go forward and live through a scene in the future with us when we hadn't got there yet."

" Yes," said Mr. Kirby, " that's the stumbling block. I got the original idea of sequence projection from an old book I found tucked away in the shop but I was months and months before I solved that one ! I can't explain it to you properly without my drawings. I suppose . . .?"

Mr. Trescall shook his head, " Complete destruction," he said.

" Oh, dear, what a pity. Nevertheless, as you have seen, it can be done. You see, the events *do* happen, it's merely the order in time that is altered and no one living knows what Time really is. We're all living in the future anyway—the past is gone and the present is slipping away into the past perpetually."

Mr. Kirby's voice was getting weaker and weaker and it was obvious his secret would die with him. Mr. Trescall moved closer.

" What caused the accident, old man ?"

" I'm a damn fool," said Mr. Kirby, " I should have guessed what might happen. I tried to project twenty-five years ahead and it never occured to me that I should probably be dead then. Of course, it couldn't take it. The thing simply blew up !"

The pause that followed was a long one and, after a close look at the figure on the bed, Mr. Trescall stood up. " I think, Michael," he said sadly, " you'd better ring that bell."

The editor drove slowly on the return journey and neither spoke for many miles. It was Burke who broke the silence.

" I wonder what ' the thing ' was like," he said.

The editor did not answer. He was never one to grieve about the past and he was busy with his own thoughts. At last he burst out :

" It's the irony of it all that maddens me. Here, I have what I consider to be the finest newspaper in the British Isles with a circulation of millions. I'm presented with the story of the century, the scoop of a lifetime—and I daren't print it ! Nobody would believe it. I should be a laughing stock."

" The scoop of scoops," he repeated, " and I can't print it."

" Except, perhaps, as fiction," said Burke.

—Max Shrimpton

Mr. Burke's appearances in this magazine are all too infrequent for our liking, but when he does have a story available it usually has that 'something extra' we have come to expect from him. This time we are involved in "matter transmission"—in a highly novel manner.

THE NEW FOLKS AT HOME

BY JONATHAN BURKE

The boy and girl were transparent, and in any case the old man's eyes were not too good nowadays. He peered at the drab wall of the room, against which the children were flittering and fidgeting, and asked :

" How do your mother and father find things up there now ? Settling in all right ?"

He had asked this question once already during this brief visit of theirs ; but the children nodded tolerantly at one another, smiled to themselves, and drifted closer to him.

Caroline said : " It's warm there. The sun always shines."

" We've got a lovely house," said Mark.

" And we go sky-swimming every Hassaday."

Their grandfather said : " Sky-swimming ? I don't think I know—"

" Father says you couldn't do it on Earth here. You couldn't ever have done it, he says. It's all to do with the moisture suspension and atmospheric layers of Dacinai."

" I see," said their grandfather, uncomprehending.

Their grandmother came into the room, perilously balancing a small tray of food.

She would never understand. Faint and evanescent as the children were, it seemed that she could never grasp the fact that they were not truly here. Now she put the tray down on the table and rested one shaky hand on the back of an old chair. It was a chair that belonged to yesterday ; or the day before yesterday.

" Well, now," she said—and her voice was as fragile as the projection of their bodies across the vast reaches of interstellar space—" well, now, what about a bite to eat ?"

Caroline said : " Granny, you know we can't touch food, the way we are."

" I never heard of such a thing. You'll never grow to be big and strong . . ."

She had said this the last time. And the time before. All of it sounded like the echo of every visit they paid to Earth.

Their grandfather said : " We've been through all this before, Milly."

They had indeed been through it all before. Mark felt, for a queer moment, older than his grandfather. More mature, anyway. He knew things his grandparents could never know now.

His gradfather looked and spoke just as he had looked and spoken on each of their previous visits. It seemed that he forced himself to be content with the recognisable shapes of his grandchildren and not to ask too many complex questions. He had given up fretting : the world as he had known it was gone too many things had happened in the last sixty years for him to cope with.

Caroline went gliding towards the window.

Outside stretched a parched, bleak landscape. She had seen it before, but could still marvel at its endless monotony. She had been taught that it had not always been like this, but she found it hard to believe. The cities her mother and father had talked about were unreal. The pictures they had shown her were fantasies. Dacnia was reality : Dacnia was where people *lived*. Here, on old Earth, they merely waited to die.

Behind her she heard Mark beginning to break the news. She did not turn round. She waited tensely, knowing that this would be painful for the old people.

Painful, if they understood . . .

Mark said : " Oh, one thing. Dad wanted us to tell you that we might not be able to come agian."

" Not come again ?"

" You know how it is." He was boyishly awkward, stumbling over his words. " This matter projection is quite a strain on the power supplies. And on the human body. Half a dozen visits is the most they recommend—and after a certain age you're not supposed to do it any more. We're pretty well at that age."

" But . . . you wouldn't not come and see us ? It's a year since you last came. We were thinking—"

" Most of the link-up stations have closed down," said Mark firmly.

Caroline caught her breath. She hoped he was not going to go on. He could not, must not say what everyone on Dacnia was saying—that there were so few of the old people left on Earth that it was hardly worth while troubling with them. Another five years and they would all be dead. And then the link-up could be abolished, and in another few generations Earth would be forgotten.

But Mark was too tactful to give even a hint of such a thing.

" With us not needing the projectors for our own travelling," he said, " they're not really much use to the community. A lot of people say they're a drain on our power resources. And of course "—he came back skilfully to the major point—" we're getting beyond the safe age limit."

There was a silence.

Their grandmother broke it. She said : " I wish your father would come and explain everything. I do wish he'd make the effort to come just once and have a talk with us."

Caroline, her gaze still fixed on the dead land beyond the window, sighed. It was no use. They could not comprehend the forces of that distant world to which all the vigorous, striving remnants of the human race had gone. They did not really understand how men, women and children had transmitted themselves across space away from their ravaged world to another, younger world. They did not understand why the adults could not come back. Tensions, torsions and the physical atrophy of certain muscular and cortical strands could

not be explained to old people who knew only that there had been a holocaust of atomic disruption—and found that in itself quite enough to grapple with.

Mark said : " Well . . ."

Caroline swung round. She did not want their last visit to their grandparents to be a depressing one. She wanted a last look round this strange, decrepit old house so that she would always be able to remember it. Her mother and father would want to hear about it, too : they would want to have the last descriptions of it, the last ghostly messages from the world they had once known.

To their grandparents the children looked like ghosts. But to the children, brought up in the vivid vitality of Dacnia, it was this grey world that was peopled with ghosts.

" Coming for a look round, Mark ?" said Caroline. She added the sop for the two old people who seemed frozen in their memories of the past : " Mummy and Daddy always want to know what the old place looks like. It means such a lot, you know."

And suddenly she was aware of something new—something she had not felt before. Everything else had been the same : the atmosphere, the repeated phrases, the feeling that this short visit to Earth had been the same as all the others ; but now there was a wrong note.

There was a queer apprehensiveness in the eyes of her grandparents.

She must be imagining it. Nothing was different. She and Mark always went wandering round the house, then talked for a few minutes, then went back home across the star-trails. This, like the questions about Dacnia and " how are you all getting on " and " but I don't understand exactly what you mean," was normal.

Yet there was a moment of tension. Things were not the same.

Caroline said : " Coming ?" Her voice seemed, to her, to ring loud and defiant.

Mark was beside her. They crossed the room—it seemed only yesterday that they were last here—and went out into the dark passage. The walls were peeling. This was a world of decay. She felt guiltily pleased that this might well be their last visit. They did not belong. Earth was dead. Only the old, the stubborn, the dying, still clung to its ravaged surface.

" It'll only look the same," said Mark.

He had done his bit. He had talked casually, dutifully, to his grandparents ; and now he wanted to go home. An hour of slow conversation, of meaningless reminiscence, was more than enough : the old world was finished, and he wanted to be back with the living.

Behind him their grandmother said : " Er—you'll find it's a bit foggy."

" Foggy ?" echoed Caroline.

This, too, was different. They went into the old playroom at the back of the house—the room where their father had been brought up, and been happy before the holocaust—and the swirling yellowness that licked at the window was quite new.

Mark said : " I can't see out."

" It's just the fog," said their grandmother anxiously. " We've had a lot of it just lately. You can't see a thing. Not that there's much to see, anyway."

She laughed; and behind her their grandfather, too, laughed . . . uneasily.

" Oh, well," said Caroline, " there was only the plain, wasn't there ?"

The plain. The stretch of land that had once, according to their father, been an expanse of rolling meadows leading up to the distant outskirts of the city. The stretch of land that she and Mark could not believe in—once fruitful and beautiful to look at, now a scorched desert of rock with no more than a few wisps of something that was not even grass.

" That's right," said her grandfather, as though with relief. " It wasn't much to look at, was it ?"

Projection from Dacnia was strange and unsettling. You had no sense of smell, no sense of contact with anything. Only sights and sounds counted.

Yet it was as though she could smell fear.

The fog licked slowly up at the window, and its silent greed was unnerving.

Mark said : " We mustn't stay too long."

It was ordinary and casual. It was the sort of thing you said when you had flown free across half Dacnia to a party, and in the glowing twilight prepared to turn homewards. " We mustn't stay too long " . . . and off you went, through the

warm comfort of evening to the home beneath the violet arch of the sky. The sky with its two comforting moons and its promise of a clear violet sun tomorrow.

Ordinary. But it made their grandparents stiffen. Not in the old way—not stiffening with the ordinary human unhappiness that had racked them on previous occasions when the children had turned towards home. This was something strange, something wrong, that Caroline sensed.

The fog clawed up the window with its blurred tentacles. It looked oddly soothing : it swayed rhythmically, surged and fell back.

Caroline said, uncertainly : " Well . . ."

As though by common consent she and her brother turned back from the window. They returned to the sitting room with its faded chairs and the tray of untouched food.

Perhaps their grandparents sighed. There was a whisper, as though of relief.

Everything was as it had always been.

Unexpectedly, tears pricked behind Caroline's eyes. This, she was sure, was goodbye. She could not reach out across the years to a real grasp of her grandparents' minds, but she knew that this was a parting that would hurt. For them it would be an end—a breaking off.

" I suppose you'd better be going," said her grandfather.

He sounded incredibly hearty.

Mark could hardly control his eagerness to be away. Caroline knew how he felt. She knew that he was thinking of the skies and lakes and tingling air of their own planet.

Yet why was their grandfather so cheerful—or, at any rate, relieved ?

She said : " It's been nice. Thank you for having us. And . . . goodbye."

Now, at last, there was the glimmer of tears. When she held her grandmother's dry, shrivelled hand between her own two, and kissed the furrowed cheek, she caught a glimpse of the sad sparkle in the old woman's eyes.

" Give them our love," her grandfather was saying. " Your mother and father—say we're thinking of them. Tell them how lucky they are. No fogs. No . . ."

He faltered. A twitch of bewilderment contorted his face.

Mark said : " No *what*, Grandad ?"

" I don't know," the old man said with a puzzled frown. " I was going to say something, but . . . well, it couldn't have been important, could it ?"

His mumble died away. And suddenly his wife, shrill and unsteady, cried : " They're building. Building."

Mark looked uncomfortable. He wanted to get away. The old people were too much for him.

" Who are building ?" asked Caroline.

Now it was her grandmother's turn to look baffled. Whatever she had meant to say, it was lost.

The children hesitated, then went to the corner of the room. Caroline took Mark's hands in hers. They stood on the plate set in the floor, and their gradnfather dubiously pressed the switch in the wall—as dubiously as a savage might touch an electric light switch.

There was the usual pause while the relays clicked and the power was drawn from that remote world into the spatial flux.

Then the old couple began to wave. It was as though they were seeing their grandchildren off on a holiday journey.

The old faces faded. There was, for Caroline and Mark, a moment of nothingness. They were nowhere.

Then the walls of home assembled themselves. Out of the haze the definite outlines hardened into reality. The brightness of Dacnia flowed into the room through the large open windows, and the senses of touch and smell were restored.

Here was home.

" Fog ?" said their father.

He had been sprawling on his divan in the loggia, listening idly and contentedly to their chatter about their visit to Earth. Now he pushed himself slowly up on one elbow and stared querulously.

" It rolled against the windows," said Mark, with an excited throb in his voice. At the time it had meant nothing : now, looking back, he found the phenomenon rather weird. " All yellow and smoky, and moving all the time."

" But there was never any fog in that part of the world. Certainly not after the destruction. Even the dust haze had settled before we left."

Caroline said : " Well, things have happened. Things change—"

" Not on Earth," said her father. " Earth is finished. Stagnant. There ought not to be any climatic changes—

nothing to start fogs rolling up. Not in that part of the world, anyway."

To the children the point was hardly worth discussion. They had seen a fog, they had not been able to look out across the sombre landscape this time ; and that was all there was to it. Already the incident belonged to the past.

Their mother came walking up towards the house. Her bronzed legs rustled through the smooth caress of the grass. She was smiling with the deep, everyday happiness that was part of Dacnian life.

She had left Earth when she was a girl. It had become as remote to her as it was to her children.

Her husband said : " Freda . . . this makes me feel uneasy."

" What does ?"

He told her. And Caroline and Mark found themselves being unwillingly drawn out. It was Caroline who first spoke of the sensation of fear ; and then Mark said that he had felt there was " something funny " in the old house.

" It sounds odd," Freda agreed. " But it can't mean anything, Lance."

" Can't it ?"

" Well . . ."

Lance said : " It could all be imagination. Or it could be an unexpected natural phenomenon. There may have been a shift in temperature—the last flickers of radiation may have sparked off some unexpected reaction. All right. Or it could be that there were some of them left. Some of . . . the others."

Still the sun of Dacnia shone, and the scent of flowers drifted across the mauve grass into the shade of the house.

But there was a chill in the air.

" Dad, there weren't any of *those* left, were there ?" said Mark. " You always told us—"

" I told you what we were sure was right. But just supposing—"

" No," said Freda.

Lance put his hand lightly on her shoulder. " You make it sound so definite. That's how we felt at the time. But are we sure ? We took every precaution we knew of before we left. We checked—we spent months in checking, and we wouldn't have left our old people behind if we hadn't been sure. But maybe . . . maybe there were some survivors. Maybe they

got together. Maybe something is going on and they're laying a screen so that no-one can *see* what's going on. No visitors, anyway."

" And how would they know when visitors were expected ?" demanded Freda sceptically.

—But not sceptically enough. Even now, after the mellow years on Dacnia, the memories could be revived. The evil shapes of yesterday could twist terrifyingly through the mind.

Yes, they had checked before leaving. When the war against the mutants had ended, and their perverted bodies had gone down into the bubbling chaos of a world melted by bombs, the surviving human beings had taken a long time over the search. None of those ghastly travesties of humanity must be left. Even when it had been decided that the younger folk and their children should leave Earth and start afresh on another planet, the search went on until the last minute. Fall-out and escapes from atomic reactors had done their work over the years, and that work had almost resulted in the annihilation of the human race. There could be no safety, even millions of light years away, if any of the monsters survived. The war was not ended as long as one of them lived.

Not one was found. The last battle had been fought, and they had died in the inferno. It was safe to go away.

And safe for the old folk to stay.

There were many who did not wish to leave. The Earth, scoured as it was, was their home and they could not face the ordeal of being transmitted through space to that other world which had been proved hospitable. They would finish their existence in the crumbling homes with which they were left. The concentrated food would last for their lifetimes ; the lighting plants could be made to function adequately ; and perhaps if it were possible for their children to come back for visits . . .

It was possible. When the major job of projecting the pioneers across space had been finished, the equipment was not totally dismantled. The process was reversed, Small projectors were built on Dacnia, and reception plates were established on Earth. The power expenditure was colossal, but the duty to the old folks at home had to be fulfilled.

Home : that was how, for many years, the Dacnia colonists thought of Earth. It took time for the mental readjustment to be made. And then, gradually, memories of Earth faded into

a haze of uncertainties. The adults found that too many trips to and from Earth could cause a physical and mental unbalance ; it was true, and at the same time it was a good excuse for cutting down the profitless, rather boring visits. Only the children were allowed to go now, with a time limit set on their visits and an age limit on their availability for such visits. Grandchildren and grandparents talked in a remote, phantom way ; the visitors were insubstantial wraiths, projecting only the shadows of their bodies to the old world while the real flesh remained behind. It was like a visitation of ghosts.

Slowly the old people died off.

The number of projectors was cut down. Only a few families kept the equipment still in their homes, waiting for the day when their last links with Earth were severed by death.

" They're all quite happy down there," they assured themselves. " They want to live out their days on Earth—all right. But won't it be a relief when . . ."

Now the cosiness was disturbed. Lance was uneasy. They had taken it for granted—they had been only too anxious to take it for granted—that the Earth could be left to decline. Nothing needed to be done. It was dying ; let it die. Nobody's responsibility any longer. No more trouble.

And now his children had brought back with them a tremor of unease. They had sown the seed of the faintest doubt.

And the faintest doubt was too much.

Suddenly he stiffened.

Freda said : " What's wrong ?"

" The light," he said. " The link-light hasn't gone out. They can't have broken the connection at the other end."

They stared. The small glowing bulb spoke of power pouring away, maintaining the link with Earth.

" They're getting pretty doddery," said Freda. " Poor old things. We'll have to set the emergency trip from our end and break the connection."

Lance said : " No."

" What ?"

" I . . . I think maybe they meant to leave it on."

" Lance whatever are you talking about ?"

" I think," he said, " That they wanted to appeal to us. Or to warn us. Or . . . to ask us to make another visit. Quickly."

Mark groaned, and turned to his sister.

Caroline said : " We don't have to go back again, do we ? We said all there was to say—all the usual stuff."

Their father's lips tightened.

He said : " No, you don't have to go back. I'm the one to go."

" No !" Freda caught his arm, her eyes wide. " You can't. You're over the age limit. It's too risky—there's no need—"

" Isn't there ? Suppose that somewhere outside that house the mutants are living again, building up again ? Suppose there were some left—just a few—and they've got together ? With their weird, twisted minds and their strange abilities . . ."

Freda said tensely : " It's none of our business. Not any more. Earth is a long way away."

" You'd leave our parents to them ?"

" They're old. All of them. We can't be expected to risk our lives going back—just to *see*. It may all be a mistake. It's all imagination. Lance, you can't go."

" If I don't go," he said, " I shall wonder for the rest of my life. I shall wonder if the mutants are building up again. And I shall wonder how long it will take them to find out how to reach Dacnia. The equipment is still down there. The plates are in so many houses, ready to be examined. And with the minds those creatures had, it won't take them many years—even months—to crack the secret."

There was a silence in which the menace seemed very close. The children stared, knowing of the mutants only as one might know of bogeymen in a fairy tale. But Freda and Lance remembered ; remembered too well.

At last Freda said : " Somebody else ought to go. It's not your job. Report to the Council, and—"

" The time is now," said Lance, " while the connection is still made. They want me go to. That's what that light means."

She did not protest any further. She knew the look in his eyes, and knew there was no argument that would change his expression or his determination.

" But," said Mark timidly, as though trying to dispel the danger his account had indicated, " it was only a fog. I mean, maybe it was nothing. Just a fog."

" Fog in that part of the world," said his father, " is impossible."

He stepped close to the wall. They backed away, as though they might somehow be engulfed. Lance pulled the metal chair forward, sat on it, and reached for the switch.

In a second he was gone.

He was still there, sagging slightly in the chair, with his eyes open and a faint, grim smile on his mouth ; but they knew that he was really far away.

The room came back to him as though he had left it only a few minutes ago. Things had changed—there was dust, the walls were peeling, the furniture was shabby—but this was a room from his childhood, and it became suddenly real to him as it had not been for years.

His father had aged incredibly. And his mother was grey and haggard. They reached out towards him as though hoping that he would somehow be solid enough for them to touch. He wished it could be that way. He wished he could put his arms round his mother, and shake his father's hand. But he was only an evanescent pattern of light and colour.

His father said : " I'm glad you could come. I hoped you'd realise . . ."

" My boy," said his mother. " It's so long. If only you'd come sooner."

He had to be terse with them. The truth was immediate and important. He said :

" What's wrong ? Why did you maintain the link ?"

The two old people looked apprehensively over their shoulders. It was absurd and melodramatic. But their fear was real.

" They may stop us telling you," whispered his father.

" *They* ?"

" They're outside there," said his father. " It's all right when they're not concentrating on us. But when they do, they know what we're thinking. They knew when Mark and Caroline were coming, and they kept watch on us the whole time they were here—made us go through the motions just as we had done before, without talking freely."

Lance stared. His father was trembling, and his mother was plucking nervously at her dull, old dress.

Lance made up his mind. Without any further questions he moved swiftly across the room, down the passage and into the old playroom.

" Don't let them know you're looking," cried his mother.

He hardly heard her. He had come to see the fog of which his children had spoken. And there was no fog.

In the doorway he halted, seeing enough to bring him to a standstill.

Outside the window was the plain. But it was not bleached and barren as it had once been, right at the end. It moved. It rose and fell with a strange kind of life—pulsating and rippling, rising and falling like a gentle sea.

Only it was hideous. It was a sea of slime, a loathsome palpitation of green viscosity, lifting tentacles and engulfing them again, pushing forth waves that clawed towards the house and then fell back.

At Lane's shoulder, his father said : " It's been growing for weeks. It's taking over the world."

" But—"

" It threatened us," whispered his mother. " It got into our minds and told us we were not to tell the children. It put up a fog to keep them from seeing, so they wouldn't carry the news to you. You've got to come back, Lance. All the men—they've got to come back and deal with it, before . . ."

" Before what ?"

" We don't know," said his father. " We don't know what its plans are. Taking over the world—it's let us know that. But we can't grasp the rest."

" It's just horrible," The old lady turned away, unable to look any longer. " Horrible."

Lance could not follow her. He could not turn away. The sight was hypnotic ; his gaze followed the undulating green morass to the horizon.

Was this, then, a new enemy ? And how did the human race fight this one—this thing that surged over the entire landscape ?

Slowly he dragged his attention away, and turned back towards the other room ; back towards the road that led home.

He was too late. The living thing that was beyond the window had become aware of him.

He felt it at once. Like fingers reaching into his mind, probing, and gently closing around it, there was the consciousness of thoughts, questions . . .

And reassurance.

It was not a voice. Not a direct message. No one being spoke to him ; no words passed ; yet only in words would he ever be able to express to anyone else the sensation that overwhelmed him.

It was as though a chorus were saying faintly, far away, with great eagerness and a conviction that struck deep to the heart: " We are the newborn. We are the inheritors, and the Earth will be ours. Do not be afraid. Have no regrets. We are the phoenix growth, multiplying and resurgent, born from the radioactive mass you made of your world."

He tried to formulate a question. None came ; but somehow there was an answer.

" We have tried to explain to the old people you left behind. They do not understand. Their minds hardened during the war, and they live in their memories. They are not receptive. They fear because they do not understand. But you . . ." There was a pause, and again it was as though fingers were probing through his dazed mind. " We tried to keep it secret. We did not wish to trouble you—perhaps to stir up trouble. We thought you would be like these old people, and that there would be more fear and hatred and eventual destruction. But it is not so. You understand—or you are on the verge of understanding."

Lance found himself nodding.

" The Earth," came the assurance building up in his mind, " is not ready to die yet. We are the new life. To you we appear horrible ; but from such as us arose a whole creation, millions of years ago. From us will arise just such another—but better. So we believe. We are not blind, greedy protoplasm. We are alive : we think, we know, we create . . . we live. All will be well with your world. Our world."

Then it was ended. He was left with a tingling sense of awe.

His mother's voice was urgent, terrified. " They're getting at you. Don't let them, Lance. Get away, quick, before it's too late."

" I'm all right," he said. " Perfectly all right. And you're going to be all right, too."

He saw that he would have a hard job persuading them. Perhaps he would fail. But it made little difference. They were old, and soon they would no longer cling to the Earth as they had done across these last years. And when they had gone . . .

When they had gone, life on Earth would not be finished. He felt a great surge of gladness. Their faces were old and suspicious : both of them were dear to him, but he knew they were really strangers who did not and would not understand ; but outside that window throbbed and struggled the new life force, the strange entity which had shaped itself from chaos.

He did not know how the vast organism would develop. He did not know how long it would be before the final perfecting was accomplished. And he would not have recognised it if he could have seen it : it would be new, alien, remote.

Everything would be different. But there would be life, striving and creating.

Earth was not yet ready to die.

—**Jonathan Burke**

It isn't very often that we have an opportunity of including a fantasy story by Francis G. Rayer in these pages as his backgrounds are invariably scientific and more suited to New Worlds. *However, "Wishing Stone" is quite definitely fantasy.*

WISHING STONE

BY FRANCIS G. RAYER

Flame leapt momentarily through cracks in the huge star-ship's side, then she burst outwards. The fire became blue, then white, and in a single explosive moment the vessel was scattered into myriad fragments, each whirling outwards with the velocity of shards from a detonated bomb. Fire burned briefly, snuffed out in the vacuum. The scattered debris of the ship was gone, a thousand unidentifiable pieces of metal spreading in an expanding circle at ten thousands of miles a second. The stars shone sedately, remote from the tiny, abrupt spark of destruction that had unexpectedly interrupted the great ship's voyage.

From : TELET-AR-ULOR to SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER.
SHIP UL7 REPORTED PROPULSION PILE RUNNING TOO HIGH OUTPUT, 1714. AT 1721 FISSION EXPLOSION DESTROYED UL7 COMPLETELY. SHE IS TOTAL LOSS. UL7 WAS CARRYING CONTROL. REPEAT UL7 WAS CARRYING CONTROL. ADVISE.

From : SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER to TELET-AR-ULOR.
ENDEAVOUR TO CALCULATE PROBABLE DIRECTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DRIVE PILE AND CONTROL AND THEREBY DEDUCE PROBABLE DIRECTION AND VELOCITY OF CONTROL OR FRAGMENTS OF HULL CONTAINING CONTROL. VESSEL EQUIPPED WITH CONTINUUM DISTORTION DETECTOR WILL PUT UP AT 2017 AND CONTACT YOU TO HELP SEARCH.

Already half a light year from the explosion, a new darkness flitted across the face of the heavens, seeking as it had been conditioned to seek . . . The remote images of stars winked at its passing, hazed, went out, and returned, like lights seen beyond floating mist. No other sign arose to indicate the vast continuum stresses caused as the new darkness sped on, drawing to itself a strange whirlpool of the warp of space.

* * *

Barney Madrigal kicked despondently through the dust at the roadside, walking slow as a snail to school. He was sorry to have sworn at his father, slamming out of the house, knowing himself twenty minutes late. But his round, full-cheeked face was stubborn. That expression had distinguished it for over half the full eleven years of its owner's existence.

" Blowed if I'm going to be pushed around !" he said rebelliously, careless that no one was present to hear.

The trouble had begun the previous evening. Barney had been made to swop bedrooms. Out of the big room, overlooking the river, into the little room, with its limited space and view of the side of a neighbouring house. He had hated moving.

He kicked a stone, careless of his cleaned shoes. " Don't see why Joe should have the best room !"

But Joe was six years Barney's senior, seventeen, and now back on holiday from college. Barney's father had been determined. Barney had argued, had fought—but had carried his tadpole jars into the smaller room, swearing because he knew his father hated to hear him do that. In earlier years, Barney would have clung to his mother yelling. But he had out-grown that, and sometimes even forgot his mother was never there any more. Or that his father had a new, unamused, hard expression.

Keen-eyed, Barney could glimpse the distant church clock across a span of fields, and saw he would be vastly late. Being

late fitted his mood. He had come out with unbrushed hair, tie all askew, and an unmended tear in his coat pocket, reminder of fighting another boy the previous day. His general appearance and air was of calculated braggadocio. Blow people, he thought. Most seemed to be in the world merely to make things uncomfortable for Barney Madrigal. If he got caned, he never cried. Once, one terrible day, he had remained toe to toe with the master, and sworn him into silence, until gripped by the collar and shut in an empty study, there to cool while the outraged master telephoned his father. Barney had broken a window and got out, but common sense had prevented the jump twenty or more feet down into the concrete-hard playground. He had been retrieved from the sill in ignominy. Somehow that had pained him more than the caning.

The day was sunny and warm, and suddenly Barney began to hurry. Such a day was meant for swimming—and there would be precious little swimming if he were kept in for being late. At eleven, he could associate cause and effect, delinquency and punishment. The latter, so often unreasonably imposed by adults, had to be taken into account.

He began to run ; had taken scarcely a dozen steps when his eyes caught something in the dust by the roadside. He stopped. He had an acquisitive instinct which gathered oddments of no apparent value—shells, coloured stones, anything pocketable.

At first he thought it was a mirror, lozenge shaped with square ends, and small enough to rest in his palm. But it was disappointingly dull, and fused near one point as if by great heat. It was thicker than a mirror, too—more like the slabs of rock and crystal the science master showed them. He could not remember any name to fit this. It was some type of crystalline rock, he decided.

He rubbed it, trying to impart a gloss to the flat surface. As he did, the distant church clock began to strike nine. Resentment and dismay seized him. It was ten minutes to the school, at running speed. He wished he were already there, it would save being kept in . . .

A strange absence of light and space came out of the heavens, folding back cloud and atmosphere. Displaced air whistled, a momentary whirlwind. Barney blinked, screwing up his eyes. For a moment he thought someone had hit him from behind.

He raised his bunched fists to retaliate, opened his eyes, and found himself in the school yard.

Boys were pushing near him and into the doorway. There were two at the tail of the string, almost special enemies, and who seemed to have been waiting for him. They had been looking back at the gate, but now saw him, and their gaze was a silent threat as they went in, answering the clanging bell in the classroom corridor. Barney wondered what would happen. Physical violence because he had stolen their school pens just before class the previous day ?

He remembered the doctor's letter. His father had let him read it just to show there was nothing *wrong* with him. Barney had been so glad about it that he could almost recall every word It was long-winded, in Barney's view, but worth remembering.

From Dr. J. Macdonald,
Psychology Dept,.
City & Border Hospital.

Dear Mr. Madrigal,

I have now given full consideration to the electro-encephalographs lately provided by Dr. Wilson of our Out-Patient Dept., and you will be pleased to hear that they fully bear out my own opinion of your son Barney's condition. There is no insanity or actual abnormality. However, Barney has naturally suffered from the death of his mother, and is of very sensitive character. I would advise you to maintain a firm attitude with him when necessary, but to avoid any open conflict or argument with him, or to allow any contest of wills in which he must inevitably lose. His swearing and truculent conduct arise primarily from feelings of insufficiency, and are a childhood attempt to establish his own worth. He should engage in healthy outdoor sports as much as possible : should be encouraged when doing well at school or elsewhere, and outbursts of temper should preferably be ignored, when practicable. He will grow out of his present phase, and will in a few years probably become a normal, co-operative member of school and society. His actions are signs of stress and uncertainty, not of mental unbalance or any similar defect. I recommend you talk this letter over with him.

Yours sincerely,
J. Macdonald.

To Barney, the morning dragged. Lessons took his mind off the strange manner in which he had found himself in the school yard, avoiding reproof for lateness. He determined to try harder, and applied himself to his lessons. The kind doctor at the clinic had pressed his shoulder.

" You're O.K., Barney !" he had said. " Do your best. Work well and don't blow your top. Everybody feels irritated at times."

The half hour before break was devoted to music. Barney hated it, and hated the thin, white-haired master whose voice had the whispery sound of a flat g-string. Ashleforth was weak, and tried to get the boys on his side by providing scapegoats. Barney dimly comprehended this, and despised him for it.

The class was barely ten minutes old when the joke came.

" I expect you to sing better than that, *Madrigal*."

Several tittered. The joke was expected, usual—old and spiteful, but they always did titter. Barney flushed, his ears feeling hot. His fists were knots under the desk. A name like Madrigal, coupled with a complete inability to sing, made him fair game. And it was subtle enough to pass. He had complained to his father, but his father had not understood, merely thinking it a normal reaction against being ticked off.

The master came along the row, and Barney noted how the white hair stuck back over his collar. Ashleforth smirked.

" Madrigals are usually musical."

The titter was louder. Barney's teeth clamped like iron, his lips compressed. *Bloody old hen*, he thought fiercely. Only the hope of the cool, tree ringed pool by the brook, where he would swim, kept him silent. But he could not control the expression in his eyes—the hate, contempt. A trace of colour came to the master's cheeks, but he moved on, returning to his board to chalk up dotted notes.

When the class was dismissed, Pike and Brown were indeed waiting for Barney outside the school door. Pike walked a few steps imitating Ashleforth.

" Sing up, Madrigal." His voice wavered on a falsetto. " Madrigals are never, never untuneful ! Simple poems of joy and love—"

Barney hit him. Brown sidled up and thumped Barney low down on the back. As Barney turned to defend himself, Pike backed a few steps.

" Barney is barmy !" He made it sound like the line from a popular song. " Barney is barmy—"

Barney fought the two, bitterly, roughly, kicking, clawing, until a master issued from the school and stopped them. Pike was mopping a lip, carrying pink upon his handkerchief.

" Madrigal hit me first, sir !"

" Yes, he hit him first, sir," Brown said . . .

* * *

From : TELET-AR-ULOR to SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER.
VESSEL WITH CONTINUUM DISTORTION DETECTOR HAS REACHED US. INITIAL CALCULATIONS SUGGEST CONTROL LOCATION FRAGMENTS PROBABLY DRIVEN BY EXPLOSION TOWARDS GALAXY SOME LIGHT YEARS REMOTE BY FIRST ORDER SPACE. UL7 WAS IN SECOND ORDER SPACE WHEN DESTROYED. WILL PROCEED IN CALCULATED DIRECTION WITH DETECTOR SHIP AND WILL REPORT IMMEDIATELY ANY LOCATION OF CONTINUUM DISTORTION SUSPECTED AS REVEALING THAT UL7'S ENTITY IS FOLLOWING THE LOST CONTROL.

* * *

School had reached its eventual end. The head had listened to Pike and Brown, but seemed rather unimpressed, and fifteen minutes after classes finished Barney set off home. He ate a sparse tea under the watchful eye of his father's housekeeper, who always reminded him of a nun without her hood, then went alone to the pool.

Sun slanted through the trees and the air was hot with summer. Scarcely anyone ever came here. Sometimes he read, and a book hung in a pocket. But now the water was inviting, cold and sparkling at the end where the brook overflowed into the pond. He undressed, standing naked on the grassy bank, and dived in.

He had been swimming ten minutes when he realised that he was observed. A girl stood on the bank, amid the reeds, tall, quite slender, and with long, dark hair. He swam over, holding to a willow root, chin at water level.

" Go away," he said. " I don't want girls here."

" It's not your pond." She sat on the grass and began to unbutton her shoes. Her dark eyes returned to him. " Charl said you hit him this morning."

" He deserved it." Barney decided both were equally objectionable—Charley Pike, and his sister Mary, two years Charley's junior, but inquisitive and bossy for a girl of eleven.

" Clear off," he said.

" Who's telling me to ?"

She was obviously undressing. He grunted in disdain, and swam away across the pool. Reeds came right down into the water here. He kicked up mud, wilfully making the pool unpleasant, hoping she would go.

" There are frogs in the water," he called.

Mary stood on the bank a moment, clad in her knickers, then jumped in. Barney felt his peace finally evaporate. Her splashing was somehow an insult.

" You can't even swim," he yelled derisively.

Her head bobbed momentarily higher, her dark hair all draggled over her cheeks, but she grinned. " Who showed you how to swim here, Barney Madrigal ?"

It was undeniably true that she had. He swore, swallowed water, and decided to get out. His clothes were at the end of the pool by bushes. He put on his pants, wiped himself with his handkercheif, letting the warm air dry him. The peace of the sunny evening had gone. Splashing noises came from the pool, with yelps of delight. Silly damn girls, he thought.

Dry, he dressed. When he stuck his sodden handkerchief back in his pocket, he felt something hard, and remembered the queer, flat object he had picked up that morning. He took it out, his fury at being driven from the pool momentarily forgotten.

It might have been a mirror, if it were not so thick. Polish it as he would, he could not make it clear. His reflection was only dim, a round image lacking detail.

" Charl says you're barmy, Barney." Mary Pike trod water.

He ignored her, polishing the object on a coat sleeve. She had seen his action, and pulled herself up to shoulder level in the water, clinging to the grass.

" What you got, Barney ?"

" Mind your own business !"

Her woman's curiosity was aroused. " Let me see."

He placed the object in his pocket, holding it against some unexpected rush for possession.

" It's my business."

She seemed to seek an opening. " Bet you stole it !"

He knew the words to be a trick to gain information, if only by his denial. Instead of defending himself, he attacked.

" Why come here interrupting a chap's swim ?"

" I haven't." She was wheedling, now. " Let me see what you've got."

Barney nearly swore, but did not. Somehow, he never used such words directly to Mary.

" You have interrupted, then." His sarcasm was biting. " Who wants to swim with a girl ?"

" But I thought you'd like to—"

" Bah ! Like to !" He felt a small triumph at being cruel, in purposely hurting her. " Not with *you*, anyway. Be better if you left a chap in peace. Far as I'm concerned, I'd rather you hadn't come. Far as I care, I'd be glad if you drowned, and then I could swim in peace in future—"

He turned on a heel, striding back among the trees, the flat piece of rock clasped protectively in a hand. He did not see the darkness that came out of the heavens, pressing a wriggling form back into the engulfing waters.

* * *

The two mighty ships slid across the space between neighbouring galaxies, their captains in constant communication with each other, and reporting regularly back to their remote base. Upon one vessel a parabolic reflector spun, scanning the whole circle of the heavens. A probing electronic finger knowing no limitation in velocity searched a sphere many million miles in diameter, flashing back information to watching technicians. The race of which Telet-ar-Ulor was a member was old in science and great in attainment. Once, thousands of years before, and distant beyond the edge of their familiar universes, they had located powers so much greater than their own that they had been shocked with fear.

But in a hundred years they had emerged again—and with a means of controlling the ebb and flow of nearly infinite power they had discovered. After thousands of years, doubt as to the source of that power still remained. They controlled it, but did not know how, or where it arose. They observed its manifestations, using it charily. Its origins were somehow beyond the limit of their comprehension. They employed it like a primitive could employ a complex machine, the workings and motive power of which he did not understand. But they

had more intelligence then a primitive, and were very cautious. The means of control, lost from UL7 in the moment of explosion, was jealously guarded, probably irreplacable, and employed only after wise discussion.

The detector beam twirled, hesitated, made a second circuit and ceased to turn, oscillating over a narrowing segment of the heavens. At the extreme limit of range was an apparent hole in space, a dark emptiness from which came back no echoes of suns or planets, nor the criss-cross of meteorites, or the haze of stardust. Space seemed distorted, continuum drawn on continuum like bundled strands of thread that somehow crowded into non-existence, before spreading again into normal juxtaposition.

The two ships changed course slightly, the detector beam locking on the remote spot of emptiness. It was receding at near their own velocity, but seemed to be in fairly stable position to a moderately sized sun. Grave unease ran through the technicians as they realised the significance of this fact. Orders passed rapidly, and a new fire of increased drive flickered blue rings behind both ships.

* * *

" That's definitely the last I saw of Mary," Barney said again. " I didn't want her to come swimming there—I told her so."

The police officer did not appear antagonistic. He had seated himself on the lounge couch with a friendly air, and had listened quietly to all Barney said, only interjecting occasional questions. He rose.

" You didn't see anyone else by the pool, or in the trees ?"

" No."

" Charley Pike didn't see anyone else, either. You may as well know that, so don't worry."

Barney heard the man talking in the hall with his father, as he left. " The poor kid seemed caught in weeds. Her brother saw your son leaving. No, we don't for a moment imagine your son knows any more, or even that there was foul play."

The door closed, and Barney was alone. He nibbled his lips, walked half to the door, then changed his mind and took up a position by the window, his fists thrust deeply in his pockets. He was extremely sorry for Mary. Somehow the fact that she was dead had not sunk fully home. He could not believe that

he would never see her again, or hear her mischievous laugh as she made a joke or scored off him.

Joe came in. Six years Barney's senior, he looked very adult, very neat in perfectly creased flannels. He sat on the couch, leaning forwards, elbows on knees, his face serious.

" You didn't try ducking Mary, or anything ?"

" I've said I hadn't, didn't I ?"

Barney felt angry, staring into the eyes which were so light blue, so like his own. He had always seemed to live in a state of unending competition with Joe—a competition he could never win. As he grew, so did Joe. It was a race with no end. Joe was always taller, always ran faster, could always make more at cricket.

" I'm not trying to accuse you," Joe said. " But everyone knows Mary was as good swimmer. I believe she taught you, years ago."

She had. But Barney instinctively caught the criticism in the words. Somehow Joe was suggesting that he, Barney, was at fault. The thought made him clench his fists. Something hard lay in his right hand. It brought memory. With the memory came a queer, twisted sense of having done wrong. He had *wished* Mary drowned—or at least said it would suit him if she were.

Memory of that wish made his eyes drop. He thought for a moment he would cry—but pride forbade it. Instead, when emotion became too strong, he swore, roundly, adultly, using every word he had ever heard the other boys employ, and those of the men down by the riverside, when he could remember them.

Joe saw the look on his face, the dropped gaze. His cheeks grew a trifle thin.

" Look Barney, if you were larking about, or anything, and gave her a push, tell me—"

Barney trembled. " I didn't ! I never even touched her ! I wanted her to go away, I only said—"

He could not repeat what he had said. The exact wording eluded him, and it seemed unkind to repeat it, now she was drowned. Instead, he summoned up the new iciness which had come to him first after his mother had gone for ever, and which was a mask he maintained against anyone who strove to penetrate his defences.

" I've told what happened," he said, quelling emotion. " I didn't know Mary was—was drowned until Charl found her and started hollering."

They left it at that.

Barney did not sleep well. It still seemed impossible that Mary had gone. He lay for a long time staring at the illuminated patch on the ceiling where light spilled across from the house opposite. He felt resentful that Joe had seemed to disbelieve him. From there, his recollections strayed logically enough to his last words to Mary. He *had* wished she were drowned, during that brief annoyance of finding his swim interrupted. It was surely a strange coincidence that she had afterwards somehow failed to reach the bank.

An odd feeling he could not define suddenly swept over him, and he sat up abruptly in bed. Once before, that day, he had wished something, and found it happen ! He could not remember traversing the road to school, yet had arrived there —and in time. Old Ashleforth, and the plan to go swimming, had almost made him forget, then Mary's death had left no space for other thoughts. But now that memory had fully returned, it burned with such bright vividness that it crowded out all else.

He strove to recollect everything associated with the day's happenings, but found little. He had often played at make-believe, had often " wished " when defeated or frustrated. Why two apparent desires should have been fulfilled that day eluded him.

Finally he settled down to sleep, the problem—if problem there was—unsolved. At eleven years, Barney had grown accustomed to taking apparent miracles as he found them, not asking questions when there was obviously no answer.

* * *

From : TELET-AR-ULOR to SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER.

THE DETECTOR SHIP HAS LOCATED A CONTINUUM STRESS SIGNIFICANTLY IMMOBILE RELATIVE TO A MIDDLE PLANET OF THE SYSTEM WE ARE APPROACHING. WE BELIEVE THE CONTROL LOST FROM UL7 RESTS ON THIS PLANET. WE ARE NOT YET AWARE OF CONDITIONS ON THE PLANET BUT RADIO SIGNALS INDICATE CIVILISATION OF A TYPE. I NEED NOT UNDERLINE THE UNSPEAKABLE DANGERS WHICH COULD ARISE FROM WRONG, WILFUL, OR UNWISE USE OF THE CONTROL, OR SUGGEST WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF THE CONTROL WERE

FOUND AND USED. MANY RACES EMPLOY HOPEFUL OR ANTICIPATORY MENTAL IMAGERY WHEN STRESSED OR FRUSTRATED AND CHANCE OPERATION OF THE CONTROL IS THUS HIGHLY LIKELY.

From : SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER to TELET-AR-ULOR.
LOCATE AND RETRIEVE CONTROL AT ALL COSTS.

* * *

The next day at school was outwardly almost normal. But a new repression had descended on Barney and the others. Pike and Brown came as usual, but did not rag him. Instead, they watched critically as if he were responsible for Mary. Barney found the silent criticism vastly more trying than open conflict.

He thought the masters also seemed to watch him, and once he found Ashleforth's gaze unexpectedly curious and condemning. A new external appearance of self-control and coolness possessed Barney, but he knew it was thin—a shell of self-defence ready to crack under no great impact.

During early break he sat on the playground wall, studying the flat piece of rock with new interest, and pretending not to notice that no one wished to play with him, or even fight him. The object was too regular in shape to be natural. If it had not been damaged at one end, it would have been an exactly symmetrical lozenge. He tried the surface with his penknife, but found it too hard to mark. Nor did his teeth make any impression on it. When held to an ear, it seemed to hum like a sea-shell, but with a murmur infinitely more remote.

The playground was unusally subdued. Most of the boys had gathered round Pike and Brown, and Pike was talking quietly. Barney did not doubt what they discussed. His ears burned ; his cheeks flamed, then an icy coldness came into his limbs.

He slid from the wall and approached them. They grew silent, looking at him.

" How can I help it if—if Mary got—drowned ?" he asked helplessly.

They looked at him, not speaking, eyes somehow condemning him. His knees trembled with the injustice of it.

" Naturally I'd have stopped and saved her if I'd have known !" he stated.

They all stared at him. One small boy's mouth hung visibly open. Barney saw he was failing to establish any kind of relationship.

" I—I'm sorry she—drowned," he whispered.

His voice was breaking with the emotion of it all. The curiosity and condemnation remained. Charley Pike whispered something, and the group began to fade away. Barney found himself standing nearly alone at the end of the playground.

" Your housekeeper told Ma you'd been to a loony doctor," Charley Pike stated.

Barney was stunned into silence. He had not supposed the boys would ever know. Denial sprag to his lips, but Charley had gone.

Barney almost wept. He felt their attitude was frantically wrong and unjust. Then his self-pity changed to anger. His teeth snapped shut, and his fists clenched, as when he went into battle.

Very well he thought, he didn't care ! He could fight them all, half a dozen at a time, if they wished. He hadn't done anything wrong, that he knew of ! He swore under his breath. Silly lot of kids. Picking on him, as usual. To hell with them. Weak-kneed lot of silly devils . . .

He was still swearing inwarldy when they returned to the classroom. When he caught any other gaze fixed on him, he returned it with equal stoniness. He was a tiny, isolated island of acute feeling, maintaining itself against attack from all sides. He knew the sensation of old—knew, also, that it was either this, or tears.

Ashleforth looked aware of the tension in class, and was anxious to dispel it. He progressed with the lesson, speaking a trifle more rapidly than usual. It was history, and Ashleforth was on his hobby-horse when it came to forms of song and music used in by-gone times. The name " madrigal " came out first time with no particular inflexion, but one boy tittered self-consciously, and two cleared their throats. Ashleforth paused momentarily, as if reminded of his old joke. Then he went on.

Barney's attention wandered. For the tenth time he re-lived the scene by the pool. It was not his fault . . . He wished, devoutly, that he had not gone swimming—or that he were someone else, perhaps capable and content, like Joe—

He came back to awareness of the class with the knowledge that the master had asked him something.

" You were not attending !" Ashleforth tapped his desk.

Barney stared at him, not comprehending. He would have saved Mary if he could . . .

" Did you hear what I asked you ?" Ashleforth was flushing as always when he suspected a boy was ignoring his authority.

Barney had not heard. Instead, he wished he had stayed to watch Mary. Then he could have saved her. But he always seemed to do the wrong thing . . .

" Speak up, boy !" The voice had a rising note.

Barney looked him in the eye, seeing him for the first time.

" I was thinking that it's not always a song to be a bloody Madrigal, sir," he said.

Ashleforth almost choked. A weak titter, against the master this time, and acknowledging Barney's courage, swept the class.

" What ?" The master overhung his desk in anger. "Kindly repeat what you said !"

Barney did, word for word, without omission or apology. The titter was louder this time.

" Disgraceful !" Ashleforth's face was white, with pink spots on each cheek. " I have never heard anything so insulting. You will stay in until the Head has decided what shall happen to you. I will not have my boys contaminated by such defiance !"

Barney stood up. He had reached the end of his ability to resist. Mary. Being an outcast among his companions. Joe turfing him out of his bedroom. Joe thinking he had hurt Mary. Charl saying he was loony. Now this. Very slowly, almost deliberately, he walked along in front of the desks. He had almost reached the door when Ashleforth awoke from his astonishment.

" Boy, come back ! That is an order !"

Barney walked on, slowly, driven by the will which would never admit defeat. A hand came on his shoulder, swinging him round. Lips quivering, he saw red, and struck. His blow was weak, but it took Ashleforth on the chest, and the master stepped back, face like mottled chalk, more astounded than hurt.

" I'm damned if I'm coming back !" Barney shouted. " Why the devil should I come back when all you want to do is laugh at me ? I've had enough of it. You can go to the

devil, and the Head too." Tears streamed down his hot face. His fists clenched in his pockets. In one was his handkerchief, in a tight ball ; in the other, a lozenge shape with hard edges that cut his fingers. The way the men swore down at the river-side came vividly to his mind. He could not remember all their words, but did his best, though Ashleforth tried to stop him once.

At last he stamped the floor. " I heard Pike say Dad had me taken to a head doctor. What the hell do I care if he has ! What the devil do I care what any of you think ?" He breathed deeply, almost hoping with the constriction in his throat. " What do I care what you think or do ? Far as I'm concerned, you could all be dead this moment. Fact, I'd be glad if you *were*—I wish you all were, then I'd have peace ! And the head too, and everybody, far as I care . . ."

Immeasurable, mindless forces sped into action from their state of stressed rest, encircling the planet. A great darkness that was a lack of time and space came into being, billowing out of the heavens, impelled into action by the same controlling agency that had acted as a magnet across space. The forces released were great enough to encompass a whole solar system, but now they concentrated on one planet, brushing away life like a great hand could brush ants off a raised sod.

* * *

From : TELET-AR-ULOR to SUPREME ALL-COMANDER.
PLANET LOCATED VERY SHORTLY AFTER CONSIDERABLE CONTINUUM DISTURBANCE IN VICINITY. ONLY ONE LIVING INTELLIGENT BEING FOUND. APPARENTLY A YOUNG OFF-SPRING OF THE PREDOMINANT INTELLIGENT RACE. WILL SEARCH FOR OTHERS OF THE SPECIES BUT DOUBT IF ANY REMAIN. AM RETURNING WITH YOUNG OFFSPRING BUT HE SEEMS UNABLE TO GIVE ANY INTELLIGENT REPLY TO OUR TRANSLATED QUESTIONS. HE HAD IN HIS POSSESSION THE LOST CONTROL FROM UL7. MESSAGE ENDS.

—**Francis G. Rayer**

LIFE SIZE

Have you ever wondered why your radio or T.V. set has suddenly become unserviceable when the last time you used it it was perfectly all right? It could be that the driver is tired or unwell . . .

BY JULIAN FREY

Sam Parker moved restlessly in his chair, and his eyes wandered round the room which was dimly lit by the small lamp. There was not enough light to read by, and Cora would not like it if he tried to do so. How many nights had he spent like this, how many more would he spend? He gazed sourly at the figure of his wife as she sat hunched and unlovely; from time to time she took a chocolate from the box on her knee, but not once did she take her eyes from the flickering television screen. Most people, thought Parker, got over the honeymoon stage with a television set, but Cora never had. With the old black and white set, it had been bad enough, but now, with this new colour job, she simply could not bear to miss anything.

He reflected glumly that not only was she television crazy, but she was getting a television figure to match; she was dumpy untidy, and her waistline was rapidly disappearing under the onslaught of sandwiches, snacks and chocolates, all of which played their part in beguiling the pangs of hunger during the long hours of watching.

And Parker could not escape; if he attempted to do so, he was met by tears and reproaches. Though Cora was approach-

ing forty, she had the emotional equipment of a slightly unstable teenager, and she had to have her way. Furthermore, her way had to be Sam Parker's way, too. Once, only once, he had tried to make a firm stand. He took away the aerial lead and the power cable, and locked them up. After the first explosion of tears was over, Cora set about boring from within. She never opened her mouth but her words contained an oblique reference to the joys snatched away from her by a heartless husband. If he made reference to a news item, she would reply, " We should have seen that on T.V." If he made some remark about the weather, she countered with, " Of course, we would have had the forecast on T.V." It took her six days before she broke him down, She knew that she would, and in his heart he knew it too, for he still loved her in a strange, irascible fashion.

Sam Parker sighed, and tried to tell himself that it might be worse. He must accept it ; there was nothing else to do. Apart from the fact that he couldn't afford to spend his evenings in bars, alcohol upset his weak stomach. He stayed where he was, trapped, dully angry, and above all resentful of the truth that if he made a move, her wail of " Oh Sam, you're not *going* ?" would put him back in his chair again. Sometimes he sat there with closed eyes, but he had seen so much television that the pictures that matched the sound seem to play along under his eyelids, so clearly was he able to visualise them. If the " Red Ranger " series was on, he could fit the pictures to the cretinous dialogue without any trouble ; if the " Army Days " series was playing, the corny gags were enough in themselves to give his retina the twitches. Lately, he had begun to see television in his sleep, and when he ate his breakfast cereal, the pieces seemed to form themselves into advertising slogans on the milk without a moment's thought on his part.

Unknown to Cora, he had been to see the Doctor, a big unsympathetic character who had examined him and pronounced that there was nothing wrong with him, physically. When Sam had reclothed his big blond frame and told the medico of his marital difficulty, the doc had chuckled.

" Be firm, Mr. Parker. Switch it off."

Sam told him that he had done so.

" Well, keep it switched off."

" Listen," said Sam, " I love my wife."

" Does she love you ?"

" I guess so."

" Then surely she won't mind— "

" She needs me," said Sam, " She needs me all the time."

" H'm. Suppose we fix you with a prescription for plain glasses. Then you can doze behind them, and maybe she won't notice ?"

Sam told him of the way the T.V. characters could play right under his eyelids, and the doctor frowned.

" Then you ought to have an accident happen to your set."

" No go," replied his patient, " There's the old black and white one we could still use."

" Well, wreck that one for a start."

Sam was doubtful. " Maybe I could. But I wouldn't like-to do anything to hurt her . . . . . "

" Try it," urged the doctor. " At least, it will be some positive action on your part. It may do you good, just to do that."

" She needs me," said Sam, " and she needs the television. We go together in her mind, like pork and beans . . . "

Anyway, reflected Sam, this was the last programme of the evening. Another five minutes, then the late night newscast, and that would be the end of another evening of which the twenty-four inch screen had been king. What would it be like when they had T.V. screens all round the walls, and life size pictures ? That was possible nowadays, wasn't it ?

His attention was jerked back to the screen, by a startled little yelp from Cora. Suddenly, the whole picture had squeezed down to a band across the middle. The band was about four inches across, and fantastically foreshortened figures moved over it.

Sam leaped up. " Oh, it's all right. I guess I can fix it." He fiddled about at the back. " It will be the vertical hold button."

But it didn't seem to be the vertical hold button at all. No amount of wriggling did any good. " I think," he said at length, " that there must be a set-screw slipped. I think I'll have to take the back off."

Cora got up. " I'll just make myself another sandwich."

He was surprised. " Don't you want to see the end of this ? You could follow it, even from that picture."

" No," she answered calmly, " It's only the last five minutes, and I've seen it before, anyway. And after that there's only the newscast."

After she had gone out, Sam Parker muttered to himself. Another sandwich ! Ah, well . . . he loved her.

When he took the back off, he found that there was no slipped screw on the vertical hold control. Baffled, he looked inside the set. This new model had a fascinating inside. Gingerly, he tapped one or two things, remembering that the set was still switched on and that he would have to take care. He tapped a small white metal canister, set to one side of the chassis. A condenser ?

From somewhere, a small voice cried in pain. Struck, he listened. Very carefully, he tapped the canister once more.

" Ow !" squealed a very tiny voice.

Sam scratched his head and went round to the front of the set, where a fantastically distorted newsreader was doing his final stint. He listened carefully at the speaker. Once before, they had had the accident of receiving the voices of local taxi drivers calling over the car radios. No, it was not the drivers. He walked to the back of the set, and flicked the canister with a finger nail.

" Oh !" cried the tiny voice. " Oh, my head ! Tell Mead to send a replacement !"

Sam stuck his head into the box of tricks as far as it would go, and asked firmly, " Who's that ?"

" Eh ?" asked the voice weakly, " Who do you think it is ?"

Sam heard the door open. " Well," he asked, " *Who* ?"

" For Pete's sake," moaned the voice, " This is control, Parker private television receiver— "

" Sam !" exclaimed Cora, " Can't you get it right ? Oh dear, if I miss ' Ladies' Hour ' tomorrow afternoon— "

Her bemused husband showed his anxious face. " It's all right, honey ; Bill Mead and I are old friends. He won't mind if I ring him right away and ask if he can send a man to fix it tomorrow. We'll be okay." He patted her shoulder and left the room, his mind a whirl of puzzlement.

Certainly, Bill Mead would not mind if he called him. They were at school together ; sometimes he envied Bill for the way in which the slim, wiry little guy had got on. He had the largest radio and television business in the district, with eight branches and another one opening shortly. In six years, that was some going.

No, Bill Mead did not mind Sam's phoning. But he was puzzled. " That set out of action already ? Why, you've only had it three months ! I'm sorry, Sam ; still, it comes under the guarantee."

" I think," said Sam foolishly, " That the driver's not well."

There was a pause of about three seconds, and Sam felt silly at bringing up an old joke. Then Mead roared with laughter. " Yeah, that's right Sam ! You got it ! That's the secret of this new design, you know. They've all got a built-in driver. Dead secret, should be, really. How did you find out ?"

Cora looked in to say that she was going to bed, kissing him on the cheek before she left. Feeling rather stupid, Sam told him about how he took the back off, and of the little voice he thought he heard.

Mead fairly killed himself with laughter, and Sam caught some of his mood and began to chuckle too. Mead pushed the joke further. " That's one of the reasons why I'm getting on so well. I'm in the wholesale side of the business. ' Drivers Inc.' There are drivers for all sorts of things now, you know. Warmpoint Company takes about half a dozen sizes for its fridges and washing machines ; Bowall Engineering take about four drivers for one of their movie cameras. And listen, Sam—strictly confidential, mind—when they start the new precision watch factory at Herrington, we shall be supplying the triple X size—the watch drivers."

" Then the old joke about the watch not going because the driver is dead— "

Bill Mead made explosive sounds at the other end of the phone. " Say, Sam," he chuckled, " I think we've carried this one far enough. Just you think of all those little men driving T.V.'s, and washing machines, and calculators and chronometers ! Why, if you spill the story that very soon ' Drivers Inc.' will be able to hold civilisation up to ransom— " he went off into laughter again.

After a minute he spoke more seriously. " Listen, Sam, I'm sorry about that set. I'll just pop round to have a look at it myself. There's a late night film on, isn't there ?"

" Yes. Cora's seen it twice so— "

" I'll be round."

He put the receiver down before Sam could tell him not to bother. Five minutes later he arrived at the Parker's house, a sharp little terrier of a man.

"I switched her on again," said Sam, "But Bill, you shouldn't have bothered—"

"That's OK. I don't like the thought of such a set developing faults this early. In here?"

In the living room, Mead surveyed the distorted image with a frown. Then he switched off the current and removed the back, and fiddled about inside. He removed something and slipped it in his pocket.

"What was that?"

"Condenser, Sam. Just want to have a look at it."

"Oh. Could we have it repaired by tomorrow evening?"

"Yeah, only I can't collect. I've got three vans but they're all mad busy. If you could bring it down tomorrow morning early, we'll do it. Okay?"

"Okay," said Sam. "And thanks for calling."

"That's all right," said Bill, as he went to the door. "Now that you know about how the set works, we'll have to keep you quiet, won't we?"

Chuckling, they said goodnight.

The next morning Sam Parker set off in his car with the T.V. set in the back. Telekon Services, Bill's firm, had a big old workshop and service place in the crummier quarter of the town. The entrance was from a side street, into a yard where the aerial riggers usually worked.

Sam parked the car and humped the set out. In the yard a boy in faded blue jeans and wearing green electric socks was slowly constructing an aerial.

"Mr. Mead in, son?"

"Not yet," said the boy.

"Never mind; I know the way." Sam took the set into the workshop, where a cleaning woman was at work, and then went up to Bill's office. He was just a bit disturbed. Cora had noticed it at breakfast. He didn't quite know what he could do about Cora. She loved him very much, wouldn't do anything without him . . .

Bill's office showed that the firm was on the up and up. There was a bright new snappiness about it; you could feel the money. Sam wondered why the hair on the back of his neck kept tingling; what was there to make him feel uneasy? There was the usual equipment, some photographs from the last Chamber of Trade fair—but, somehow, the place didn't feel ordinary.

Sam was on the point of nosing around a little more when the phone rang. He picked it up, and before he could say, the voice at the other end was nattering urgently.

" Bill ? Main depot here. Listen, about the drivers for the watch company. They'll have to be held up for a bit."

" They—will ?" asked Sam.

" Yeah. Listen. The missile department got on to the chief late last night. Seems that they've decided that the new *Odin* ICBM's need five drivers, not four. They said what they wanted and the chief said we could cope, but it will mean switching the triple-X size personnel from the watch company's order."

" I see," said Sam. Little spiders seemed to be crawling round his stomach.

"Hey Bill, you got a cold or something ? Boy-oh-boy, this is a feather in our cap, eh ? Now, while I'm on the line—about the three fridge drivers that were suffering from muscular fatique when you got 'em. Your reviver working on them okay now ?"

" Okay," said Sam, weakly.

" Fine. Say, when your new sizer and reducer comes along, you'll be pretty well independent, eh ? Swell. You've worked hard, Bill."

" Thanks," said Sam. Though his knees were knocking, he became very daring. He asked, " How are things with you ?"

" Not bad. Had some odd clients lately, but it all adds up to trade. The driving team for the new television cameras is working well, and we've had some cautious enquiries from the chairman of the Magician's Convention . . . "

During the last few words Sam thought he heard a door open, but he took no action. The enormity of his discovery held him paralysed. Suddenly the world was lit by a million stars as something hit him over the head. Then everything went black.

When he awoke he was in a narrow cell with smooth grey walls. Sam felt dizzy, and every muscle in his body ached abominably, as though it were under some powerful and unseen pressure. After a few minutes he felt well enough to inspect his prison. It contained a bed, a table and a chair, and the light came in a suffused glow through a slot in the roof. At first there seemed to be no door, but a closer examination

revealed that all one end of the place was a door of some sort.

He could not tell what time it was ; he did not feel hungry only immensely depressed. Gradually he remembered the events which had led up to his present incarceration. His discovery was frightening. It seemed that in many modern machines there was a driver of some sort, presumably in human shape, and presumably trained and sold by the firm of which Bill Mead was an important executive. *That* was why he was doing so well ! Sam had the impression also that the firm continued to exercise control over its drivers when they were working.

Somewhere, a speaker crackled. Bill Mead's voice spoke. " Hallo, Nosy Parker !" it said.

" Bill !" yelled Sam, " What's going on ?"

" You'll see."

" Let me out !"

" Not bloody likely," said Bill Mead's voice pleasantly, " You know too much."

" Bill ! You can't do this to me— "

" I've done it. Sam, this is what comes of not minding your own business. With all the money and power I've got to come, do you think I'd let you stand in the way of ' Drivers Inc ' ? Listen. When you make a call on the phone, there's one of our drivers keeping the handset in order. When you switch on an electric light bulb, who do you think is at the bottom of the filament ? Power—you don't know what it is!" The voice changed from its jocular tone to one of easy menace. " I'll see that Sam Parker never spills the beans !"

Sam sat on the bed ; he was utterly stunned. Three, perhaps five minutes passed by, then he heard voices.

Mead was heard to say, " Well, yes, he's a scientist of sorts, in his job. Not a bad brain. But he's over forty. Do you think he'd train— "

The voice said something else, and Mead was heard to say, " Yeah, sure, we could try the course on him. Hypno fed of course. That tape would only take about a quarter of an hour— "

Mumble from the other voice. Then Mead chuckled. " Yeah, okay. Poetic, kind of."

" Bill !" howled Sam Parker, and beat on the smooth walls. " Bill ! Bill ! ! ! Let me out !"

Silence for a minute, then Mead said, " Sam, we've got just the job for you."

Sam swore. " You can keep your decorated job ! Let me out !"

" Hush," came the answer. " That's exactly what we're going to do."

Sam waited, tense, angry, trembling. He thought of Cora, who depended upon him so much . . .

There came a scraping sound, and the end of the prison slid back, revealing nothing but blackness beyond. Sam stayed immobile. A curious, fantastically amplified sound, resembling nothing so much as a gigantic mouse scratching, came to his ears and set him further on edge.

" Now," said Mead's voice, " Careful how you go. Sometimes there are after effects."

" After—*what* ?" gulped the prisoner.

Then it happened. A weird shape appeared in the doorway. It was a sort of pink in colour, and at first it seemed to be two headed. It stuck itself in and probed round for him like an obscene monster. When Sam realised that what he was looking at was two huge human fingers, he fainted. . .

—**Julian Frey**

Mr. Ashton recently made his debut in British science fiction in New Worlds No. 71 with a very fine story concerning the search for other sentient life in our galaxy. His story herewith is of a very different calibre—with a rather nostalgic ending.

A SMALL HOUSE

BY JOHN W. ASHTON

The cottage nestled cosily amidst the Cotswold hills. On the far side the woods murmured, dark voices of oak and fern. To the right the lazy laughter of a brook rippled over rock and pebble and whispered in and out of the reeds along its grassy banks. The thatched roof blanketed the cottage to make it warm in winter, when the snow would lie foot-high on fields and wooded slopes and nearby highway. It would keep it cool and fresh as the faint breeze stirring stealthily from amongst the trees and brushing the flowers in the garden, the fuchsia and clinging vine on the white-washed walls, with gentle fingers.

The cottage was beautiful. A symbol of friendly welcome to those outside ; a haven of peace, of love and tranquil happiness to those within.

"I love it," she said. "It's what we've always wanted, Mike ! A real home at last, something to think of and remember when we're away, something beyond the noise and worry and anxiety we've always known."

The husband looked at his wife's flushed face and then at the agent.

" I know," he said. " It's just the thing. But what's it going to cost us—that is the main question ?"

The agent smiled.

He took off his glasses and rubbed them gently, methodically, on the sleeve of his jacket. Then he put them back, settling them with care on his nose.

He was a slight man of medium height and uncertain age, despite the whiteness of his hair. He smiled again and put his fingertips together.

" Let's see. We've got every possible modern facility inside —telephone, radio, TV, automatic dishwasher and cookery range, all built in by the owners. Fully furnished too, as you've been able to see and—ahem—appreciate. Then of course, there are six rooms, one bathroom on the first floor, and the garage at the back. Garden and quite unrivalled surroundings. The whole cottage has been carefully checked and put in perfect order. Do you think fifty pounds will suit you ?"

" Fifty pounds ?" the husband exclaimed. " But—!"

" I know," the agent interrupted soothingly. " Our advertisement said it was to be had cheap with price adapted to the client's possibilities—"

" Fifty pounds ? That's how much in dollars, Mike !"

He told her.

The agent continued :

" What I meant, of course, was fifty pounds a year !"

They stared at him.

" Fifty pounds a year ?"

" Look here, Mr. Hollis !" the husband said. " There must be a snag to it ! No house can be that cheap, it's impossible. What is it now, and don't beat about the bush ?"

" There's no snag and no strings attached. You move in when you want and leave if you don't like it."

" I don't believe it. Something must be wrong—roof leaking damp in winter or autumn or what—?"

Mr. Hollis sighed.

" I don't know whether you'll understand. Naturally, we've had quite a lot of visitors about, all interested. But we only want people who will buy and care for this house. It's destined to make folks happy. The two or three other families or couples we've had here before didn't quite seem to suit it. They just didn't stay long enough. They left, quite suddenly and

without apparent reason except—" he hesitated an instant,"—that one of them mentioned something about a window open on certain nights. Such nonsense, I'm afraid. I never saw anything myself."

" So it's haunted !" she murmured.

" Of course not, madam ! But some old houses are like people ; they've got to like you in order to make you feel you belonged there. And these other people did not. They were city people, with inbred city instincts, and no close contact with nature. To them this cottage was just a house, any house."

" Haunted," her voice repeated on the still air of the summer evening.

" Well," the husband said. " It's up to you, Ellen !"

Their eyes met and held and their hands sought and seemed to cling to each other.

" This is our home, Mike. This is where we belong, I'm sure of it somehow. We can be happy here."

" Of course you can," the agent said. " You're young, both of you, and still very much in love."

" Not quite so young in years any more," the husband said. " But in love—yes. There may be something wrong with the place but we don't believe in ghosts. Not here and not with Ellen or me around. We'll take it."

They moved in during the last week of September. A few trunks, a couple of suitcases. They kept the small city apartment with their furniture and other belongings—vaguely thinking of selling it all later on. There was no hurry, anyway. Mike's job as an electronics expert, as well as the low rental for the cottage, permitted them to keep both the apartment and the house if they wanted to.

Although there was a slight touch of autumn to the air and the voices of the forest were louder as the wind stirred restlessly amongst the boughs, the flowers in the garden were still in bloom, the lawn was green and trim.

They parked the car in front of the house and sat very still, holding hands and looking at it. The shutters gleamed with fresh paint ; the small leaded windows were spotlessly clean ; the drive swept clear of the first falling leaves. They looked at the cottage steeped in the beauty of that late September afternoon, with its background of gently sloping hills and fringe of white cloud encroaching on a blue sky, and again they had that feeling of having found a home.

October came and passed.

The forest turned red and gold and brown. The leaves fell and in the evening the wind would rise and many, many voices whisper around the house. The indian summer bathed the garden in a pool of warm, vibrant light and the laughter of the brook grew more riotous now that the reeds yellowed and withered.

Ellen no longer swept the drive and when Mike came home the car would move softly over a bed of red-gold leaves. The petals of flowers crumpled, faded and fell, floating to the ground on the wings of the breeze and mingling with the rich colours on the earth.

October went and November came, bringing with it the first of the rainy days.

They had grown accustomed to the cottage, knowing it as they knew each other even down to its small idiosyncrasies. She knew that the third step from the top of the narrow stairs creaked, and Mike had discovered that one of the shutters at the back opened by itself on certain nights. No matter how he might try to force it tight, it would be open in the morning. They had grown used to the kitchen and the strange cookery range with its electronic selector. Ellen knew that all you had to do was to slip a piece of meat in the oven, select " roast " or " boiled " on the small luminous screen, and at the right moment dinner just moved into a heated compartment, complete with dish and ready to be served. Meat, eggs, noodles, potatoes, it made no difference. All was prepared, seasoned by invisible hands to perfection, and delivered. " Must have cost a fortune, that thing," she used to say to Mike.

Her husband examined it once in a desultory fashion and soon gave up trying to understand the mechanism. " The fellows who made it knew something," was all the comment he mumbled.

But the range, and the dishwasher with its metal arms that dried and stacked plates, cups and glasses so neatly, intrigued him and he decided to ask Hollis where the equipment came from. Yet somehow, on the rare occasions that he ran across the agent in the village, the thought had left his mind, and he said nothing.

The rains came. The wind grew louder and moved closer to the house, murmuring under the eaves, rustling the thatched

roof with invisible hands. The evenings grew cooler and soon they were lighting a fire in the huge open hearth, feeling the warm flames on their faces and hands and watching the shadows of the room caper about the walls. And again, in the morning, the shutters of the back window facing the forest had stood open to the rising dawn.

One evening towards the end of November, Mike decided to give up closing them when they went to bed. " There doesn't seem to be any sense in it," he grinned," and beside, what harm can it do if they prefer to stay open ?"

" Remember what Mr. Hollis said ?" Ellen's voice was thoughtful.

" Hollis ? Oh, yes—that story about the window ? But all that's nonsense, Ellen. We're grown-up people. We don't go for such things !"

" No, Mike. Of course not. But it is strange now that I come to think of it. You wouldn't—"

" Look," he said. " I've had a tiring day at the office and I'm not going to stay up just to see who or what plays with those shutters. I couldn't care less ! I'm going to bed, and if you want to sit up all night that's your business. But, honest, I think it's downright nonsense."

Her eyes glittered with defiance as she faced him.

" I'm going to stay to see what happens even if I have to wait all night. It's been troubling me for some time, and I want to find out."

" Oh, all right !" he sighed. " Have it your way then. We'll wait together."

They looked at each other and broke into laughter. He kissed her lightly on the nose. " Silly girl," he muttered affectionately under his breath.

They turned out all the lights in the vast sitting-room and sat in the dark. The hours crept by. Outside the wind was rising, whirling straggling ribbons of torn mist around the house and the hills. Rain pattered against the closed shutters. Slowly the fire burnt lower, a log crumpled, then another, until only the embers still glowed faintly in the room.

His arms around her, they sat together in one of the deep chairs facing the back window. The house was very still now, so still that it seemed to be waiting. The impression was so strong they both sensed it and she caught herself wondering why they had never experienced the feeling before.

Then, as though the silence of the house had been a prelude, the wind stopped.

Instantly alerted they straightened in the chair, nerves suddenly tense. The wind, and the rain, had inexplicably ceased beyond the shuttered back window. The silence was no longer confined to the room, but was spreading outwards, tangibly almost, mingling with the greater silence outside. Inch by inch, the shutters opened and a great, glorious shaft of sunlight lit the room with all the radiance of a summer morning, enveloping them with sudden warmth and wellbeing.

Thunderstruck, speechless, they stared at the window and the shaft of gold that now streamed through the panes.

" Christ Almighty !" Mike whispered. " It just can't be—" he rubbed his eyes and stared again. " It's one in the morning and November with rain and fog and cold, just look, that's sunshine outside."

Her fingers tightened on his arm.

" I knew it."

Looking down at her, he saw her face, eager and happy, turned to the light.

" Come !" he said. " Let's take a look."

They walked across the room and, reaching the window, looked out.

Where there should have been the sinister skeleton trunks of trees, tortured and stripped by the wind and the cold light of stars there now was a vast expanse of green fields. The rich pastures stretched seemingly endless to the horizon, broken here and there by patches of white and yellow flowers. To the left, perhaps a mile away, stood a small copse of ash and maple. Half-concealed by the foliage they could see what looked like the white walls of a farm, with a red roof. It was surely a farm, for a fence spanned a field and disappeared amongst the shadows of the little wood.

As their eyes tuned to the sudden change of scenery they noticed other roofs on the skyline. At least they seemed to be roofs, although they looked like strangely translucent domes that glittered in places as they caught the rays of the sun.

They stared through the panes, hardly breathing, at that pale blue sky and those empty green fields.

All they could recall later on was that suddenly the sky had darkened, the light faded, the distant domes seemed to dissolve and become one with the general scene until the whole picture

trembled and broke up in a lightning kaleidoscope of floating, mellowed colour. Then the colours softened and disappeared as the air itself changed to layers of night and day, merging and separating as they fought and the familiar darkness of the November night built up its overwhelming barrier of rain and faint stars and barren, misty trees.

Long afterwards, as they lay sleepless on their beds she asked, for the tenth time as her wondering mind wrestled with the problem :

" What could it have been, Mike ?"

And for the tenth time he replied :

" I don't know, my dear, I don't know."

Deep within, somehow, they both knew the answer.

" It was a sort of mirage, a sort of inexplicable interplay of lightwaves as they occur in certain prisms," he mused.

She chuckled softly.

" Yes—and the waves opened the shutters too !"

In the dark he smiled uncomfortably.

" That's what scared the others," she said. " It doesn't scare me. I know what it is, Mike, and so do you. It's another world, a—a sort of other dimension. I feel it is, and there must be people in it."

" It's a mirage, Ellen, just as in the desert—"

" No. It's a world, the same as this one maybe, but different. And those domes we saw—they must have been a village or a town."

" Sure, with shops and cars and people. I tell you, Ellen," he thumped the bedclothes with his hand," it's a freak, and if you climbed through that window trying to get into your imaginary world you'd find yourself ankle-deep in the mud of your own backgarden. Didn't you notice the fields were on a slightly higher level, and that those domes just kind of faded away ? Besides, we saw no people about."

" You're wrong, Mike, and you know it," she cried out. " Maybe it was Sunday over there, maybe the people were resting. It was a world like ours, or as this might have become, and where one can live in peace. Where peace is something real, not only wishful thinking or just another amusing topic."

Yes, he thought to himself, she is right.

But he said :

" What do you think we might run into out there, supposing it were real ? What sort of people or beings should we meet, if any ?"

The thought passed through his mind even as he spoke. People like ourselves, of course, simple people who had become fed up with it all down here and who had the will and energy to find the world they wanted on another level, or in another dimension. By some coincidence—or was it a coincidence ?—that window was the doorway to it.

Yes, that was the answer. The window was not a window at all. Given certain circumstances and factors beyond their control it became a passage through space and time.

He listened to his wife's soft, regular breathing and knew she had fallen asleep. But he lay awake, thinking, long into the dawn.

For the next three weeks they sat up late each night, waiting for the shutters to swing open again to that unforgettable sunlight.

The first snows of December fell, covering the countryside with a cloak of white down, and still nothing happened. They grew irritable and nervous. Mike's work at the plant suffered from his lack of sleep and a week before Christmas his boss told him so, politely but firmly. The implication of this was clear to him.

" It's no use waiting any more, Ellen," he said when he got home that evening. " It won't open again."

There were dark lines of worry and fatigue under her eyes.

" We should have taken our chance then and there, Mike," she said.

" Maybe but it would have been a one-way ticket into the unknown, Ellen."

" Not so unknown in our hearts and minds."

" I know," he said softly.

They slept, none too well, and in the morning they found the shutters closed as usual. " You see," he said, although he suspected her of having gone downstairs several times during the night, even as he had done.

In the afternoon he phoned her from the office. " Make yourself beautiful, dear. We're going to a party at the Robinsons." And hastily cut the phone as she started to protest.

The party was as parties at the Robinsons always went ; with rich food and drink and loud laughter and salty jokes and agitated music. By midnight a strange restlessness gripped them.

They felt it at the same time, as though a call had gone out to them.

They said their farewells amidst howls and shrieks of protest from hosts and guests and Mike kept the speedometer at sixty as far as the village. On the other side the snow had piled up in spots, and the corners of the lane were slippery with thin ice. The car skidded once and he slowed down.

" Can't we go any faster, Mike ?" she said.

" I'm sorry."

His mouth set in a grim line and at the last straight he put his foot down again on the accelerator. The car leapt forward. They were quite close now, but the cottage was invisible in the dark.

The lane wound on and the headlights picked out the little crossing where, in summer, the honeysuckle covered the road with a golden veil. " Another fifty yards," he muttered, his foot easing on the brake.

They reached the fence and turned into the small drive. She had already opened the door, ready to leap to the ground the moment the car stopped. But she did not run for the house.

Instead, when he shut off the engine, she just stood beside the car, the door wide open and the cold air rushing in, staring stupidly ahead.

" What's wrong ?" he asked with a catch in his voice.

She did not reply.

He switched the powerful lights on again and opened the door on the other side and climbed out of the car. For a moment he braced himself against the night, nerves tingling. his eyes trying to focus on the white emptiness and tree-lined hills.

Her voice reached him, dully, from the other side of the car.

" It's gone ! "

He knew she was right but for a long time his reason and logic refused to admit the fact. When finally they remembered the shelter of the car, and he turned on the heater, they still remained staring down the beams of light, unbelieving, silent, pathetic. Then, without a word, he started the engine again. Its comforting roar broke the silence. He slammed in the reverse and backed slowly out of the snow covered drive, away from the cottage that had vanished together with its golden window.

They both knew they would never find the cottage again. Nor was there any sense looking for Hollis.

—John W. Ashton

So that there may be no misunderstanding—let us indicate that Brian Aldiss's article is satire. Any errors in scientific content are deliberately accidental !

SMILE, PLEASE !

BY BRIAN W. ALDISS

I'm as glad as anyone about these space satellites ; all the same, you must face some unpalatable facts. Maybe you have noticed that ever since the first one went up on 5th October, 1957, the weather has been getting colder ? Obviously, the satellites have absorbed warm radiations which we should be getting. I've been working things out, and if conditions go on like this, it will be forty degrees below in England by next July.

This does not surprise me at all. That's the way it is with science : it's full of unpalatable facts. Every new improvement which comes along just makes us worse off ; another century of progress like this last one, and we'll all be back in caves before we know it. I don't want to sound bitter—but look, let's take a well-established little science like photography and see what it has ever done for me, apart from adding to the difficulties of living.

At any time now, I am going to get down to several pressing jobs, most of which I failed to get down to last winter. One of these jobs is sticking photographs into albums. Already, in the fine summer mornings, I jump out of bed and do finger exercises by an open window (well, just ajar) in preparation for a tussle with those dear, dinky, little, invisible corners.

Once on a time, when life was less hectic, back in the dear, dead forties, I did manage to fill a couple of albums. Since then, however, the khaki folders full of contact prints and negatives have piled up year by year. Formerly, an elastic

band held them all together ; now they need a shoe box—one of my shoe boxes, and I take large sizes.

Sorting out the snaps ready to stick in is a melancholy business, for which science offers no remedy. Take these groups of us with the Scrapsmiths, on the front at Ampersands in July, 1953. Freddy Scrapsmith, after nearly five years, no longer looks as funny in that coolie hat as he did at the time. And their little girl—Sonia ? Synthia ? Sylvia ?—was really rather a pest ; amazing how we tolerated her for a whole fortnight ! Ah, no doubt we too have changed in those five years, become less simple, less tolerant. But we no longer want to be reminded of the Scrapsmiths. Why, we sent them copies of these very snaps, and they never bothered to write and thank us. True, they sent us a Christmas card. We didn't send them one. No, the Scrapsmiths are out.

Then there are these views of Poole Harbour. Perhaps they might look better if we had them enlarged. Alas, photographs of water look flat however big you make them. And this one of the seagull I took on the ferry at 1/150 second—what patience I had then !—you can just see the tip of its wing here on the left. But the cloud effect is good ; hardly album-worthy, though. Throw it out.

Slowly, sadly, I fiddle through the folders, rejecting, rejecting. I can no longer remember why I wanted to take most of the pictures in the first place. Here's one of me, snapped by Uncle Bert on the putting green at Peterborough. Hmm. I have put on weight, years and spectacles since then. And here is one of my wife. She has fared better . . . but that dreadful hat on her head ! We liked it at the time. Better stick it in the album : it will amuse the children.

Gradually, a pile of possibles accumulates. Inspecting them together, you notice that a strange uniformity hangs over them. If a visitor from another planet looked at these pictures, what a distorted idea of England he would get ! Can you imagine the report he might make back to Deneb IV on the strength of them ?—" The sun always shines in this region of Sol III. The inhabitants do no work ; they spend most of their time standing idly, or sitting about in bathing costumes. Occasionally, they saunter in gardens, elegantly dressed. They do not go into their houses, though they delight in posing on doorsteps. They marry. The children never speak or cry. The countryside is a maze of coast and picnic sites except for Peterborough, where golf is played. Men always have women on their arms.

The island, apart from Bournemouth in 1955, is almost uninhabited ; those few people who are about face south and wear forced smiles. Ideal for colonisation."

From this, you can gather that my picture-making is fairly unscientific. I am just a dilettante with the camera, the sort of fellow who gets the chemist to put in his roll of 120 for him. Laugh if you like, but at least there is more life in my albums —well, in the two I have filled—than in those of my parents. Their old albums tell the grim story of pre-war England clearly enough.

It is a strange world in those parental albums, another dimension entirely, where frightfully young uncles, a little dimly, a little brownly, wear their trilbys beside square cars. The hats are nothing ; the short shirts, the weird waists, the bowdlerised busts—these are nothing. What frightens me is the firing squad mentality they all suffered from in those days. Every man Jack and Jill of them confronts the lens like a hero, rigid at attention, lined up in chronological family order. Profiles were not invented then ; it is only in my day that the family nose shows up in all its glory.

However, it is not for me to cast stones. While my friends launch out in flash, colour, moving and underwater cameras, I am stuck with the old black and white. I have no light, range, or wind meters, no colour filters, no dark room. My friends, who have all these things, take wonderful photographs. They wield developers, enlargers, maskers, and the rest of the scientific tackle, as to the manner born—yet they are worried men. Something eludes them. They use more gadgets, more time ; still it eludes them. They have run up against an unpalatable fact !

This is the trouble. The human face was not meant to be photographed ; it was not even meant to be well photographed. However skilled you are, that cold glass eye will not look at you as sympathetically as another human eye with weaknesses similar to your own. Glass has no sensibilities, and science will never change that. Which is why poor old Scrapsmith appears such a fool in his straw hat. Which is why those broad grins on those loveable faces turn out as sickly grins. Which is why—but need I go on ? The camera is an enemy, just another devilish machine. Answer this question honestly : did you ever see a snap of yourself that you really thought did you justice ?

—**Brian W. Aldiss**

A SENSE OF PROPORTION

As predicted in our last issue, we expected to publish further stories from new writer Clifford C. Reed, and his latest contribution has just that light touch which makes good fantasy reading.

BY CLIFFORD C. REED

There were no clients on the books. That was bad. True, the books were new, but they were not that new. Not after a month. After another month, with still no clients, the Filmarron Advertising Agency would have to give up. At this reminder the worries that bedevilled Mr. Filmarron stirred up the acids in Mr. Filmarron's stomach with extra vigour, and Mr. Filmarron blinked, and hardened his heart against the two innocents on the other side of his desk.

Whom he must accept as clients. Not because he deceived himself that they were going to make his fortune, or theirs, but because they looked as if they could pay. For a while, anyway, until they woke up to the fact that they were never going to take away the business from the established houses. No matter how good they thought their pills were.

First, though, he must get them into the right frame of mind. He must make them feel he was taking their account against his better judgment. If he did this properly, it might influence them to increase the amount they had come prepared to invest.

" Like duck's water off my back such claims you make," he opened. He sniffed realistically. " I would expect the big agencies are waiting for you at your factory yet, such a boon your product is." He held up his hand to show he had not done. " For a cheaper rate rather you come here, I think, because you say that Filmarron Agency is new and wants business so it can eat." He wagged his head. " Only for a big account can there be a cheap rate," he warned.

His visitors smiled back unabashed. They were big men who breathed an air of assurance. Particularly in the case of the swarthy one, " Call me Lew, Mr. Filmarron. And my friend here is Mike."

It was Lew who answered. " It's the personal touch we need Mr. Filmarron. That's why we want you. That's what the big agencies can't give us." He waved his hands. " They'd take our business. Sure. Along with soap, and detergents, and toothpaste, and everything except atom bombs, and the administration's got the exclusive rights there."

" What we want is a dedicated service," Mike put in. He spoke gravely. He was treating a serious matter in a sober manner.

" That's the word !" Lew beamed. " ' Dedicated.' Exclusive service. First thing in the morning. Last thing after taking out the dentures. Until we're selling our little pills all round the world." He leaned across the desk, slapped Mr. Filmarron's shoulder heavily, and grinned. " Right ?"

Mr. Filmarron winced. " Please," he begged.

Two pairs of eyes regarded him with interest.

" Are you in pain ?" Mike enquired.

" Night out ?" Lew jerked a thumb towards the adjoining room. " Secretary trouble ?" he suggested. He winked. " Nice looker !" he commented with approval.

Hurriedly Mr. Filmarron squashed this insinuation. "Rosie's a good girl," he assured them. " Please, no." He laid one hand on his middle. " Here," he said. " Such an empty lump I feel," he confided.

A wicked smile twisted the swarthy man's face. He poked his solemn friend. " See what I mean," he said. " Here's Mr. Filmarron needing us just as much as we need him, and it isn't till he gets a little pain that we can show him just how much good we're going to do him." He slid a carton from his pocket, and spilled a capsule from it on the desk.

"Go on," Lew told the little man opposite. "Swallow that, and see what it does for you."

Dubiously Mr. Filmarron picked up the offering. "For anything it is good?" he asked. "Maybe for the stomach I have got is wrong these pills?"

Lew shrugged. "You can talk all day an' where'll it get you? Or you can take our word for it, and swallow. 'Course, if you'd rather have your pain—!"

Another twinge gripped Mr. Filmarron, and he winced.

Mike set a hand on his friend's arm. "Do not aggravate things," he commanded. He looked across at Mr. Filmarron. "You will feel better when you take it," he stated.

"What's your stomach got to lose?" Lew encouraged. "Only trouble!"

Mr. Filmarron nodded. "So it can't be worse," he agreed, and lifted his fingers to his mouth.

He felt it working even as he swallowed. Warmth flooded his whole being, washing away the gnawing discomfort. It did not stop there. He grew aware of a feeling of well being, of a wonderful freedom from his cares of five minutes before.

"Such a relief!" Mr. Filmarron whispered. "Like your overdraft is being extended. Without interest."

He scrambled round the desk. "For other pains, perhaps, it is good also?" He waited hopefully.

"It will cure," Mike answered, "many ills."

"Like your secretary's headache'" Lew added slyly.

Mike turned. He frowned. "There was no need for that," he reproved.

"She's got one, anyway," The dark man shrugged. "No harm done when she's cured."

Mr. Filmarron hesitated. Between asking how Lew could know that girl in the next office had a headache, and an impatience to discover whether these capsules could deal with that affliction also. The stronger impulse won. He galloped to the door, opened it, and called.

"Rosie," he summoned. "Come in, Rosie. Quickly, please!"

Lew had not exaggerated. Rosie, despite her present strained expression, was delicious. But the eyes of the devoted Mr. Filmarron had not missed the strain, and his usual attitude of mingled pride and awe was overlaid with eager solicitude.

He pushed the carton at her. "For your headache, Rosie. Like lightning it works."

She looked back at this strange, excited Mr. Filmarron. "What is this?" she asked. "And how did you know I've got a headache?"

Mr. Filmarron's hands fluttered. "So what does it matter how I know? If it gets cured!" he demanded. He pushed the carton at her once again. "Take one," he urged. "Like my stomach it is making your head perfect."

"Drugs!" Rosie's consternation announced that she had discovered the reason for her employer's behaviour. "You've been taking a drug!" She whirled on the two visitors. "What is it you've given him?" she snapped.

"Not that sort of dope." Lew lifted a large hand. "This is legitimate. It's business. You don't have to get scared."

She looked past him. "Is that true?" she asked the fair-haired man.

"It is true," Mike answered. "It will not harm you. Nor anyone. I promise that." He smiled. "Take it," he commanded.

"If you say so." She surrendered without argument. Under their eyes occurred the same transformation that had come to Mr. Filmarron, but in an infinitely more elegant fashion. Her taut expression eased, softened; her eyes sparkled in delighted surprise. "But it's wonderful!" she cried.

"For all things it works?" Mr. Filmarron had the carton back, and was holding it in both hands.

"Everything?" Lew assured him grandly.

Mr. Filmarron came back to his desk. He stared at these two clients who's remedy was going to make Filmarron Agencies famous. "Soon," he breathed, "you will be very rich."

Lew winked. "We've got money," he answered.

"They have money." Mr. Filmarron nodded several times. "The day should come when someone can tell me he has money. Except he is a millionaire." He tapped his desk. "How much, please, is the account to be?"

"How much will you need?" Mike countered.

They settled down to discuss terms. When this business was completed the Filmarron Advertising Agency became the sole representatives of M. Guardian and L. Pluto, catalysticians.

"Is new, catalysticians," Mr. Filmarron commented.

"It is old," Mike corrected. "Like the formula. Very old."

Mr. Filmarron showed an intelligent interest. "Like alchemists," he suggested.

"Older," Mike assured him. "It is older than the earth. It is elemental."

Mr. Filmarron seized his hands. "Please," he begged. "No more, Mr. Mike, Not one word." He spread his hands out wide. "More," he said, "and it would spoil. With saying this, only, so perfect, like sweepstakes it will sell. Like springtime."

With capital, with clients who did not proffer hampering comments and objections, with a never weary Rosie, and a flame of purpose, Mr. Filmarron flung himself into the battle. In the press, on the air, on the screen, with every known device for arousing interest, he wrought his vision, and found it shaped perfect in every detail.

Except one.

One thing he could not control, and which could not have come at a more inconvenient time.

"Yesterday," he complained, "everything is lovely. The market is crying for us, after the work we are doing. People will be wanting our pills, and more also they will be coming back for. Except that this transport strike there is suddenly, and nothing now we can send. This is what they do to me, Rosie."

"What?" Lew asked from the open door. Behind him was Mike.

Rosie's lip quivered. "We were going to start distributing to-day. Everything was ready. The wholesalers. The retailers. Everything. It was perfect, Mr. Lew. But there's no knowing how long this strike may last. A week's delay, maybe more, and we'll have to start a whole new campaign."

Lew nodded. He touched mike lightly. "Here, Michael," he said, "is my business." He winked at Rosie. "By this afternoon," he promised, "everything will be fine again."

She looked unconvinced, but the swarthy man did not stay to argue. He had gone. She turned to Michael. "What is he going to do?" she asked.

"Nothing," a depressed Mr. Filmarron declared. "A strike is not for a fixer. Nothing he will do."

"What will he try?" Rosie asked.

Mike's forehead was furrowed. "What is in his mind," he answered slowly, "is that both sides will be having meetings.

Discussing. Planning. Working hard. They will have refreshments sent in to them. There will be something about the refreshments—"

"Poisoned?" Rosie gasped.

"Not poisoned." No. But, so as to produce discomfort."

"I see," Rosie nodded. "Then, when they're feeling bad, somehow someone will have a supply of pills, our pills, and they'll be so impressed—"

"Relieved," Mike amended. "Yes. That is his plan." He frowned "It will work, of course. But it not the way I would choose, myself."

Mr. Filmarron shrugged. "For me," he declared, "if it makes these arguings stop, I say Mr. Lew is being a good fixer. Maybe, always, peoples should be having stomach aches an' being fixed. Then we are having less troubles."

He had voiced his own convictions. He had greeted the returning Lew with admiring enthusiasm for the good news the dark man brought back with him. He had gone back to the winding up of his campaign with a light heart.

Nevertheless, when the sales returns had started to come in, justifying the work he had done, he had voiced his secret worry to an equally uncomfortable Rosie.

"Something there is queer about them," he said.

She nodded. "But Mr. Mike is nice," she qualified.

"Do I not also like him?" He shook his head. "Still, something there is."

"You'd like to be out of it?" she asked.

Mr. Filmarron snorted. "Am I mad? Is it stinking fish their business? Only I said is something not normal. Like Mr. Mike should know without talking what Mr. Lew is thinking."

"Telepathy," Rosie suggested.

"Telepathy is normal with you?" Mr. Filmarron enquired. He reached for her hand. "Rosie" he confided, "sometimes I have been wondering if Mr. Mike and Mr. Lew are different like us." He stared at her anxiously. "This formula, Rosie, you remember he said it was so old, eh? Before the earth, he was saying. What could that mean, maybe?"

"No!" Rosie shivered. "You're saying things, Stanley. Things you mustn't say. There don't happen miracles now, Stanley. Flying saucers, yes. And space ships. Yes. That is

scientific. But not miracles. Otherwise you will have me frightened also."

Mr. Filmarron squeezed her hand comfortingly. " Then only will I remember that it is good business," he promised. " For me. So that Filmarron Agencies is on the map, and I can be remembering all day that Rosie Ginsberg soon is changing her name to Rosie Filmarron."

She gave him a gentle look. " It would be Rosie Filmarron even if business was bad," she said.

" Not with me," Mr. Filmarron contradicted. " That I would not have asked. For my life."

There was a light tap on the door, and the dark Lew came breezing in. " Good news," he announced.

" Is fine to hear it," Mr. Filmarron responded.

" The government," Lew told them, " they want our product."

" A government contract—So !"

" An exclusive one," Lew continued. " We go on a priority basis. Not for export."

Mr. Filmarron blinked. " Is this good ?" he wondered. " In this country only. Yesterday, also, Mr. Mike is speaking of exports."

" That's changed," Lew assured him. " I like it better this way. So does the government." He winked. " They didn't take much convincing. Not habit forming. Relieves anxiety. High morale builder." He winked again. " If there were a war—!"

The second partner came through the door. Mr. Filmarron and Rosie shifted uneasily. There was a new look on Michael's face, directed at Lew, a stern look. " You arranged this," Mike charged.

Lew waved his hand. " Consolidating the position," he returned. " It's a sound principle, Mike. Conquer one country first before you conquer tne world."

" Not ' conquer ',' Mike objected.

" No need to quibble over words." Lew grinned. " It's done, Mike. You can't undo it." He lounged towards the door. " I worked with you on this idea, my friend, because it suited me. Now, it suits me to stop. So—I've stopped working with you." He looked at Rosie and Mr. Filmarron. " If you've got any sense," he warned, " you won't let him talk you

into anything. Because I wouldn't like that. I'd have to do something about it that you wouldn't like," He went out.

"I do not understand," Mr. Filmarron complained. He looked at the others. "Also, he was not talking nice like he was making threats."

"I don't like *him* !" Rosie said.

"It is my fault," Mike confessed. "I should have anticipated this. I hoped that it would not be necessary to involve people deeply. But now I see I must."

"Tell us," Rosie responded. "We're on your side. You know."

"Thank you." He nodded. "I do know. What you don't know is how dangerous is this thing Lew has done. If other countries can't have this product, they will be prepared to go to war to get it."

"War !" Mr. Filmarron gulped. "For this they will make wars."

"For what it means," Mike told him. "Because the greatest menace to any government is a discontented people. Because some governments cannot afford such conditions."

"What do you want us to do ?" Rosie asked.

"I want you to leave. To organise things abroad. To make sure the rest of the world gets it also."

Rosie's eyes narrowed. "We'll have to go at once," she reasoned. "Because once it becomes official, we won't be allowed to do it. Also, because Lew will know what you have been telling us, like you knew what he was thinking—"

"Telepathy," Mr. Filmarron groaned.

"—and he'll arrange things so that we are stopped." She touched Mr. Filmarron's arm. "We've got our passports for the honeymoon. If we leave now—!"

"Treason," Mr. Filmarron declared with gloom. "Like what they do for treason is maybe coming to us."

"If we start now," Rosie asked Mike, "is that possible ?"

He smiled. "You will be looked after," he answered. "And when you get off the plane, I will meet you."

"Please," Mr. Filmarron begged.

On that word Rosie went, an uneasy but loyal Mr. Filmarron at her side.

They carried one small bag each to the plane. They waited tensely in their seats, lest, at the last moment, officers should appear to remove them. Because Lew would fix something if

he knew what they were doing, and he probably knew, and he could fix things. Unless they had moved too fast for him to have alerted the security people.

If only the fog would lift. But—what was fog doing at this time of the year, rolling thick across the field? It was not natural. But it was doing Lew's work, holding them here until the security officers arrived.

A sudden wind tore a passage straight down the runway. The fog pressing in, heaved up on either side, seeking to blot out the path, and the wind shrieked and held the passage clear.

The plane began to roll.

They were in the air, and the fog was gone.

"That fog!" Mr. Filmarron whispered.

"That wind!" Rosie returned, and Mr. Filmarron blinked, and nodded, and gripped her hand.

"Science maybe?" Mr. Filmarron asked, and Rosie's fingers tightened on his.

Their seats were forward. There was a coming and going through the door to the flight deck. Mr. Filmarron strained his ears each time the door opened.

"Something with the radio," he communicated to the girl. "Is not working properly."

"If it was receiving," she whispered back, "there would be a message telling them to land. So that they could put us off."

Mr. Filmarron giggled. "Is more science," he declared cheerfully. "Is very good scientist is Mr. Mike, eh, Rosie? Is better scientist than Mr. Lew, I think."

She did not answer. She was looking through the window beside her at where three distant specks were wheeling in the sky. Mr. Filmarron's head turned also. The specks began to grow in size.

"Is sent to tell the pilot to come down," Mr. Filmarron judged. "Because the radio does not work like it should answer."

"They will have orders." Rosie trembled. "Covering a situation where enemy agents have seized control of a plane to escape with information endangering the country's security."

Mr. Filmarron patted her hand comfortingly. "Just like a book you talk," he commented. He beamed. "But does it not happen that way with us. You will see." He looked again through the window, and chuckled. "So what am I telling you?" he asked. "How good is Mr. Mike, like I said?"

The clouds poured past the window, shutting the fighters from sight. It swathed the plane in a cloak of invisibilty, so that contact was impossible between them and those who searched for them.

Until later they drew clear of it, and looked down at the islands in the sea below, and the plane banked, and slanted down.

A month later Mr. Filmarron sat back in his chair, and smiled at Mike and Rosie. " Is fine," he announced. " All over are coming the orders. So that the factories must work, not sleeping even, to supply." He winked at Mike. " Such factories which Rosie and me have not seen, but is pouring the stuff out." He held up his hand. " Me, I do not want to see them," he assured Mike. " Nor Rosie also."

" There is no need to see them," Mike answered. He smiled.

Mr. Filmarron nodded. " So now I know is no need," he agreed. He leaned forward. " But, is one thing I do not know. What is it happens with every people taking these pills ? Is not just stomach aches."

Mike rose. " It is not medicine," he told them. " That is only to persuade men to take back what they thought they could do without—a sense of proportion. Which will restrain this world from destroying itself. Which, if this world had not been persuaded into taking back what it cannot live without, would have meant that there was nothing to prevent people going too far."

He moved towards the door leading to the garden. " When you return home, you will not be penalised for your part in this," he promised. His eyes twinkled. " I am sorry I cannot stay to become a millionaire," he apologised, " but, someday, when we meet again, you shall tell me how it feels."

He lifted one hand to them, and went through the door, into the garden, moving across the grass. They leaned forward, watching. Then he was gone.

" Such a scientist !" Mr. Filmarron breathed.

—Clifford C. Reed