

# Science Fantasy

No. 31

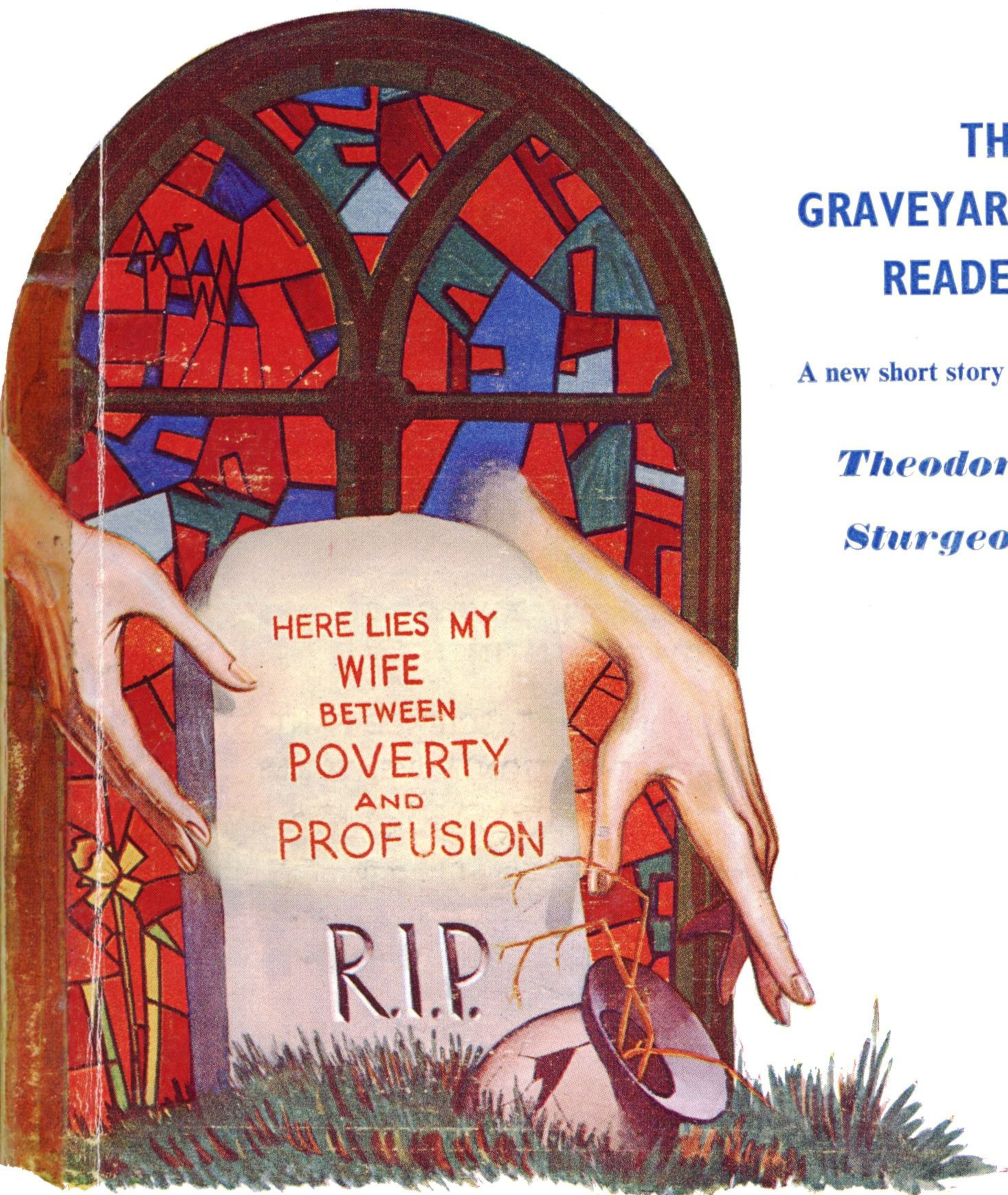
VOLUME II

2/-

## THE GRAVEYARD READER

A new short story by

*Theodore  
Sturgeon*



Plus BULMER \* DEL REY \* MACKIN \* REED



\*\*\*\*\*  
***Buried Treasure***  
\*\*\*\*\*

We recently discovered in our stock-room several cartons containing early issues of NEW WORLDS. Collectors are always asking us for them but we shall only be able to supply a limited number of orders

**Nos. 2 to 4 inclusive  
each 2/6 post free**

**NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD**

**Maclaren House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1**

\*\*\*\*\*

***Australasian Readers***

**A SCIENCE FICTION SERVICE ON YOUR  
OWN CONTINENT**

We carry :—NEW WORLDS : SCIENCE FANTASY  
SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES  
NOVA NOVELS

and other current British s-f magazines.

The largest range of back issues in Australia.

Send your Want List to :

**BLUE CENTAUR BOOK COMPANY**

**BOX 4940 G.P.O. SYDNEY, N.S.W. AUSTRALIA**



# Science Fantasy

Vol. II No. 31\*

1958

## CONTENTS

### ● Short Novel

THE BONES OF SHOSUN ..... Kenneth Bulmer 2

### ● Short Stories

THE GRAVEYARD READER Theodore Sturgeon 62

CHAOTICS .... Edward Mackin 75

NO STRINGS ATTACHED .... Lester del Rey 88

THE MISFIT ..... Clifford C. Reed 100

ARM OF THE LAW ..... Harry Harrison 112

---

EDITOR : JOHN CARNELL

Cover by LEWIS illustrating "The Graveyard Reader"

---

### TWO SHILLINGS

#### Subscription Rates

Great Britain and the Commonwealth, 6 issues 14/- post free

United States of America, 6 issues \$2.50 post free.

Published Bi-Monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.,

MACLAREN HOUSE, 131 GREAT SUFFOLK STREET, LONDON, S.E.1.

Telephone : HOP 5712

Sole Distributors in Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

In New Zealand : Messrs. P. B. Fisher, 564 Colombo Street, Christchurch, N.Z.

The contents of this magazine are protected by copyright and must not be produced without permission of the publishers. All characters, names and incidents in stories are entirely fictitious. No responsibility is accepted for material submitted for publication and return postage must be enclosed



# THE BONES OF SHOSUN

*Once again Kenneth Bulmer produces an interesting 'other-world' story ; this time the logic of our own Earth is peculiarly twisted—so, too, are many of the scientific marvels we take for granted. A computer, for instance, which doesn't work by electricity but has human beings as transistors !*

**BY KENNETH BULMER**

---

## I

Stephen Justin was not a hero. He was not much of anything, judged by the standards of his time. He was so average, a market research boffin would never have believed he existed.

That was before he blew up Professor Broster's plasma fission reactor and was plunged headlong into fire, slaughter and destruction.

That changed him.

The weird business might never have started had Justin been concentrating. As it was he sat before his instruments, and his work as an assistant nuclear physicist studying the design applications of direct electricity conversion from nuclear fission—in hot competition with the publicity-getting fusion boys—was running a poor second to lascivious and moody thoughts of Mavis.



Mavis was a brassy, leggy blonde, and Justin's present preoccupation at the moment of the catastrophe was the dawning comprehension that he was quite unsure whether or not she should become the future Mrs. Justin. Now that Tony Marten was around, the contingency had become remote.

The final humiliating episode had occurred just that morning in the Project's gymnasium. Justin had always enjoyed the thrice-weekly fencing bouts. He gained distinct pleasure from the quick flicker of steel, the feeling of power in wrist and the subtlety of reactions that followed hard on one another faster than mind could respond. When he took up foil, epee or sabre he became a different man.

He never won anything, of course. Justin never did. And the ease with which Tony Marten could pink him had long ceased to pain.

But when Mavis had laughingly goaded Marten on to make a laughing stock of Justin—well, it unsettled him profoundly. He was barely conscious of his ranked panels. Through the plastic and plate glass windows the one hundred and fifty foot long tube, twenty five feet in diameter, circled by a maze of piping and wiring and smothered in concrete and lead shielding on the floor below dominated everything. In that plasma fission reactor a regular surge of gaseous uranium reciprocated, the resultant shock waves created magnetic fields which, cutting copper coils, produced electricity by the kilowatt. At least, that was the theory.

"Watch your blasted input, Justin!" That was Tony Marten. The two were alone up here on this cautious dummy run. The control room was mounted high on the side of the wall, projecting, accessible by a long ladder from below.

"Rock steady," said Justin, lying. Damn Mavis! No girl has the right to come between a man and his job.

"Careful, man! You'll boil the lot—"

Justin concentrated. He controlled. He tried not to let his mind dwell on Mavis and Marten. He wondered what it would be like to have the fellow at the end of a rapier that was not blunted. Suicide, absolutely. Marten, always cocky, was efficient. Mavis was showing too much interest in him—damn Mavis! The temperature was rising fast—too fast. Uranium metal boils at 3,900 degrees Kelvin and the materials lining the cavity reactor weren't up to that sort of heat resistance yet.



Justin juggled his power controls, not as delicately as he would have wished, and felt thankful there were the automatic cut-outs standing invisibly on watch behind him.

Perhaps someone else had woman trouble. Perhaps a tech's mind was wandering to unpalatable facts when he checked the auto circuitry. Justin saw the red lamp go on a fraction of a second before he lost interest in the proceedings. The red lamp told him that a failure had occurred in the circuits and his instinctive reaction—the correct one—was to damp down at once. He never made it.

A red fist blossomed in front of his eyes. A jackboot caught him in the stomach. The mind that was Steve Justin's parted company with its body. Blackness fell on him.

He awoke to a boot stirring ungently in the ribs. He had a King-size headache and his eyes winced from the after-effects of the flare. He felt awful.

"Get up and start walking!" The voice pummelled him. Blearily, mind not yet functioning on the top-line, he obeyed. He took an unsteady step forward. Then, rebelliously, he stopped. Who was shouting at him? Where was he going? And why?

A thin, intense pain scorched its way across his back.

He shouted out of shock, and started walking again, not understanding. He tried opening his eyes again. Still walking, his feet hard on stone, he gradually regained contact with himself and saw where he was.

Not that it made sense.

He was walking across a stone-flagged bridge. His blurred vision could not pierce the further end; there were mists and veils of diaphanous colour, like sunlight on water falling. On either hand the grim walls of a vast ravine marched out of sight in dwindling and giddy perspective. He glanced back over his shoulder. The familiar concrete shielding of Professor Broster's plasma fission reactor met his gaze; by all previous experience he should be standing in the car park. Not on a bridge. Over a yawning depth of nothing. With a ravine like the Grand Canyon in black and umbre stretching out of sight on either hand. The first sight of the Project had cheered him into thinking normality had returned. Normality? Here—he must be going mad.

Spicy odours wafted from scarlet trees growing from the bridge. The sun burned down. The sky was blue. He could



feel the bridge under him and see the emerald and cerise fluting wavering ahead. The whiplash stung him again. He stumbled onward and studied from the corner of his eye the man who marched at his shoulder.

It would not have surprised Justin if the man had turned out to be some evil incarnation of Tony Marten. He soured at the idea ; it was almost a relief to see typical fancy-dress costume—broad red sash over loose yellow robes, globular black helmet with white plumes and iron nasal, crepe-soled shoes and a minor arsenal of weaponry scattered in the leather belt around the man's waist. The utterly strange could be accepted easier that would the smack of familiarity had the man been Marten.

Justin walked on over the stone bridge spanning nothing. He went in silence. His guard followed, warily. Had he not been a convinced rationalist, he might have considered the theory that he was dreaming. He had no need of pinching himself to discard that idea. This was real enough. The pain in his back was a fact. His head still ached, his eyes still stung ; but these pre-now sensations were fading. Where he was, he rather naturally did not know.

The idea of how he had arrived suddenly took possession of him. Professor Broster had once said that plasma fission entailed reversals of flow ; by that, Justin had understood him to mean reversals of flow of the gaseous uranium. As the high pressure gas at one end of the tube plunged towards the far end creating shock waves and leaving the slower moving ionised gas behind, this ionised gas gave sufficient pressure to distort the magnetic fields of the copper coils. From this distortion electricity could be siphoned off from the transmitted kinetic energy. But the big thing was that when the uranium gas had built up to critical level again at the far end of the tube, it went off again, thrusting down to where it had started. Reversals.

Professor Broster hadn't told the half of it.

The machine had functioned on and above the level at which it was safe ; the red light showed that the autos had failed—and in the resultant upheaval not only fissile uranium gas had reversed—time, or the parallel dimensions, *something*, had reversed.

Something that was powerful enough to toss Justin off contemptuously into a new world.



He'd read about this sort of situation. He'd even sensed glamour in it. Here he was, in an alien dimension—or in the far past or far future—walking along under guard, with a whip for company, going—well, where was he going? He looked up with renewed interest.

Tony Marten was sitting on the stone of the bridge, holding his head in his hands with the bright blood running down between his fingers.

A guard dressed as was Justin's was reaching down with spatulate fingers. He took Marten's shoulder and heaved. Marten came upright like an unfolding pocket-knife. His nose was a bloody mess. The guard hit him alongside the ear.

Why Justin did the next damnfool thing he couldn't afterwards have said. He jumped forward and planted a solid fist in the guard's face. The guard staggered back. He tottered, arms flailing the air, swaying on the naked edge of stone. He screamed; once, shrilly.

Then he fell.

The sound of his scream persisted. Moving sideways and realising that he had let himself in for it now, Justin caught sight of the first guard, face congested with rage, lunging forward. He had not drawn a weapon and it seemed likely that he thought he could overpower the still dazed Justin without trouble. Marten was useless.

Justin said: "It was an accident."

Which was as fatuous a remark as he could think up on the spur of the moment. The guard wasn't playing. He kept on coming.

The next few moments were extremely confused. Justin experienced sensations he associated with the interior of a cement-mixer. He caught a vague glimpse of a ham-like hand covering the sky and then, for the second time that day, everything went black.

This time, when he came round, he was ready for anything. Even of finding himself safely back on the Earth he knew, carrying out his duty in the Project control room. That was a pipe-dream that hadn't materialised. He sat up. He was lying on filthy straw, in semi-darkness, his back pressed hard up against an icy-cold, damp wall.

This settled it. He must accept the fact that he had in some way been transposed through a quirk of Professor Broster's Project from his own world into another. That would do for



now. Now he had to figure out ways and means of staying alive wherever he was.

This must be a prison. He had punched that sadistic guard, the fellow had gone over the bridge, had been killed. Justin thought of the fact that he had been responsible for the death of a human being, he considered it, and he could not get any emotional charge from it whatsoever. It had just happened. He did not feel like a murderer.

When they came for him, however, he began to feel some of a murderer's fears. Guards unshackled him and led him from the prison out into daylight. He blinked his eyes. They crossed a courtyard, ascended a flight of worm-eaten wooden stairs, entered an arched doorway. From some distance ahead came the murmur and hum of an impatiently waiting throng. Justin was thrust into a small room; iron bars clanged shut. The tramp of the guards as they marched off was oddly final.

"What you up for, mate?"

Justin turned. He saw four men in the room, and then realised with a shock that two of the huddled forms were women. They all wore coarse sacking, belted with string around narrow waists. Their hair was lank and filthy. Their feet were naked and black and dreadfully covered with sores and blisters. All their faces, men's and women's, were thin and gaunt, with huge dark eyes and the visible marks of privation and suffering.

"In for?" he said. "I don't understand." But he did. Only too well.

They were looking at his clothes. His dark blue lab smock was badly torn and singed, showing his white terylene shirt through the rips. His shoes were scuffed. He realised that he must be dressed like a king in comparison with these poor scarecrows.

"You heard me." The speaker hunched up his string belt. "I stole a book." As he spoke he looked proud, radiant, with an inner fire that stripped away the husk of depravity surrounding him. The others murmured in awe.

"A book?" Justin sensed the answer to something he ought to know here. "This is a magistrate's court, then?"

"It's a court. I don't know anything about magistrates. The literati do things their own way, Shosun rot 'em."

One of the women cackled. "You'll get a hundred, you see! My boy ran away—they'll flog me for it!" She began



to rock backwards and forwards, crooning. It was quite obvious that she was deranged with fear. "I had it before. Five it was. Five! Nearly died—Oh, Shosun, why did the ungrateful, belly-aching lout have to run away?"

The other man spoke with the roughness of fear.

"Glad to get away from you, you whining old hay-bag. Who wouldn't run away from you?"

"Leave her alone," said the first man.

"Why should I? She belongs to me, don't she? If she hadn't been so free with her tongue, the boy—"

"And if you hadn't been so free with the strap—" the woman screamed back.

Justin knew enough not to mix in a man and wife quarrel.

## II

The iron bars squealed. They all turned as one. The gate opened and a man stumbled in, cursing, tripped and fell full length across the stone floor. Jeering laughter rose from outside and then the familiar receding tramp of the guards' feet.

"Another one for the pot," said the woman who had so far been silent. She laughed, a merciless cackle that embraced her own misfortunes with the others.

The man picked himself up. There was a sudden dignity about him. His clothes were bizarre to Justin; but they might well be normal wear for this world. Over a scarlet shirt he wore a white doublet and trunks, very puffed, very slashed, pointed and with ribbons of sickly violet in bows at every vantage point. He had no shoes. Two leather thongs depended from his belt. Their ends were newly cut. At least, the man's clothes were clean.

"I commiserate with you, madam," he said, that dignity abruptly becoming in Justin's eyes comical. "I assure you that pleasant though your company may be, I would infinitely prefer not to have made your acquaintance."

"Anyone'd think you was a damned literati," one of the prisoners said.

"That infinite honour"—the man spat—"is not, alas, mine. But I do what I can, I do what I can."

"What you in for?"

"Alas, to tell you that is to unburden my soul of its deep disillusion with mankind." He sighed, soulfully. "My land-



lady, Shosun rot her, has a singularly ungrateful mind. A sheer piece of calculated perjury. As though I, the Potent Prato, had need of a measly imitation-pearl snuff-box ! A complete fabrication, complete, I assure you, your honour." He stopped, coughed, and even then did not look abashed.

"How much did you get for it, Prato?" asked Justin.

"A mere two hundred—" Prato's face tightened. He glanced keenly at Justin. Then he smiled, lifted his hand, forefinger and thumb joined, and sniffed delicately.

"I see I have to deal with one not of the illiterate caste." Prato's hand clenched. "You would not, by any chance, be an unfrocked literati?"

Justin tried to play it clever. Literati. Not the sort of word to find in the mouths of people like the four prisoners. He said, evenly: "Would I tell you if I was?"

"No. No, of course not. Presumptuous of me, my dear sir. The Potent Prato, after all, has no need of literati, Shosun rot 'em, unfrocked or otherwise."

Again the iron bars clanged and the prisoners turned. The man who this time was tossed in bounced back from the floor like a wildcat and flung himself against the bars. He shook them in frenzy. He shouted in hysteria, invoking the diseased portions of the anatomies of various gods of whom Justin had never before heard. When the newcomer quietened, he faced the other prisoners. A fleck of foam spittled his lips. He was clad all in tight-fitting black, his narrow face shaded by a black hood, his eyes bright and snake-like and yet oddly human and pathetic. His face had a skull-like quality that chilled.

"You whining curs!" the newcomer said dispassionately, not willing, apparently, to waste his wrath on sub-lits. He stalked away to brood in a corner.

"Whew!" said Prato softly. He plucked Justin's sleeve. "Step aside with me, friend—"

"Justin."

"Ah, so. Well, then, friend Justin. I don't think our chances are great with a disenfranchised student. We must dispose of him."

"A student? How do you mean, dipose of him?"

Prato favoured him with one of his keen looks so out of keeping with his bluff blunt exterior. "You must excuse me, friend Justin, if I am blunt. How innocent can you—"

"I come from a far country. I do not know your ways."



"That will be pleasant for you. Tell me, what are you in for?"

Danger signals thrilled along Justin's nerves. The others had been insistent about asking that until the arrival of Prato had turned their fleeing thoughts. His whole scientific training, through all the struggle to land the assistant nuclear physicist's position he had last obtained had not trained him how to react in the stinking dungeon on some fantasy world. He said: "I told you, friend Prato, I come from far away. Your laws—"

"I believe you—"

"I am a complete stranger here. I know nothing of your laws. Therefore I do not understand your references to that man as a student—"

But Prato was gripping him fiercely, his eyes wide and horror struck. "You — know — nothing — of — our Great holy Shosun ! Tell me." He shook Justin agonisedly. "Tell me. *What have you done ?*"

Suddenly frightened, Justin faltered: "I—a guard—it was an accident. He fell off a bridge."

Prato let out a long moan. He was shaking with fear. Sweat drops started out on his fat forehead.

"Great Shosun preserve us ! No—it's too late !"

The truth rushed in on Justin. He was a murderer. However innocent he felt ; that was what these people would call him.

"What is it to you?" he demanded roughly.

Prato was controlling himself. At last he croaked: "We're all doomed ! Doomed ! And me, in the prime of life—oh, that miserable snuff box. Would that woman rot at the bottom of the canyon to the end of eternity !" He glared at Justin. "So you don't know our laws, friend. You don't know ! You have no idea that a group of prisoners is charged as one and that sentence is passed on all for the crime of the worst ?"

"I see," said Justin. He felt profoundly sorry for this pompous little man. A little peccadillo on this world could have disastrous consequences. And very effective it must be, too, in preventing crime.

"Ask the student what is his crime, Prato. It might be worse than mine."

Prato ignored this. "And you don't know the punishment for murder ? They'll tear us in two ! D'you hear ? A tug of war—and me in the middle. Torn in two portions." He groaned in genuine fear, but through it reverted to his old



pomposity of manner. "To think that the Potent Prato should end thus, a sport for the common herd."

A filthy arm reached out, caught Justin's shoulder.

"Torn in two? That's for murder." The prisoner's grimed face split in a grin of sickly fear. "Who's in for murder? Come on, quick. Who's in for murder?"

"Murder—murder—murder—" The grim word rolled round the cell. The student rose lithely from the straw and elbowed his way masterfully through the others to stand beside Prato.

"Murder," he said sharply. "That's bad. Who is it?"

Prato opened his mouth, groped goggle-eyed for words, and then shut his fat lips on a groan.

"You, fat one, eh?" the student said. He looked about keenly. He pointed. "There. Grab him."

Things happened fast. The prisoners fell on Prato, carried his screamingly protesting bulk rapidly to the other side of the cell. There was a low oubliette opening. It was covered by a single horizontal iron bar. They laid Prato's neck across the bar and the student stood back, measuring distances with a cold eye.

Justin was appalled. He could see it all quite clearly. If the worst crime was punished and that punishment visited on all of the group in the one cell—then the best thing would be to dispose of the very worst offenders yourselves, privately, before they had a chance to reach the open court. And now the student was callously going to jump on Prato's fat head and snap his neck.

If Justin let them, of course.

It would be an instructive sight if they did, and were then arraigned with him, upstairs, facing a murder charge.

But that wouldn't save Prato.

And the fat man had at least been human; and he had not screamed out 'kill!' at first revelation of the enormity of Justin's crime. The trouble was, if Justin told the truth, then it would be his neck across that iron bar and his head that would be jumped on. He was sweating with fear and his limbs were trembling quite beyond his volition. He swallowed and took an unsteady step forward.

Prato was yelling blue murder. One of the prisoners was having trouble holding down his deceptively muscled arm.

The student was waiting, watching coldly, gauging the best place to strike.

Justin took another step—and then made up his mind. He was an anachronism in this world—he could at least save Prato and then see about saving his own skin afterwards. He jumped forward headlong.

Everything happened at once. Prato's thick arm whipped up to ward off the pouncing student. The thin prisoner came with it. Justin crashed into the student. They smashed in a writhing pile to the floor. In the bedlam of shouting and oaths and scrabbling of feet, Justin heard quite distinctly the squashy thud.

When they were sorted out again the student leaped upright, sprang with demoniacal fury at Prato. The big man, not now caught unawares, thrust out his fist. The student crashed to the floor, unconscious. But Justin was aware of that as side-play ; he was staring with sick revulsion at the squashed head of the prisoner where it had shattered against the iron bar.

"Luck," Prato said, panting. "At least, you did not leave me to die."

"I couldn't very well, could I, and live with myself afterwards." Justin was bitter. "Poor devil. What do we do now?"

The other male prisoner supplied the answer. He hurled himself at Prato. Prato knocked him down as though he were smacking aside a troublesome fly. The man's wife ran to his side, crooning over him.

"Murder," Prato said again to himself. He looked with that uncomfortable, all-embracing glare at Justin. "Here, friend, there's only one thing you can do in the circumstance." His pose of pomposity had vanished. "Get that dead man's clothes on you fast, muss your hair, rub dirt on your face. He stole a book—but that's not quite as bad as murder."

There was a plan in what Prato had said. Swiftly, Justin stripped the thin, emaciated body, seeing the ridged rib-cage, the weals, the marks of flea-bites. He shuddered involuntarily at the touch of the filthy sack-like garment ; but he put it on over his terylene shirt. As he was rubbing dirt into his face and hands and hair and sprouting beard, a nasty thought occurred to him.

"What will the guards say when they find we've murdered this poor devil? Won't we all be booked for murder then?"



Prato started to say something. Then he shook his head. A deep laugh rumbled from his belly. "You know, friend Justin—now that we might get away with this—I must admit that you would make a fine comic turn. There's been no murder here."

Justin looked up from drawing on his blue lab smock over the dead man's wasted frame. "No murder?" He couldn't look at the bloody pulp. "What's this, then?"

"That? You can't murder a sublit. You only murder a guard or a literati. We others don't count."

"I see." He did, too. "What did this man steal a book for?" He plunged. "If he can't read?"

"What for? Why, to burn it, of course. What else?"

"What else indeed," said Justin, busy grinding dirt into his feet.

When the two unconscious men had come round the familiar ominous tramp of guards' feet echoed down the corridor.

"Another chance of a painful death—or is this the summons?" said Prato. He caught Justin's eye and tried to smile. "We will have to be brave now; which is a trick I'd sooner not have to try. It isn't easy."

"You and me both, friend Prato," said Justin.

¶ The guards slammed the iron door open. They barely glanced at the corpse, except to kick it aside. The prisoners filed out, two women and four men, going to their judgement. Only then did Justin realise that no-one knew what the student had done, except the student himself.

### III

Through stone corridors, up ramps and flights of steps they were hustled along. The courtroom was high and lit by tall narrow windows. Wooden benches formed three sides of a square in the centre; the fourth was occupied by a high counter, behind which stood a gilt chair. Guards lined the walls. A clerk had a scroll in his hands, reading out their names. He was wearing a flat yellow cap, with a red tassel over his left ear. He had a squeaky voice and read with exasperating slowness, pronouncing each syllable with discrete care.

English? How could Justin understand these people? It sounded like English. But it wasn't. He must have fallen into this world more deeply than he had suspected. But the very

fact of his discovery cheered him. It must mean that there were unknown advantages on his side, unsuspected credits that he might have to call upon later.

The clerk had finished reading. The prisoners, huddled in their iron-barred cage bare in the centre of the square, bated their breaths. Justin looked with them towards the seat of judgement.

A bare head rose above the wooden counter. A narrow forehead, a thin nose—and a startlingly alive pair of dancing brown eyes. The woman's face was incisive, used to command, hard and completely dispassionate. She did not look towards the prisoners.

The clerk went on his halting way to read out the charges. He must be a sort of literati slave, one of the clerical class who had to be taught to read so that his masters could be freed from mere menial clerical work. His words floated stiffly to Justin.

A son, indentured to those very clerics, had run away. The parents must stand indemnity for him. A man had stolen and sold his landlady's snuffbox. Prato groaned deeply at this. A man had stolen a book—at this there was a sudden, quickly stifled cheer in the crowd penned behind the barriers. Guards moved with a warning clink of mail and the woman judge frowned momentarily. Justin recalled the dead man's pitiful pride when he had told of his crime.

The woman said : " I will have the court cleared if there is any more disturbance." Her words were like icicles.

The clerk was off again. A man who had murdered a noble guard doing his duty and, to boot, had been found wandering on the Bridge of Mist. There was a genuine gasp of horror at this, and Justin caught the glances cast towards the prisoners' cage, glances of pity. An older clerk, pettishly brushing his red tassel away from his face, leant over and spoke deferentially to the judge. She listened, stony faced. Then she nodded.

" Cancel that case out, clerk. Proceed."

So it was to pass as easily as that. Justin was weakly conscious of the wash of relief that swept over him. He was becoming too involved in this whole affair. After all—could it be really happening? A flea bit him. Yes, by—by Shosun, it was !

The clerk read on. A woman had stolen two loaves of bread and a lace handkerchief.



Prato nudged Justin. He whispered from the corner of his mouth. "Nothing more serious than your book—" A guard casually flicked one of the ever-present whips and Prato let out a fat wail. He rubbed his back and cursed just sotto-voce about the new rip in his doublet.

"Silence in the dock!"

A nagging worry was biting Justin. So far, no names had been mentioned. He didn't know who he was supposed to be, and, even assuming that any of his fellow prisoners knew, he couldn't ask them now. And he was still the star prisoner, the one upon whom their fates hung.

He wondered what the punishment was for stealing—and burning—a book.

The clerk read on. A quondam student, given the proud name of Ignatius, already automatically disenfranchised from all benefits of his college had—the clerk stopped reading. He looked up towards his senior. His face was pitiable. The senior, brushing his tassel faddishly, stepped down, peered over the clerk's shoulder.

"Come, come, down there," the woman said.

"A technical hitch, your worship. The words—they are not familiar to the clerk."

A rustling, uneasy sigh ran round the courtroom.

"Can you read them?" the judge demanded.

The senior clerk screwed up his eyes, cocked his head on one side, pursed his lips. Then Justin saw the edifying spectacle of a senior clerk of the court forming syllables painstakingly with his lips, mouthing out the words that he did not understand. "Nu-cle-ar ex-peri-ments—" He shook his head, swivelling to cringe before the accusing stare from above. "Your worship—I'm afraid—that is—"

"Give the inditement here."

The clerk scabbled up the steps, the parchment fluttering from his palsied hands. The woman read, her brows knitted. Then, quietly, she handed down the scroll.

"This student Ignatius is charged with meddling in things he has no business with; he was foolhardy enough to attempt to pry into those things properly pertaining only to the most highly-skilled of the literati." The sobbing sigh of vicarious terror that went round the court struck deeply into Justin. By this time he was enough in control of himself to have worked out a few theories about these people—slave state, educated ruling classes, sub-literate masses, magic and scientific secrets

—that he recognised at once the danger. The student had represented a far worse danger to them than had his own murder.

Yet Ignatius had been foremost in the murder.  
Perhaps the student had his own plan ?

Watching him, Justin felt that surmise harden into conviction. The student had been segregated by the other prisoners so that he stood alone. Now he raised his head. In a strong clear voice he said: "Have I your worship's permission to speak?"

To say that had taken courage. The whips lashed him before he had completed the first three words.

"Enough!" The woman's voice cut through the sound of whistling whips. "Speak."

"Your worship—I am not guilty." At the woman's impatient gesture, Ignatius went on quickly: "I plead the protection of my college—"

"They have disenfranchised you."

"No! Not me. Your worship—I am innocent. I ask that Reader Humbleback be called. He will tell you—"

"This is not a court of appeal. This is a court of condemnation. You stand condemned and must accept your just punishment."

Justin knew this was no abstract legal battle. What happened here decided his own fate—and the fate of Prato and the others. He felt a fierce surge of partisanship for the student flare in him. The man—he was little more than a youth, his starved yellow skull-face added years—had been fighting for his life since he'd first been thrust into the cell. Justin felt he could not condemn him for his methods. Ignatius flung up both arms dramatically.

"By the radioactive bones of Shosun, I demand that Reader Humbleback be called in my defence."

There was the crash of running feet. Screams and yells and the slam of doors. Justin swivelled to stare into the rear of the courtroom. He could see the backs of the crowd, pushing and struggling to leave, looking like a herd of cows being crammed into the slaughter pens. Even the guards were fingering their bows and swords and trying to control their transparent inclinations to join the rush.

One man, a single black-clad individual remained. He stood up slowly, seeming to uncoil, from where he had been knocked



down in the stampede. Justin could see his face. His arms crossed on his chest.

"Reader Humbleback stands ready to answer your call, Student Ignatius."

Justin, switching to watch the student, could have sworn that a flicker of astonishment and fear passed over the man's face. As though he had scarcely believed that any man would stand to answer the call. And yet, more than that . . .

"Well, Ignatius, speak up." Humbleback spoke with out-of-place testiness. "I was in the middle of a most important experiment when you summoned me. You might have arranged for me to land somewhere other than in the centre of a panic-stricken horde of runaway sublights." He broke off, glancing sharply upwards. "Your pardon, your worship. I had not realised that court was in session."

Justin felt bewildered. The man had been standing in the middle all the time, hadn't he? How could he have failed to realise the court was in session? But then, how could he have been conducting an experiment? Justin felt a cold breeze waft down his back.

The judge spoke with chilly finality. "Reader Humbleback. This disenfranchised student has dared to invoke the call of summons, so that you are here. Have you anything to say in his defence before I pass sentence?"

"With what, your worship, is he charged?"

The woman judge glanced round the court. Then, her voice lowered, she said: "He was playing tomfool tricks with a nuclear reactor. Trying to—" she broke off and glanced down. Then, assured, went on: "He was trying to smuggle a radioactive isotope out. Of course, the poor deluded fool was picked up by the Geigers at once."

Ignatius wet his lips. "It is my mother. She is dying! I needed the isotopes to cure her—"

"Silence! You forfeit all claims of the flesh when you enter college. You stand condemned from your own mouth."

"Well, your worship—" Reader Humbleback was clearly embarrassed. "I have a feeling, a very strong feeling, that student Ignatius had received permission to use a milligram of isotope—or was it a milligram. At any rate, your worship, and begging your illustrious pardon, I feel that the charge is, that is, permission granted—out of touch myself—very important, most delicate experiments—" He would have

mumbled on indefinitely had not Ignatius, his composure at last broken down, sobbed out beyond all staying.

"There! I told you. It was lawful!"

The woman snapped back at him. "Lawful? How is it lawful to use radioactives outside the colleges? Your mother is a sublit, she has no value. You are being trained for the highest non-noble rank there is and you abuse the trust placed in you like this! It is monstrous!"

"But—your worship—permission—"

"Reader Humbleback, who gave this permission?"

The Reader shivered throughout his length. Then, with his return of a calm manner, he said clearly: "Grand Peruser Karsh, your worship."

"Grand Peruser Karsh!" The woman sat back, disappearing from view. Justin had the impression that the news had shaken her, that events had taken an unexpected turn. Presently he heard the unmistakable ring of a telephone. A good ten minutes later the woman's head reappeared.

Tonelessly, she said: "Two years cybmatte. Court is closed."

A great despairing cry burst from Ignatius. He swung, ignoring the whips, flung his arms out. "Reader Humbleback! I implore you—" A swordpommel struck him on the ear. He fell flat on his face, lay crumpled and pathetic. The guards began shuffling around. The woman judge had vanished. Justin knew he would never forget her.

#### IV

Like the falling of a curtain, the courtroom jumped into an after-the-play activity. Reader Humbleback, with a single, bemused look towards the prisoners' cage, shuffled out. Guards shepherded the prisoners down the steps and into the waiting blackness of the corridors. The clerks gathered up their scrolls. And for the first time since the episode on the bridge, Justin wondered where Tony Marten was. However much he had thought he hated the slick character, he hoped that now he wasn't being sentenced to a horrible death on someone else's account.

Stumbling along in the bumbling wake of Prato, Justin realised that he had not discovered what the sentence meant. Prato had said that as they were not literati, they would not



rate the cybmatte, whatever that was. But now they had, on the strength of the student's crime, been sent just there. Well, he tried to rationalise it philosophically, he'd find out. And he was devilishly hungry.

They were prodded into a room on the ground floor where, in answer to his instinctive ravenous demands, they found crusty grey bread and wooden bowls of un-nameable soup placed on trestle tables. The prisoners ate with gusto, making sounds that, to his surprise, Justin just didn't bother about. Yesterday—and a world away—he would have been nauseated.

Prato caught Justin's eye, and with a quick, practised flick of the wrist, stowed a greasy crust inside his bedraggled doublet. Watching his chance, Justin did the same. It was a good thought. Shosun knew what lay ahead. The student was carried in and casually dumped on the floor. He groaned. By the time guards bustled round, shouting officiously, he was conscious. They all went outside into the sunshine.

There was no opportunity to talk. Justin saw a narrow courtyard, an iron-bound gateway, lounging guards, hard-packed earth fouled with dung, and the waiting cart.

Remarking to himself that this was what the tumbril ride must have been like he clambered in, turning to help one of the women aboard. A tailgate swung up and they were off.

Some animal that might have been a mutated horse's nightmare, all slatey-grey, and yellow about the mouth, ambled between the shafts. Guards on more agile-looking beasts spurred around. For six miserable prisoners, they rated a big escort. That, Justin decided, was because of the student. Out of a feeling of pity, he thrust a chunk of bread into Ignatius' hand. The student stared at it, then he wolfed it.

"Can you tell me what the cybmatte is?"

Still eating, Ignatius said: "For sublits it doesn't mean a thing. For me—it will be hell."

Prato leaned over, swaying with the jolting cart.

"I would like to know more about it, friend Ignatius, if you know, that is."

"If I know!" The student had still enough spirit left to glare indignantly. Then he deflated. "Well, it's bad enough for us all. And I am innocent—I had permission—" Then, as though realising that all complaint was now useless, he said listlessly: "You would not understand what the cybmatte does. Even I do not comprehend all its working. For you, it

will mean manual labour, fetching and carrying, night and morning. There will be no end to your labour."

"I am surprised that sublights were sentenced to the cybmatte." Prato, with food inside him, began to flower. "The Potent Prato, surely, will find suitable employment—"

"They have no time for minor wizards there, I can assure you. All the magic is in the cybmatte itself." Ignatius spat, and picked his teeth. "And I shall be one of those poor chained devils providing the workings for that magic."

"But what does it *do*?" demanded Justin.

"I've told you it is useless trying to explain. If I used words like digital computer and analogue computer and nuclear reactor, you would imagine I was incanting a spell."

"Indeed, yes!" boomed Prato, moving away from the student. "I shivered in my shoes when you summoned the Reader."

Abruptly, Ignatius laughed. It was a bark of released emotion, "Poor bewildered Reader Humbleback! One minute in college, the next being trampled in the rush to get out of court. I warrant he cursed me roundly."

"You mean," said Justin, not really believing what he was saying. "You teleported him there?"

Ignatius sat up so swiftly his head cracked against the cart. He said, ignoring the thump: "What know you of teleportation? Speak up!"

"Nothing. I thought it was impossible—but of course, where we are, things are different . . ."

Prato, still pale, offered: "Friend Justin is a stranger here. A total stranger, by Shosun."

"But he knows things. He knows enough, perhaps, to find himself in the cybmatte with the other doomed devils? The literati overlords would welcome fresh workers there, I know." Ignatius' face became animated. "Tell me more, man."

Justin felt frightened. He'd been flapping that damned great mouth of his and now he was likely to be given away by Ignatius. Out of the frying pan . . . To be sentenced to manual labour was bad enough; but from what Ignatius had been saying, the student's fate was far worse. And he could only be subjected to that fate if he was an educated man. That seemed the crux of the situation.

Justin decided to be a dumb man who had stolen a book and then burned it.



Ignatius tried to cajole him into more revelations. They jogged through the dusty streets of a leaning-fronted town ; passing wooden houses, rumbling by brick shops, creaking past the open doors of wineshops, at last leaving town by a strongly guarded gate and heading out along a white rutted road. Still Justin refused to speak. He just sat, shaking his head, playing dumb.

He had managed to keep it up under the growing anger of Ignatius until they were startled by a blue shadow covering them, cutting off the warmth of the sun. They all looked out of the cart. Guards in flat helmets with erect, narrow metal crests were coming for them. The tail gate clashed down ; they descended stiffly. They were in a wooden-roofed stone chamber, lit only by slanting sunshine falling from the door they had entered ; noises rang loudly in the confined space.

" We're here," said Ignatius, and his voice shook.

A guard captain with a scarlet knot at his left shoulder, signalled, pointing towards Ignatius. He was hustled away, helped by the prod of spears that had replaced the whips. Justin watched him go with a twinge of regret. There went an innocent man, he felt sure.

The rest of them were herded into a long, low building, apparently carved from the living rock. Thin strips of light far above told of lighting and ventilation. They were assigned sleeping pallets, straw-stuffed palliasses. They were issued with dark grey coats and pants, women as well as men, each with a large yellow number sown on breast and back. Justin was number 8965. They donned leather sandals. They were driven through into another lofty stone hall, fed on grey bread and sickly soup. They were prodded perfunctorily by a man in a green smock. A doctor, guessed Justin. They were led outside, into the sunshine. Buckets were pressed into their hands. They were led by a swearing guard down a sharp declivity in the rock to where a spring of clear water gushed forth in sparkling beauty.

" Fill your buckets. Don't spill any on the way back. And keep moving."

A bucket of water in each hand, Justin walked back up the steep declivity, panting and slipping, red-faced, sweating and straining with the exertion, feeling the muscles across his shoulders and along his arms pulling with the unaccustomed exercise. The two women made the grade with balance and

practiced ease. Justin felt ashamed, until he reasoned that they had probably been conditioned to this sort of manual labour all their lives.

The Gunga Din treadmill wound in a blur of work and heat all that day. They struggled up the slope and emptied the buckets into a vast tank that never seemed to fill. The straw palliasses that night were like soft foam rubber to weary limbs. They were on water carrying the second day. The third day saw a change in their labours. In a gigantic kitchen—the size of the place was out of all proportion to the number of prisoners—the preparation of food went on in an area that would have overlapped Paddington station. From the type of food—bread and soup—Justin guessed guards' meals were not prepared here. Row after row of soup boilers stood steaming, each as large as a 4-6-4 main line loco. Grey loaves streamed in and out of ovens. Set to turning wheels which operated the conveyor belts, Justin and Prato swung their arms until they were scarlet in the face, wheezing for breath, winding like runaway windmills.

Prato lost his fat fast. Slowly, Justin hardened. He wouldn't become fully toughened for a time yet. You don't turn into a superman with a little exercise, however strenuous; if it doesn't kill you it still takes time to remould you.

The great change came when Justin was almost through his transmogrification into a beaten-spirited slave.

One morning—it was water-carrying day in the schedule, Justin thought—their regular guard had vanished and a new man took over. Outside, Justin had strength to work and to look about. He saw with clearer eyes just where he was.

The water gushed from a spring near the foot of a gigantic sugar-loaf mountain. Terraces sloped upwards, full of growing things. The top of the mountain was crowned by a pillared temple—it looked like a temple, it might have been anything—sharp against the blue of the sky. On every hand, green fields and forests and cultivated land stretched out of sight into the shining horizon. This could have been a pleasant land. The great frowning mountain dominated it, the place in which, the slaves said with hushed breath, the dreaded cybmatte was housed. In that giant hill thousands of people lived. The unfrocked literati. Outside, the manual workers slaved to keep them fed. It added up.



"Stop that skulking, you there!"

Obediently, Justin jumped. There was a familiar ring in the voice. It took him two trips to place it.

The guard who had struck him on the Bridge of Mist! The man who had seen him kill his comrade! Here was danger.

The shock of the discovery snapped the pall of lethargy that had been insidiously creeping over him. He found—to his intense pleasure—that his body could perform the herculean labours demanded of it without trouble now, he was able to work and think at the same time.

And his thoughts took a sombre turn.

Escape?

How? Where to? Most of all, where to.

That night he awoke to the fierce grip of a hand across his mouth.

He started up, wild-eyed, imagining the worst.

A voice spoke, hard and low: "Keep quiet. Get up." Prodded by a knife blade, Justin rose and fumbled his way from the barrackroom.

The dark shadow forcing him on halted in an angle of stone. A black cloth was removed from a small lantern. Yellow light spilled across Justin's face. He blinked.

"I thought so. I don't know how you got here; but, by Shosun, I'll soon have you where you belong."

It was, it had to be, the guard. And the fellow had recognised him. Justin swallowed. "Who are you?" he said as bravely as he could. "What do you want?"

A dry chuckle answered him. The knife pricked him.

"Keep moving. We're going to see the captain."

Justin knew what that would mean. He'd be torn in half. If only that damned guard hadn't fallen off the bridge then perhaps Justin could have approached the literati, as an educated man, explained the position, secured their help in transporting him back to Earth. A dull resentment against, of all people, Tony Marten rose in him. Then he saw the futility of that, and slouched along, near frantic with the desire to do something—anything—to get out of this trap.

## V.

A guard warned them that to rouse the captain would incur his wrath. He was—the guard winked—sleeping.

“Get him out,” Justin’s guard said. “This is important.” The captain’s bodyguard, reluctantly, went.

Justin sat down on a low wooden stool, stared round the chamber. The stone walls were hung with tapestries, much faded and dirty. A table held a bowl of fruit. In a corner trestle supported by fancifully carved legs, reposed a set of military trappings. Conspicuously, the sword was absent. Swords and nuclear reactors? Justin swayed wearily on the stool. More to keep himself from doing something more silly, he struggled up, watched by the keen merciless guard’s stare, and wandered round the chamber. Three or four bulky books piled on a table attracted his attention and, as any civilised man does, he flicked open the pages to see what they were. A muffled sound from behind him did not register.

He was staring at a badly printed copy of a novel by—Charles Dickens! Rapidly flicking the pages, he saw that this novel was not one with which he was acquainted—was not, in fact, any novel which the Charles Dickens who had lived in London had written. In this dimension there had been a novelist called Charles Dickens, and he had written books that fitted this world, as the swords and nuclear reactors and slaves and literati fitted it.

One thing Justin knew—*he* didn’t fit into this world.

A harsh sound made him turn his head. A door had opened and through the lighted rectangle he could see a corner of a bed, with a glimpse of a tangled mop of blonde hair and one rounded arm. The captain blocked his view. The man was wearing a long white nightshirt and carried his sword in one hand. He looked very, very angry.

The guard explained. The captain called for the records. “Number 8965,” he said, reading slowly and painfully. “Stealing a book. Nothing here about murder.”

“But it was him, sir, I swear it.”

Justin decided that a chance here might, if taken boldly, swing the scales. He said: “Are you suggesting that the judge and the clerics were wrong?”

The guards automatic reaction was to strike him.

The captain made a small gesture. “When I came in, you were looking at those books over there. Why?”

"Well—" Justin spread his fingers. "I was interested in them. Nothing criminal in that, surely?"

The sword point rose and pressed, lightning fast, against his throat. "Less of your insolence! I watched you. You were obviously surprised by something. I want to know what it was."

Justin sought desperately for an answer. "Well—that is—they're big books."

"So they're big books. So what does that mean to you?" The sword pressed a little more. Justin felt sure it would slide right into his neck, and his head would fall off to roll on the floor. Thinking became difficult.

The guard said viciously: "He probably was thinking they'd make a nice big blaze. All these sublots can only dream of burning books—it's a passion with them."

"I am well aware of that," the captain said quietly. The sword did not cease its pressure. "You understand, 8965, I am your lord and master here? If I say you will die, there is nothing on this earth that can stop you dying. Now"—the sword was pricking up blood now—"tell me why you were surprised by those books."

Frenziedly, Justin babbled out words; lies, anything to make this big man take his damn great sword away. "It was nothing, sir, I swear it! They're big books. Big for novels. That's all. No offence was meant, sir."

The silence dripped like congealing candle wax.

Then the captain let out his breath in a great sigh. He took the sword away and stood quite still, staring at Justin.

"Novels," he said.

And only then did Justin realise what he had done.

"We've turned up bigger fish than we expected, eh?" the captain said. His cold eyes did not leave Justin's face. "I think, little man, you have been wasted out there in the labour gangs. We will rectify that."

Events moved swiftly and in a blur after that. Justin was vaguely conscious of rows of lights, of drug injections, of being pummelled and oiled and soaped, of being given a clean red smock, of having his hands thoroughly scrubbed and the filth removed from his fingernails and their shape meticulously cut by a little whirring machine. He fell into a dreamless sleep, still on a straw palliasse, but in a lofty white painted chamber. He was too tired and too stupid from the soporific drugs to give a damn about what happened next.



But that was altered for him when he awoke and was escorted down into the cybmatte.

His mind cringed from anticipated horrors. His escorts wheeled him into a small ante-room. A man walked swiftly in, wearing a red smock with a blazing flash of yellow and purple shaped like a human brain on his breast. "Into that booth, you!" the overseer ordered. A cane cracked down cuttingly on Justin's shoulders. He jumped and walked forward obediently, following as directed. They entered a cubicle and the overseer ordered him to sit. Justin saw a glass screen before his eyes. Measuring about eighteen inches a side, the box to which it was attached extended towards the rear, bent through a right-angle and joined a pipe leading into the oil-smoke-dimmed upper reaches. There was a little writing table above his knees, a greyish slate, much scuffed, a dirty duster and a box of broken chalks. The seat was hard.

The examination-room atmosphere caught in Justin's throat, gagging him.

"Write down fifty-five times seventy-eight," the overseer directed. Justin did as he was bid. The switch cracked across his shoulders. He half-started up, biting back his cry of pain.

"Write down the answer, fool."

Justin, to give him his due, had always been quick at maths, quick and accurate; that had played no little part in helping him through his various courses. Now he wrote down four two nine zero and, with a ridiculous touch of bravado, slashed a chalk line underneath.

The chalk broke under his angry fingers.

The switch sliced down again. The overseer said: "One broken chalk, one disciplinary blow." Then he peered over Justin's shoulder. He harrumphed and hahaad, and then reached over, swiped the figures out with a cloth and said: "Ninety six times thirty five. Quick!"

Justin licked his lips and wrote three three six zero. He winced in anticipation of the cane.

The overseer let out a great sigh. "Magic," he said, firmly. "No previous calculations; but a correct answer." He ducked his head back and Justin guessed he was checking the answers in the question book. He felt too dispirited and the lines of pain on his back stung too much for him to formulate any ideas on this madhouse. He knew, very strongly, that if he could get out of being struck by that abominable cane he would work maths out till the cows came home.

The overseer put his face into a horn-shaped instrument and Justin heard his words flat and distorted: "Run a test down here, will you?" He withdrew his face from what Justin could only surmise was a speaking tube, and said: "When you've worked out the answer, think it at the screen."

Justin looked at the screen. Two sets of figures appeared on it. Automatically, he multiplied them in his mind. Then he stared—and stared, feeling his face grow hot and his hands icy cold and a general feeling of acute illness spreading from his stomach.

The lines of oil-lamp light on the screen forming the figures writhed, contorted, blurred and reformed like dancing snakes into the answer that Justin had just worked out. There was too much of organic movement about the process for it to have an electronic answer. It was another manifestation of the magic these people took for granted.

"You'll do," the overseer said. He was rubbing his hands. They made a dry rustling sound. "Good. We're always understaffed here. How they expect us to cope, I really don't know." He gestured. "All right. Take him through to the cybmatte."

Here it comes, Justin thought greily.

The overseer, the naked human brain embroidered on his chest like some mocking symbol from another land, ordered the guards about. They jumped to obey. The ante-room cleared. Double doors crashed open—Justin had a fleeting thought that there might have been a fanfare of trumpets, so like royalty was the impression he received—and he was marched into whatever fate lay waiting to receive him.

The chamber was vast. His first impression was of size, of dwindling perspectives. Oil lamps flared everywhere. He was led onto the floor of smooth stone. The impression he received was of a gigantic department store. In place of counters were rows of booths, wooden walled, with cramped red-robed backs bent over slates, deep-sunk eyes from lolling heads watching screens whereon figures writhed and formed and vanished, only to reappear with a fresh demand for an answer. In place of the pneumatic tubes were the forests of uprising light tubes, ending at the bottom at the black boxes behind the screens, and at their tops ascending into the dimness of the roof. Up there, Justin guessed, were more slaves, busy feeding down the queries and sorting out the answers.

He had no reliable means of estimating the size of the place; he guessed there must be three thousand men and women, each in a booth, each watching a screen, each working out arithmetical problems. Guards stalked warily between the lines of booths, their canes snaking out to crack across the shoulders of any laggards.

Justin received a cane on his own bent back almost at once. He glared at the screen of his own cubicle, feeling the stool hard under him, frenziedly thought of the answer. Again with amazed disbelief he watched as the figures writhed on the screen, formed into the answer he was thinking. At once they vanished and another set appeared. The cane struck him even as the figures blurred into the answer. The third time he had the answer forming before the last of the question had solidified. The cane did not descend.

"Keep operating, 8965, there is a big problem running. Any mistakes—and . . ." the voice broke off with a chuckle.

A shrill whistle cut like a bacon-slicer through the incessant droning. The screen went black. All heads pivoted.

"Very opportune, 8965," said the overseer with deep satisfaction. "A most impressively timed demonstration."

A small stage glowed into life as oil lamps flared up around it. Three red-clad overseers, their switches flickering, drove a staggering, white-haired, emaciated woman up the steps and onto the boards of the platform. She cowered, whimpering. Justin could hear her sobs clearly, and then he surged upright as the three men began to beat the defenceless woman. The overseer standing by him nodded; the two men with switches beat him back into his seat. He stared, horrified, as the woman was beaten unconscious. She was carried away like a side of bacon.

"No-one makes a mistake without paying for it," one of the overseers shouted. "No-one. To your work."

As one, the screens flared with reflected light and sets of figures flashed down from the pipeline overhead.

Justin went back, sick and hopeless, to answering the problems that appeared in a never-ending succession before him.

This was nightmare. This was—this had to be—a bad dream. He felt the stiffness across his shoulders and knew he wouldn't wake up into any other life than this.

Then he decided that he ought, at the very least, to try to behave like a civilised—and cunning—human being.



Ascertaining that the overseers and guards had gone, he delayed his answer fractionally. He watched, agonised, as the figures hung on the screen—then he let the answer form in his mind and waited as the oil-lamp lit screen faithfully copied the answer. Nothing untoward happened. Through the next few problems, he slowed his rate of delivery down, and found he had time to see more of what was going on around him.

As far as he could see in all directions, booths were occupied by busily working people. Chalk dust flew. They must be working out their answers on the slates, and then thinking the answer. Deliberately, on the next problem, he picked up a piece of chalk—remembered not to break it—and worked out the answer painstakingly. Obliging, the screen waited for him. He breathed out a shaky sigh and wiped his forehead, leaving a chalky streak. He didn't have to work his brains to a frazzle, then.

He was Stephen Justin. Of Earth. An assistant nuclear physicist. He must remember that. One day, he would return to Earth, the Earth he knew, that is. Just how that would be effected he did not at the moment know; but that it would most certainly come to pass he realised he had not the slightest doubt. It was a deep-seated conviction. All right, then. Behave, or try to behave, like a human being.

What was this place? At first sight it resembled nothing so much as a madhouse, where lunatics scabbled frantically at playing schools. The examination room atmosphere was undeniable. Was all this merely an extended form of test, readying these people for further more useful tasks, when the few survivors had pulled through? Justin did not feel confident that that was the answer. He let his mind form the answers to the continually flashing problems, watched them form on the screen, and tried with what brains he had left over to formulate a reason for this place and after that to try to come to grips with his own personal plans for the future.

Time had become a meaningless abstraction in the past few days; literally every facet of his life had been regulated by the omnipotent guards. He expected that the same would be true in this new experience opening out and the red clothed men with switches would take over the role of masters. He cursed them; and wondered when he was going to eat.

The workers in their honeycomb of booths were relieved by section, herded out and into a long dining room where

the usual gritty bread and greasy slops were fed to them in a quiet fury of impatience; then they were herded back and at once set to work on the never ending flow of arithmetic. Justin began to feel tired. The thought gradually took possession of him that perhaps this nightmare never ended; that workers just went on until they made a mistake and were then beaten to death and tossed out onto the rubbish heap.

It could be; however illogical it seemed from his Earthly point of view—it *could* be.

At last, when he was so tired red grits scraped under his eyelids and his mind stumbled around the problems at half speed, the screen went black with merciful finality and he was prodded along to the white roofed dormitory he vaguely remembered. He fell asleep at once.

## VI

Awakening brought breakfast—bread and soup—and the chance of a wash at the communal ablutions. Here men and women jostled for place, splashing water and generally behaving as though school was out. Thinking; Justin felt that perhaps it was.

He was towelling himself off on the coarse sacking which passed for towels, when a voice said: "After you."

"Right." Justin finished wiping, wadded the towel, and threw it across. The girl caught it, smiled and began massaging herself. Justin couldn't help noticing her. Her skin glowed a warm healthy pink. Her fair hair fell in a mist over her face. She tossed it back, smiling, her face frank and seemingly oblivious to circumstances and situation alike.

"That wasn't a bad one," she said.

"I don't understand—"

"Oh, new boy. How long were you operating?"

"Couldn't say. It seemed like days."

She began to put her red smock on over her head. "We get all-out efforts every now and again." Her head popped through the opening, she straightened the smock and tilted her head. "Well, thanks for the towel. Be seeing you."

She began to walk off.

An improbable feeling of panic assailed Justin. He had the odd feeling that he couldn't allow this girl calmly to walk

off like that. And, any way, his conscience said, he needed information. He had to know more about this macabre world of fantasy into which he had been pitchforked.

And it seemed so much more sensible to ask for that information from this girl than from any of the other people chattering and splashing in the ablutions.

He walked after her, fast, and his heart thumped inside him—purely from the exertions he had been going through and the vigour of his drying-off process.

“Uh, I say—that is—” he paused, feeling foolish.

“Yes?” Cool reply, cool uplift of eyebrow, cool gaze from brown eyes—cool? Or wary, frightened?

Justin plunged on, nerving himself. He heard himself saying apologetic, babbling, idiotic words and broken phrases. The girl eyed him with calm disdain. The whole scene suddenly floated into his mind as though he were viewing it in a TV screen—and he could not stop the smile and then the laughter. She frowned. “Do you find me funny?”

It was a slap round the face.

Justin sobered, said swiftly. “Of course not. It’s just that I’ve been through quite a bit recently, and I’m not quite sure what’s been happening. I’d rather hoped you might be able to enlighten me.” He was serious now. “For a start: what is this place? Why are we here? What are we all doing?”

The look of wariness was still shadowing her eyes. “You sound like a literati of a high-sash,” she said. She bit her lip, eyeing him. “You’re trying to tell me you don’t know what the cybmatte is?”

They were walking through the stone corridor into the sleeping chamber. Justin stopped. He said with all the sincerity he could put into voice and face: “I am perfectly serious. I’m a—a stranger here. I don’t even know what a literati of a high-sash is. As for this cybmatte, all I know is that I had a King-size headache afterwards. I have to find out. You probably don’t—”

“There are many things I don’t know. But one thing I do know is that if you don’t know what a high-sash literati is—then you must have a bad case of amnesia.” Her hand flew to her mouth. Then, haltingly, she said: “I’m sorry. Of course—the very fact that you are here in the cybmatte at all should have told me. Whatever it was you did—or



didn't do—aloft, was good cause for them to make you forget your origins. I'm sorry, really I am. "

"There's nothing to be sorry about. All I want to know is what is going on here. After that perhaps we could get around to high-sashes and allied subjects." Justin repressed the thought that occurred to him about allied subjects as soon as he had finished speaking. He decided not to tell this girl what he was allegedly imprisoned for, or even what he had actually done. Neither, he felt, would gain her confidence. "What is your name?" he asked at length.

"Rose."

Rose. The word was not English. Yet it immediately conjured up in Justin's mind a picture of a red rose, dewy fresh, petals still crisp and tight around the bud. It was an eerie sensation.

"I'm Justin. Now—tell me."

"The cybmatte is where most literati and clerical convicts are sent, as you obviously do know. The problems we work out are all linked together; they are dictated by higher echelon workers in the caverns above. The problem on which we are working may take hours, or days." She shivered. "But once we start on a problem, we go on until it is finished."

"No rest?"

"None. As I said, this last one wasn't bad. The longest I've done is sixteen hours. By that time my head felt like a balloon."

"I'll bet," breathed Justin, badly frightened.

Now he understood what Ignatius had been screaming about. And he could also see more to it than even Rose had told him. She apparently, from what she went on to say, accepted this crazy scheme of setting hundreds of people to work working out sums, and going on until a 'problem' had been finished. She knew that the answers were integrated aloft and fed back again until whatever question had been posed by whoever it was ran the whole set-up had finally been worked out. She knew, vaguely, that the questions dealt with the movements of the heavenly bodies, with calculations for weight stresses on bridges, for deciding how much food to order for populations in drought conditions—any big mathematical question to which a quick answer was needed had only to be sent to the Grand Peruser for an answer to be forthcoming as soon as the cybmatte had worked it out.

And the cybmatte was people.

It wasn't all multiplication. There were the division, subtraction, addition bays. There were more complex problems on other levels ; but the integrators' job was to break down an initially complex question into as small and as many components as possible. That way, Rose said, they got the answers quicker.

They had walked into the sleeping bay and now men and women around them were flinging themselves down to rest again until, as Rose told him, the summoning bells were rung. He looked at her. He said, slowly and with utter horror : " Do you know what we are, Rose ? You and me and all these people ? We're a high-sash bunch of cryotrons, that's what."

Summoning bells started up a frenzied clangour, rebounding in clashing waves of sound from the stone, sending a tocsin pounding in Justin's skull.

Cryotrons.

Everyone was springing off palliases, running down the corridors, shouting and pushing not to be last. Rose grabbed Justin's hands.

" Come on ! Last one in gets a flogging on general principles."

" My general principles wouldn't stand the punishment," Justin said, and ran hard, making very sure that he wasn't last one in. Scruples had vanished a long time ago in this fantastic world.

He and Rose settled into adjacent booths. At once the screens came alive and problems began pouring down. They went at it, and every now and then, as though pulled by some invisible string, both their heads would go up simultaneously, and they would exchange a smile. And time passed.

The roster was called and batches of people—of cryotrons, of blasted transistors, of vacuum valves—went off for food. During his first meal break, Justin was preoccupied ; he sat next to Rose and they ate in silence.

Justin didn't like the feeling that he was just a cog in a computer—a piece of human machinery in a cybernetic nightmare. Analogue, digital—or human—he just plain didn't like it. And it was making his head ache.

The second meal break marked the change in tempo. There was a heightened buzz of activity as the hundreds of people

mouthered over their chalked calculations. Reinforcements arrived. More guards with flicking switches arrived. The canes were layed about freely. People who made a mistake were savagely beaten and then flung back to work and the screens did not shut down during the punishment. Justin caught half a dozen strokes for absolutely nothing. He was keeping up with the stream of problems—he was still on a multiplication bay—and he felt confident that he could go on easily for some time yet. But if he had to continue for sixteen hours, or longer, he just didn't know if he had the mental concentration and stamina to last that long.

Rose smiled at him ; a flush of confidence, of hope and of reckless bravado overwhelmed him. He recognised the pathetic foolishness of the feeling ; and at the same time he was strengthened and sustained by it. He tried to be clinical about it ; stimulation, a rush of blood to the head, the freshly aerated blood speeding up the thinking processes, all adding up to a renewed interest in his predicament and a new resolve to get out.

He began to speculate to himself on the culture that could produce cybernetic computers operating on human components, a slave caste of sub-literates, a ruling caste of educated people—swords and nuclear reactors—and only then did the possible solution of that query hit him.

They'd called this the cybmatte ; a name for a computer. Might not, therefore, what they called a nuclear reactor be something entirely other than what Justin knew as a nuclear reactor ? A Rose by any other name, they said ; and Rose was named for a red rose he knew. But sociology ruled out mutually exclusive facts of human developments ; a sword was obsolete the day a man produced a gun. Or, more or less.

He had not seen any evidence of the use of electricity, or of guns ; little whirring machines were operated by a man turning a wheel ; the same power fed the bread into the ovens. Guards wore swords—and men and women did sums to operate a sybernetic computer to give answers to questions posed by Grand Peruser Karsh. Ignatius owed him a score.

Justin felt he too would like to meet him, very much. He'd like to shove the old buzzard into a booth and stand behind him with a whip and let him get on with the sums. As though to bolster that resolve, a cane lashed down on him ; he had been calculating too slowly. Speed it up !



At the next meal break they all swallowed vile-tasting spoonfuls of medicine. Vitamin C and stuff like that, surmised Justin, to prevent the inevitable diseases that would break out from a diet of bread and slops. The other units of the cybmatte were talking uneasily. Rose told Justin that rumours—rife as usual—had it that this problem was the granddaddy of them all. They were to work on until they all dropped. Justin squeezed her hand, and then women guards were whipping them back to work.

This time the problems seemed harder; the working out more painful. Cotton wool fluffed his brains, and he grew terribly afraid of making a mistake.

Hearing a cry, he looked up, eyes squinted in the stinking oil smoke. Rose was being dragged from her stool, being beaten by three women in red robes with naked human brains embroidered on their breasts. The canes fell with clearly audible smacks. Justin half rose from his stool—and a switch, slicing across his shoulders, reminded him just where he was and just what he was. He sank back. Shame and despair and frightening anger flooded his mind.

Rose was flung back to work. Tears cut grooves through the grime on her cheeks. The back of her smock was ripped to tatters, and was no more red than the flesh beneath.

Justin sponged that torn back tenderly at the next meal break, his mind raging. His fingers were quite steady, surprising him that they did not shake with the anger he felt. Rose was talking softly to herself.

“Of course, three times eight are twenty four. Silly of me. Put down twenty one. Foolish, Justin, that’s what I was. Twenty one!”

“Don’t worry about it, Rose. Forget it. We’re going to last this one out.” He flung the bloody sponge into a bucket and reached for her wooden bowl of slops. “Here, drink this. I hear it’s twenty hours, now. We’re all half asleep.”

“It’ll go only so far, Justin. Then we’ll all make too many mistakes. If the problem isn’t finished by that time I don’t know what will happen. I don’t know.”

“But it won’t be nice. All right, you don’t have to tell me.” He drank greedily. “Do you feel strong enough to carry on?”

“I’ll have to, won’t I? There’s no rest in the cybmatte.”

“No rest. If we escaped outside, Rose, do you have friends, that is, could you suggest where we might run?”

She laughed, weakly, mockingly. "Escape? Run? No, Justin, I don't know anyone who would take in slaves from the cybmatte."

"But you know the country. You live here—you could tell me what to do and what not to do? You could!"

The summoning bells had not rung yet. Rose smiled at him, as though placating a small child. "All right, Justin. And so I could guide you around outside. But you can't get outside. No one escapes from the cybmatte."

"I've heard stories about prisons no-one escapes from before," said Justin darkly. This strange glow that suffused him must be a sense of direction, a sense of purpose; it was something that he had never experienced before quite so strongly. It sharpened his wits.

Returning from the ablutions, Justin held Rose's arm and they stood in the corridor for a moment, looking into the dining room. Red robed guards were stalking in, ready to herd the workers out as soon as the bells had rung. "Wait," he said. They stood in silence.

A female guard saw Rose. She raised her switch and beckoned impatiently. Justin, in the shadow of the corridor mouth, leaned back.

"Faint," he whispered.

Rose turned up her eyes and slumped.

The guard scowled and ran across. Justin couldn't stop the first two blows. But he took a miserable satisfaction for their ugly sound as he caught the guard's hair and dragged her into the corridor. A single chopping blow silenced her.

"Change clothes—and quick!"

Rose stripped and changed. Quite oddly, Justin was thankful that her lacerated back was concealed. Rose said that it had ceased to pain; Justin knew from experience that the ointments he had used would heal it smoothly and without infection. The guard was moaning. They dressed her in Rose's smock and then Justin caught her round the waist and told Rose: "Hit us if necessary. Drive us upstairs. This guard will show the way. If she tries to cry out—hit her!"

Under their prodding, the guard led them up worn stone steps to the next floor. She was still dazed, not quite sure what was happening. When they had climbed three more flights, with the stairs curving away above, she came to an understanding of what was going on. She shouted.

Rose hit her.

The guard was quite docile after that.

"Tell me where the exits are, and the guard system," Justin said. "You know what happens. This switch is hungry for your blood." It was melodramatic as well as cruel; but it was the only way—and it worked.

"The main doors—" the guard began.

"Tell me about the small exits."

She told them. Small wicket gates leading out to the mountain side, used by porters and slaves, casually guarded, Justin realised from what she said. They moved upwards. There was a freshness in the air now. To Justin the tang of it came as a benison. He hadn't realised how far underground they had been; or how used he had become to the eternal stink of oil lamps.

The guard said: "You don't seriously imagine you can escape, do you?" She snickered. "With snakes on doors?"

"That's our business," Justin said. "You just show us the way. We may not kill you, then." *Snakes?*

He spat, to clear his mouth of that. But, terrifyingly, he knew he meant it, snakes or no.

## VII

They came out onto a long stone corridor hung with rich tapestries. Justin frowned around. This didn't smack of slave quarters. He opened his mouth to question the guard—and shut it with a snap as two of the old, black helmeted guards saw them. The men walked towards them quickly, frowning. The first said sharply to Rose: "What are you doing here? No cybmatte units allowed here, you know that."

"Special orders," Rose said crisply.

"Catch them!" the woman guard screamed, wriggling free of Justin's grip. "They're units—I'm the guard."

Rose slashed and missed. The guards' swords whickered out. Justin drew a deep breath and took off. He hit the first guard low, doubled him up with a blow in the stomach below the armour, and grappled for the sword.

He heard Rose scream. Frantically, he jerked sideways. The second guard's sword whizzed wickedly by. Then Justin

had pried the weapon from the first man and had sprung to his feet, hefting the sword. It was heavy by comparison with the light practice weapons he was used to ; it seemed to weigh half a ton ; but it was balanced and in the first sudden flurry of strokes, he found strength he hadn't known he possessed. He hadn't—before he'd laboured as a manual worker on the cybmatte.

The guard was a hacker, an edge man. Justin gave him the point in the throat. He glanced around. The female guard lay unconscious and Rose stood panting above her.

"Behind the tapestry," Justin said, breathing raggedly. He'd never killed a man before—apart from the guard who'd gone over the bridge, and that had been an accident. It was not a pleasant sensation. He felt sick.

They bound the guards and the woman with their own clothing and stuffed them behind the arras. Then, dressing himself in the dead man's armour, which fitted as well as it fitted any other guard Justin had seen, they moved cautiously down the corridor. He still didn't know whether they'd done it or not.

Directly ahead lay a small wooden door. "They were guarding this," said Rose. "It might lead out onto the mountain. We must be near that temple thing."

"It seems too easy," Justin said. "Be ready for anything."

"The old witch was counting on cybmatte units not being allowed up here."

"If that's the outside door—"

"If."

Justin took down the bars whilst Rose kept watch. There was no keyhole, no way by which he could look beyond to see what they were stepping into. But it was a door, and doors, usually, led somewhere. Gently, he eased it open.

The sense of failure dragged at his bowels.

They were looking into a huge chamber that, but for the lighting, might have been the one from which they had so painfully escaped. The same exact patterns of booths, the same red smocked men and women busily working, the same hum of hundreds of murmuring voices and the same clouds of chalk dust. Then Justin noticed the absence of the problem-bringing pipes descending from the roof. Looking more closely, he saw the pipes all right—but they were all pointed downwards, running through holes cut in the floor.



"Top echelon," he said. "How interesting."

"What do we do now, Justin?"

"Get out and find another door—or a guard who will tell us."

"Too late." She gestured minutely. "Look."

A fussy little man with a ring of white fluff for hair, a prissy mouth and the naked human brain emblazoned on his robe was half-running towards them. He seemed in a hurry. "Come on, then. Over here."

Justin and Rose exchanged baffled glances. Then, perforce, they obeyed. They walked after the little man.

He was prattling away. "Biggest problem we've ever tackled. Units falling out all over the place. I see they've even had to call in surface guards. Well"—turning on Rose—"You'll put him right. Not too much punishment up here. And keep your sword in its sheath. Nasty things."

Justin was getting the picture now. With the pressure on, surface guards, those with the round black helmets, had had to be called in. On a round-the-clock drive the guards would have to sleep, even if the slaves didn't. They went through the chalk dust and the bustle and the flashing screens to the far end of the chamber.

"Remember," the overseer warned them. "These units are fragile—just make sure they keep going. No bullying. We can't afford to fall down on this problem. Grand Peruser Karsh has been driving everyone like a man possessed."

The overseer waddled off. Watching him go, Justin checked the door by which he left. Wooden, like them all, bound with iron bars, perhaps it led to the freedom they were seeking. Their unexpected arrival through the side door, apparently, had passed off as mere departmental muddle in the current flap. Justin turned back to the row of booths he and Rose had been set to patrol.

A feeling of tense impatience threatened to throttle him. He wanted to get out! They had escaped this far; how long it would be before they were discovered he didn't like to estimate; but it wouldn't be long. He walked slowly along the row of bent backs, idly flicking the whip.

He watched the work going on, and at once saw the difference between the types of problem here and those far below. Messengers were coming and going in constant streams from a large glassed-in area near, carrying slates. The units worked

quickly on the slates, then fed their queries into their screens, waited, and then filed the answers on the appropriate slates. The mixture of modern efficiency and ancient fumble-fingered methods was quite extraordinary.

But he could see that it would work. He gazed towards the glassed-in area. Perhaps Karsh was in there, squatting like a great black spider before the final computations?

When Rose passed him he said softly: "When is the next meal break?"

"I don't know."

"I'm going out that door, find out where it leads. The overseer left it with the chain links loose. If anything happens to me—that is—"

"Don't worry. I'll make out."

With dry lips and a fluttering feeling in his stomach, Justin walked smartly to the door. No one stopped or challenged him. He went outside.

At once vertigo seized him. He clutched the rail that extended before him, eyes fixed giddily on the vast panorama opened out before him. He was high on the mountain side. A railed-in balcony extended down out of sight to his left, trending round with the curve of the mountain's flank. To the right it went up a pair of ornamental steps and finished at a marble door. The door opened. A captain stepped out, his shoulder-knot scarlet in the sun, his face turned back. He was speaking to someone beyond; and Justin guessed that the door led to the temple crowning the mountain.

". . . certainly, Grand Peruser. I will bring my men up at once. If the Grand Peruser allows."

He shut the door on the formula and turned. He saw Justin, gripping the rail. Justin recognised him at once.

So did the captain. His sword whickered out.

As the captain—last seen by Justin in his night shirt hot from the bed of his lady-love—jumped forward with an incredulous oath, Justin reacted. He recalled an old sword-fighter's trick that had appealed to him from the great days of swashbuckling adventure. He whipped his own sword free, tossed it in the air and caught the hilt reversed, swung it up behind his shoulder and lunged forward with all his strength.

Like a great gleaming arrow the sword flew. It plunged deeply into the captain's neck, almost taking his head off. The man staggered a few steps, blood streaming, and then

sank down at Justin's feet. Justin pulled his sword free with a jerk of effort, his mind quite empty, cleaned it on the captain's uniform, picked the man up and tossed him over the parapet. He tinkled the man's sword after him.

Then, walking like an automaton, he returned to the top echelon room of the cybmatte. That had been a near thing.

He went back to Rose.

She gave a visible sigh of relief. "They're changing shifts. I thought I'd be marched off without you."

As the shifts changed Justin and Rose went with the other guards into a walled-off room where they ate good red meat, fresh vegetables and washed it all down with sweet wine. The food gagged him; he thought of the bread and slops the prisoners were bolting down. Then he made his final character change.

From now on, he must think only of Rose and himself.

Only.

Break finished, they were hard at work herding the slaves back to their booths. Immediately all were settled, Justin caught Rose's eye and nodded. Together, they walked to the door. Then Justin halted, frozen, defeated, beaten.

*Snakes.*

The door was shut. The chain links he had thought were metal and which now looped irrevocably around the lock, he saw with dilated eyes were snakes, petrified, their heads, wedge-shaped and hideous, lifted towards him. The glittering eyes regarded him balefully.

"That's what she meant . . ." Rose breathed.

"We can't get out—"

Scuffling sounds of movement drew their attention to the fresh batch of slaves going from the meal rooms to their booths. One red-robed figure sprang into focus. Would it work? Would the magic that this crazy world dabbled in as a matter of course help them now? Justin licked his lips.

"Hey! You, there! C'mere."

Ignatius slouched across, broken-spirited, obedient.

"Ignatius," Justin whispered with fierce desperation. "We're getting out of here. Can you unlock these snake-shut doors?"

Ignatius looked up, eyes dull, face slack.

"The stranger. How did you—" Light crept into those suffused eyes, clearing them of the madness, giving them strength and purpose.

"By Shosun—I believe—" Ignatius glanced around.

"Hurry, man! Can you unlock these doors? You are a student, versed in magical ways. We've no time . . ."

"Hurry, oh, hurry!" whispered Rose, agonised.

The cybmatte pulsed around them. Beneath their feet men and women were working, in level after level right down to the floor of the mountain. Guards prowled, watchful. Already the two guards and the slave must be attracting unwelcome attention. Justin gripped Ignatius' arm.

"Snakes . . ." he said, savagely. "Do something."

Ignatius drew his shredded dignity around him. He looked at the snakes, looped in the locks like padlocked chains. What he said, Justin could translate only as 'Open Sesame.' It wasn't, of course. It was a magical spell that operated merely as a key, turning in the sluggish brains of the snakes. Obediently, they untwined, dropped slack. Ignatius swung the doors open. They went through. The doors closed behind them.

"Ignatius," said Justin with all the force of command he could muster. "We're getting out of here. Believe that."

Ignatius, his face radiant, followed.

"Can you use a sword?"

"Yes."

"We'll find you one, directly."

In a bunch, they walked towards the steps leading down.

Above them, the doorway disappeared from view around the curve. Below, the balcony projecting from the cliff face trended in a gentle curve, swinging round and down, featureless, empty, beckoning. "It must lead onto the plain," said Justin. "Any idea what's below, Ignatius?"

"No. We were never allowed past the doors. I've only been in top echelon a week or so."

Rose said: "We can't go back now."

"We're going on," Justin said firmly.

Rapid footsteps pattered towards them up the slope. They paused. Justin drew his sword. "Get on, you misbegotten cybmatte unit," he ranted, using the over-familiar oaths of the guards. The footsteps did not falter. Round the curve of the balcony three men pushed, guards, their helmets low,



their swords in their sheaths, whips slung over backs. Fresh men going on duty, surmised Justin. He motioned to his group to stand aside—the cliff side.

The leading guard reached them. Without pausing he rushed on. The second gave them an indifferent glance. The third was level with Ignatius. Justin, standing in the centre of his group saw the tightening of skin around the student's eyes. He felt the tremble along the man's limbs.

Ignatius stooped, seized the guard and hurled him over the brink.

His dwindling scream pulled the first man around. The second, turning, was cut down by a single blow from Justin. He withdrew, swung, and the first guard tumbled dead.

"All right, Ignatius. You've got your sword." Justin was bitter. "But next time think before you attack."

Ignatius rapidly donned guard's uniform. The two bodies were toppled over the edge. The air was very clear. They bounded from crag to crag, to smash at last into the branches of the trees so far below.

"I thought they had broken me," Ignatius was saying, over and over. "I thought I was finished."

"We're not. And we're getting out of this. But keep that temper under control, otherwise you'll kill the lot of us." They went on down the slope.

The balcony turned into a narrow track clinging to the sheer rock face. They passed many doors, leading to the different levels of the cybmatte and to guards' quarters, Justin surmised. Gradually, the trees below grew larger. They had swung round a good quarter of the mountain's flank by the time they reached ground level. Here a slide had washed out the trail and the last part of the descent was over loose rolling scree. They slid at last breathless into the trees in a shower of pebbles. The ground beneath was cool and grassy under the trees. Birds twittered in the silence.

"Where now, Justin?" Rose asked.

For answer, he set off into the trees, headed out directly away from the sugar loaf mountain and the cybmatte.

"You two know this country. I don't. We need to get clear away and then find a change of clothes and food and shelter for the night. Where do you suggest?"

"We can't go ahead, we must angle off. We'll run into the labour camps that way round the mountain." Ignatius glanced at the sun. "Early afternoon. Time enough."

Justin realised that this was the side of the mountain he had not before seen. Thought of the labour camps reminded him of Prato. The fat man would have been useful.

And then he saw what he must do—or, rather, what Ignatius must do. If he could.

“Ignatius,” he said, his face and bearing serious, not really believing what he was going to ask. “Bring Prato here as you brought Reader Humbleback to the courtroom.”

“Very well. Where is he?”

“In the labour camps.” Justin described as best he could their layout, around the shoulder of the mountain.

“Not precise enough. I knew exactly where Humbleback was when I summoned him.” Ignatius bent a black brow on Justin. “You are a strange man, stranger. I am thankful to be free and desperately anxious to be gone. Yet you spend time to think of that fat fool—”

“He could be very useful. A man with his knowledge of tricky living and the devious ways of this world . . . You are a student; Rose is a high-sash literati, I guess, with little knowledge of the country ways outside her palace—”

Rose smiled, wearily, rememberingly, pathetically.

“—and so Prato could be our eyes and ears and guide. But you say you cannot summon him. We’re on our own.”

“I need a TV set. Once I know where he is—”

“A TV set!” Justin stared blankly. Then he recalled his suspicions of the way this world was set-up. He said, cautiously “Just what is a TV set to you, Ignatius?”

A stream tinkled ahead. Ignatius said: “Follow me to the stream and I’ll show you.” He took off his helmet.

With the water placid in the upended helmet, he peered down, his face rapt, staring with concentrated effort at the small round pool of liquid. His eyes half closed. He mumbled words, snatches of phrases that Justin heard as bits out of an electronics catalogue. Running together, they formed a spell, an incantation compounded of valves and condensers, transistors, tuning guides, wavelengths and the cathode ray screen—the water in the helmet.

The water soundlessly took on the consistency of milk. Rose shut her eyes and turned away. Justin stared in fascination. He was gripped by the unearthly magic.

The water thickened, grew luminous. Specks and sparks of colour flew within its depths. It cleared.

Like the image in a full-colour tri-di television set, Justin was looking down upon the familiar picture of the outdoor labour camps, upon men and women toiling up a slope carrying water buckets, egged on by whip-flailing guards.

The image mimed away silently. Ignatius crooned softly, words that incorporated the 'tuning condenser,' words that were translated by magic formula to shift the focus of the TV set, that sent the picture dancing over the labour camp. Slaves were feeding, crouching in long lines. Guards stalked soundlessly, their armour a-glitter in the sun.

"There he is," said Justin quietly.

Ignatius looked, his eyes wide and fixed.

Then, with an impatient gesture, he tossed the water from the helmet, sent it in an iridescent waterfall over the grass. He stood up. His face went blank. Radiant power surged into his form.

He raised his arms. Watching him, Justin saw his fingers form into a pattern, hold it, rigid and straining.

Ignatius said, intoning the words: "By the radioactive bones of Shosun, I summon the Potent Prato."

Rose gave a cry and cowered back, covering her eyes.

Justin stared.

A familiar, fruity voice made him swing round. "By holy Shosun, I'm fed with this slop—here—" A long pause.

Prato, his fingers holding a wooden bowl to his lips scowled about him. Then he dropped the bowl and let out a howl of pure terror. He lurched on the grass and fell.

Justin bent and picked him up.

"Come along, fat man. We must get moving. Here, can you use this?" Justin thrust the third dead guard's sword into his grip. The touch of bone quietened Prato.

"Justin! Ignatius! What magic is this—by the occluded intestines of Shosun—I understand!"

The situation was explained. Prato, muttering about the dangers of summoning people off their guard—he might, he pointed out with injured dignity—have been anywhere, told them their best chance lay directly away from the mountain. He pointed into the trees. "About ten miles or so lies the town of Origlamme. Small, quiet. Heavily taxed. I'd keep those uniforms, create an impression."

"Maybe." Justin began walking. "Come on."

They followed him through the forest and out onto a dusty white highway that led straight to Origlamme. Prato recovered

slowly from the shock. His joy at being free was tempered by his dour prophecies for the future. No-one had escaped from the cybmatte, he said, over and over. No-one.

"If we stay too long on this convenient road, we won't escape, either," said Justin sourly. He stopped, wiped his brow. The others stopped with him, blowing, and rubbing their faces. It was a fine warm day. The sky showed a blue, indifferent face, unmarred by a single cloud.

Ignatius pointed to the fields bordering the road.

"If we use those we'll take three times as long."

"Justin's right, student," Prato said heavily. "The cavalry will be riding soon."

To Justin, the four escaping prisoners seemed to be a lonely group out of some far off romance; he could feel no identification with himself. And yet he knew well enough that unless they found a haven before nightfall, they would in all likelihood be picked up and returned to the cybmatte—if they weren't killed out of hand. He and his three companions formed a solitary group, isolated in the landscape.

"We'll go on for another hour," he said harshly. "After that, we take to the fields. And we must find water."

## VIII

An hour later they turned off the road and found a small stream tinkling along between mossy banks. The drink revived them and they set off again, trudging through fields of coarse grass and bright flowers. Cultivation had lapsed here, Justin saw. A number of times they forced their way over ruined fences. Twice they passed a burnt out farmstead.

After they had crossed a cart-track, much overgrown, running at right angles to their path, Prato said, wheezing, his face a mask of perspiration and dust: "Origlamme is one mile ahead, in the valley." He pushed a pudgy finger round his neck. "We can't go in like this. The people would accept you and Ignatius; but not me and the girl."

The problem was settled by surprising the first little group of people who came slowly down the track. When they were turned out, naked, and Rose and Prato were dressed in their work-stained clothes, Justin felt that he had reached the depths of depravity. He found money in the guards' pockets and thrust some at the robbed and naked people.



Later, Ignatius said : " They didn't expect payment ? "

" No. But they're ordinary people. Not literati. "

" Why should you love the sub-lits ? The girl's literati—high-sash. And you're obviously so yourself. I wasn't sure before ; but now I know. "

Justin had discovered that a high-sash literati was merely a member of nobility of this land. It made little difference to him, he thought. His mind was turning with impatience to the plasma fission reactor he had seen looming at the end of the bridge that had brought him into this mess.

If the thing existed in this world as it existed in the comparative sanity of Professor Broster's Project then it must of necessity be a portal between the two worlds. He secured careful directions from them all, pooling their knowledge, until he felt confident that he could find his way back to the Bridge of Mist. He felt no surprise that all three of his companions steadfastly refused to set foot on the bridge. That gave him another idea.

" What else, Ignatius, besides the finger patterns and the ritual words, is necessary to summon a person ? "

" Nothing. Apart from a knowledge of where he is and a complete belief that the person summoned will come. "

" That might be the big problem with me, " Justin said.

He'd seen the magic in operation ; and yet he felt that if he twiddled his fingers all day, shouting out about the radioactive bones of Shosun, he still wouldn't really believe he could bring anyone to him. It wasn't the scientific logic of his own world. And that this world operated on different levels and under different laws he knew ; but believing in them was another matter entirely.

" Can you bring more than one person at a time ? "

" No. Only a few adepts, like myself and other Readers and students, really believe they have the power. Prato, here, believes in the magic all right ; but he doesn't believe that he could do it. "

" That makes sense, " Justin said, and fell to musing.

Hell—if he believed it at all, he'd also believe he could do it, too. That was the way men of his scientific world were built. TV sets from a pool of water and gibberish !

In the little town of Origlamme they found no difficulty in fixing accommodation at the flea-bitten inn. For the sake of security, Ignatius and Justin, dressed as guards, kept aloof

from Rose and Prato, mere sub-lits. They joined forces again the following morning a mile outside the town and pressed on towards the Bridge of Mist. In the bright sunshine, eating bread and cheese under a hedge at midday and washing it down with cooled flasks of wine, Justin began to succumb to the first flicker of hope. They might do it yet.

What his companions would do if they refused to tread the bridge he hadn't yet worked out in detail. But he had ideas on the subject ; ideas that would upset them considerably if they knew. He smiled, and munched his bread and cheese.

Rose saw the coloured veils of mist first. She pointed and they all stopped, looking with fascination at the trembling sheathes and ripples and veils of luminous colour.

"Beautiful," Justin said. "What is it?"

"A waterfall," Ignatius said slowly. "And the sun light reflecting from rocks—"

"Bosh," snapped Prato. "They are the visual image of magic incantations. I know. My brother fell—well—"

"What you believe they are, then they are," said Rose.

"Fine," Justin laughed. "I believe they are the gateway out of this madhouse."

"This is my world, Justin," Rose said quietly.

He felt guilty. "Sure, Rose, I'm sorry. But you must admit that as far as we are concerned it's not a very hospitable place." He paused and looked at her, seeing for the first time the plain lines smoothing from her face, her hair neatly combed, her face radiant in the sun. "Rose," he said hesitantly. "You never told me what you'd done to be sent to the cybmatte." She gave a quick, involuntary gesture. "Forget it—we won't talk about it at all," he added, ashamed now that he'd opened old wounds.

"Don't worry about my feelings ; they were cauterised long ago." They all began to walk slowly forward ; Rose and Justin dropped back. She went on : "I was a high-sash literati. I had foolish, romantic dreams of helping the sublits. Really stupid ; because any deviation from the norm was like trying to fly like a bird. I was fighting too much weight. They soon found out, of course, and my—that is, they tried to convince me of my error. I was young and irrational and wilful. So—at last, they sent me to the cybmatte for the good of my soul." She laughed bitterly. "They cured me all right."

"In my world," Justin said. "Men and women fly into the air in comfort. It is commonplace."

They did not speak for a long time after that, not until they had cautiously approached the bridge and were lying full length on a tussocky ridge, looking down. Vapours swirled a scant fifty yards away and the bridge stretched before them, straight and narrow and deserted.

"I believe the guards have some detection system arranged." Ignatius did not take his eyes away from the bridge as he spoke. "As soon as we step on the bridge, they will know."

"We're guards," Justin said. "Why should they be suspicious?"

"What excuse can you think of which will take two guards and two sublights onto the bridge?"

"I was hoping you'd know that."

Ignatius shook his head. "I'm just a student."

Justin stood up. "Well, we can't stay here. Prato, stick that sword under your clothes again." He drew his own weapon. "We're driving you across for labour at the plasma fission reactor."

"The what?" said Ignatius, startled.

Justin told him. He waited as the student thought.

"No," Ignatius said at last. "This is not a nuclear reactor. They work by burning coal and converting water to steam for power where slaves are not used. They are too dangerous to have near homes."

Justin brushed all this aside. Nuclear reactors, he had felt sure, weren't in this world what they were in the world he knew. The confusion had arisen simply from the terminology—he had had no control over this weird power of understanding these people; but when they spoke of a new and mysterious source of power—the steam engine—his twentieth century mind had translated that into atomic power stations. "And the radio isotope you took?"

"Salts from the water used—what else?"

"It doesn't matter, you wouldn't understand." He began walking again, heading down to the bridge. "Come on. Remember, Ignatius, you're a guardsman, and you, Rose and Prato—you're sublights wanted for labour. Act like it."

"It's useless!" Ignatius said. "The guards won't be fooled for a moment."

Justin's self-control slipped. "How do you know?" he shouted. "You don't know what the guards do or don't do! What else can we do? We can't stay here."

Prato smoothed his much-thinned stomach and said : "We must go on. Justin is right."

Rose took Justin's free hand, pressed it, then turned and walked across the tussocky grass and down towards the bridge. Prato followed. Justin stared at Ignatius.

"Well?"

Ignatius drew his whip from the thongs on his back, flicked it, and smiled. "You're right, Justin. We're just two guards driving a couple of sublots. Come on, let's go."

Justin felt the tingle through his sandals the moment they stepped onto the bridge. He had missed it before, wearing his tougher civilised shoes. At the same time he heard the patter of running feet and heard the challenge. A vibration detection system, unnecessary during the day, infallible by night. He cracked his whip loudly and swore at the two in front.

Four guardsmen appeared ahead. One was a captain ; his red shoulder knot gleamed in the sun. He stepped forward.

"What do you desire here?"

"Workers, captain," Justin said. "Urgently needed."

The captain looked undecided. Justin still kept walking. His whip cracked a scant inch from Patro's back and the fat man jumped. "Get moving. We're late as it is."

"I've no orders," the captain said at last. "You'd better wait here until I check with the teleport chief."

"But we must get there—" Justin started to protest.

"Wait!" The captain made it an angry order, and as he spoke Rose disappeared.

Where she had stood the air rushed in with a sharp crack and drove up little whorls of white dust in the sun.

Ignatius said : "They've summoned her—"

And Justin felt a cold wet blanket wrap itself round his body and then he was standing blinking in oil-lamp lit gloom.

Rose was shivering beside him. Directly to his front, leaning forward with knuckles pressing down on a smoke-blackened and intricately carved table, a lean yellow-faced man wearing a black robe with hood thrown back was staring at him with eyes that caught the lamp glow and glittered with moisture. Cruel eyes, they were, snake-like and merciless.

On the table rested a shallow bowl half filled with water. Justin looked at it once. Then he took his gaze from the TV set and stared around the room, at the tapestry hangings,



the immobile guards, the tall marble columns outside, between which was visible the blueness of the sky. He knew at once that he was in the temple that had crowned the sugar loaf mountain above the cybmatte. The place reeked of unnameable evils.

Justin tried to throw off his supernatural fears ; hell ! he was a civilised scientist of twentieth century Earth, wasn't he ? There was nothing in these people's magic that couldn't be explained by parapsychology, was there ?

*Was there ?*

"So you are Justin," the hawk-faced man said, his yellow cheeks twitching with nervous tic. "I am Grand Peruser Karsh." His voice rustled like a crow's. "You did not think to escape me, did you ?"

Justin nerved himself. This man's power was greater than any other single man's in this dimension ; he knew that instinctively. Despite that, Justin felt a flare of hope—so far, neither Ignatius nor Prato had been summoned. That must mean that the TV set had not picked them up—Rose put out her hand to Justin in an automatic gesture of succour, her fingers brushed his arm.

Then she disappeared.

Karsh frowned. He straightened up. The guards around the wall sighed in credulous awe. The Grand Peruser's jet bar of eyebrow drew down, he began to speak—and Justin was standing on the bridge again, the rainbow of colour at his back, blinking his eyes in the sun, watching the guards fleeing from Prato's enraged sword.

"Good man, Ignatius !" he shouted. "Run for the main building !"

Ignatius was well ahead, running with Prato. They despatched the guards, as Rose caught them and Justin followed her, and so they all ran helter-skelter for the reactor.

"I brought you back," Ignatius panted. "But this cannot go on long. I have not the power for a sustained contest."

More guards boiled from the building, their forms black gesticulating scarecrows against the sun-warmed red brick. Prato and Ignatius and Justin engaged. The swords rang loud and clear. Birds flew out in frightened coveys from the eaves, their hoarse cries an eerie accompaniment to the swordplay and the shouts and the screams of the dying.

Prato ran his man through. Ignatius took another off his back and Justin, in his turn, cut down a fresh attacker. The bright blades were red. Sweat dripped from Justin's face. His feet gripped the stone of the bridge. How long this could go on, he did not know—and then, miraculously, there were but four guards left.

Justin spared time for a reassuring glance at Rose, standing to their rear. She was not there.

"Rose!" he shouted. "Karsh has summoned—"

He was shouting the words in the oil-lamp lit room, with the guards holding Rose, and with Karsh standing in blazing fury behind his table, lifting his head from the TV set. With demoniac anger Justin sliced his sword at the Grand Peruser. He missed. The TV set, chopped cleanly in two, clattered away, spilling water in black drops.

"Hold him!" ordered Karsh in frenzy.

Even as guards sprang to obey, Rose flickered and vanished. The first guard fell as Justin cut him down. And then the blessed interval of blank clamminess supervened.

But in the fraction of time before Ignatius summoned him back to the Bridge of Mists, he heard Grand Peruser Karsh shouting. "I know who is summoning you back! But you cannot evade—"

And then Justin was on the bridge again, the sun warm on his back, running with the others into the arched gateway, jumping over the bodies of guards where they lay, the dark blood spreading in slow rivulets around them.

The foot of the bridge was cobbled. It led under the archway and up to the ponderous double doors of the inner courtyard. Useless to shut the gates under the archway, useless to lower the portcullis; these merely material defences could not stop the eerie power that could summon a man across immense distances, snatch him from his friends and deposit him in a breath into the hands of his enemies.

Ignatius was panting with effort. He gestured to the reactor building; the building that on this world was the teleport. "We cannot escape the Grand Peruser; not even here, at the source of all power—"

How much longer this summons and counter-summons could go on Justin dared not think. It could end only in victory for Karsh. There had to be some way to break the deadlock. They could go on skipping from teleport to temple

all day until Ignatius collapsed. Again Justin was called, magicked into the dim temple room and again, before he could react, was on the bridge once more.

Ignatius was deathly pale. "I cannot keep this up much longer, Justin. The teleport ahead is the central source of the power that enables us to summon people. Were it not so close, I would have been exhausted after three summonings. I have done more—but I cannot last much longer—"

He disappeared.

Rose disappeared.

Prato disappeared.

In his inner ear, Justin seemed to hear a mocking laughter, the rustling voice of Grand Peruser Karsh derisively preparing to summon the last of the foolhardy four who had sought to escape.

So what was the plasma fission reactor in the old world was the teleport central here? When you summoned a man the power flowed from this building shrouded in mists?

That meant that Justin could save himself by hurling himself into the building and smashing everything in sight. But that would mean that he wouldn't get his friends back—and it would mean he wouldn't be able to return to the world he had left so long ago. So that left only one thing to do.

He raised his arms, formed his fingers into the pattern, and said: "By the radioactive bones of Shosun I summon Ignatius here."

It felt as though he had just run eight miles non-stop. He was suddenly breathless, faint, and all his limbs trembled. A great respect for Ignatius swept over him.

But — Ignatius appeared!

Justin shouted: "Run for the teleport, inside! We must get nearer." Justin's arms were still raised. He summoned Rose. Then, feeling as though his head was a balloon about to take off for the stratosphere, he summoned Prato. The fat man wheezed and chuckled and swished his sword.

"I took care of two of them, during my short stay," he said jovially.

They all ran like panicked sheep into the building. Justin stared quickly about. The same! Almost, nearly the same. Allowing this dimension's lack of electricity, and counting in the use of mental force, the set-up was to all outward purposes, the same. A long, groaning wail took his attention.

And there, of course, was the difference.

Back on Earth, in Professor Broster's Project, the power surged from dynamos, electrical power thrummed through the power banks. Here, it was different.

Men and women, naked, filthy, chained in rows, sat each glaring with slack despondency upwards towards a shining, undulating, multi-coloured circle of light.

The light pulsed from a giant jewel, lambent, vivid, coruscating with fire and flashing with lightning strokes.

"The jewel!" breathed Ignatius, awed. He stopped with such suddenness that Justin collided with him.

"What is it?" he said, his voice pitched low.

"The jewel of power, the jewel left by Shosun when he returned to his aerial kingdom."

"What does it do?"

"It collects the mental force of all these slaves. It stores that force against the time when anyone calls upon the radioactive bones of—" Ignatius swallowed. He was beginning to realise just what this mad stranger had got him into. "It is the heart of the power," he said at last. "From it all the strength flows to teleport men when they are summoned."

"And," Justin said practically, "it's going to be used again pretty soon. Karsh will soon spot us in here on a new TV and call us back." He put a hand tiredly to his head, looking at the mass of slaves who were too dulled from fatigue even to bother to raise their heads to look at him. What in blazes could he *do*?

"Are there any more guards, do you think?" demanded Prato, whirling his sword and watching with clinical interest the bright drops fly.

"Oh, Justin—" Rose held his arm, tightly.

"There are few, I understand." Ignatius wiped his forehead with one dusty forearm. "Superstition holds all in thrall. No one comes here except on the most urgent business."

"That's us, then," said Justin with conviction.

How long would it be before Karsh found them again?

"Well, Justin," said Prato with his wheezing laugh. "What do we do now?"

Ever since he could remember, Justin thought dully, these people had been asking him what they should do next. They had come to rely on him implicitly. Responsibility was a new and strange experience for him; yet he had so far shouldered it unthinkingly. Now it seemed that they had reached the



end of the road. There was no going forward—and they could not go back.

He held his head with his hands, the naked sword hanging from its thong, wet against his arm, and tried to think. If this nightmarish place had operated by electricity they could have shut off the power. Shut off the power!

He started up, and then slumped, recognising what he proposed to do.

He couldn't order all these slaves to be killed!

Then he had it. He shouted at Ignatius.

"Order the slaves to shut their eyes, order them to stop thinking, order them to shut off their mental power flow! You know what must be done! We'll take away the power from Karsh! Hurry!"

It was done with not a moment to lose. He felt clammy bonds creeping around him and the world blurred; then he was standing, panting, in the reactor building, free from that insistent power.

"Just in time," he said, smiling weakly. "A close shave."

"But—" said Prato, walking importantly among the slaves and making very sure that they did not think at the great glowing jewel. "But, what now?"

Justin bit back the swift retort. Hell—he was in charge; what they did was up to him alone.

"Listen, friends," he said, thinking as he spoke. "Karsh will send guards here. Ignatius, how long?"

"Cavalry can gallop here in half a day or less. We came a long way round, and on foot."

There must be an answer. He recognised the deep compulsion that had driven him here, the inner confidence that had forced him against odds to bring himself and his friends to this place; now he was temporarily confused, unable to follow through the thread of logic. The answer was in his mind, that he knew; the problem was to entice it out.

"Who knows what is possible in this madhouse," he said, more to himself than anyone. He was feeling sick and faint and utterly frightened of what lay ahead. Here was the power house of magic, the central source of the energy of teleportation. He didn't seem to be having the sense of awe he dimly realised must be any man's normal reactions here.

He looked up towards the projecting room that corresponded to the control room in Professor Broster's Project,

the room where he and Tony Marten had allowed a dummy run to fling them into this parallel dimension. Suppose he just went through the motions up there, repeated what he had done then even though no electricity flowed? With the slaves all thinking at the great jewel? Even as he toyed with the idea he remembered Tony Marten.

Justin couldn't leave this world and let Marten stay behind. Assuming, of course, that they ever did leave.

What to do? The question hammered at his mind.

"Prato! Ignatius! Set the slaves to thinking at the jewel." He found a slave's bowl and filled it with water from a pitcher. "Ignatius, it takes time, you say for the power to build in the jewel. I want you to find a man in the TV set." Rapidly, he outlined what he had known of Marten, and that he had last been seen on the Bridge of Mists.

"It will be difficult," Ignatius said. He created the TV set, and began to focus it. Riddled with anxiety, Justin watched.

He turned sharply to Prato. "Slow down, Prato. This will take longer than you need to get the jewel going."

"The Potent Prato controlling supreme power," said the fat man—fat no longer. "By Shosun, it's a good feeling."

## IX

The search went on. Marten was elusive. They hunted through the jails, the dungeons, the slave camps. Justin doubted if he would recognise the man; but Ignatius said confidently that from what Justin had said he would be easily recognised by some—aura?—peculiar to him alone. At last, at long last, Ignatius steadied the TV. Justin was standing at the door, looking out and along the bridge. Any minute, now, soldiers would come galloping across. Tension corded his throat muscles.

"I will call your friend, Justin," said Ignatius.

He lifted his arms, formed the pattern, intoned the magical words. Magic on this world, science on another. It was all one; merely the name given to a workable method of having one's wishes answered.

A bundle of rags appeared on the clean tiling.

The smell of putrefaction wafted to them. A hoarse, croaking voice, babbling the same thing, over and over; "Mercy. Mercy. Mercy." Justin stared, appalled.

Out of all the bedlam and fury of the past hours, the sword-fighting, the magical-scientific teleportation, the throat-constricting fear and the blood-lust, nothing, none of them, affected Justin as did this degraded version of Tony Marten suppurating on the floor. It seemed a symbol typical of this world. His determination to find a means of escape hardened into near fanaticism.

"Tony!" he said. Then, again: "Tony!"

The bundle of filthy rags stirred. Two rheumy eyes gleamed up at them from beneath a ragged mat of knotted hair. Claw-like hands, deeply grimed, crept from the main bundle and brushed the hair away.

Prato said: "Just a sublit worker, Justin. And, by Shosun, a reject from the refuse dump, by the look of him."

"He comes with us, Prato." The words died, drowned in the faint but menacingly growing clink and jingle of bridle and harness and the rapid clip-clop of many hooves.

"Karsh is coming in person," said Ignatius, cleaning his sword meticulously. "He is no doubt still unaware that the teleport power has been resumed. But when he does . . ."

Prato sat on a stone spur. "It was a good fight. A good fight. A fight I can find it in me to enjoy, by Shosun. But I swear if I am summoned again I'll catch my death of cold. That dank shroud—" He shivered, pantomiming.

Rose laughed.

That laugh spurred Justin. It shamed him. It wrenched his guilt in him, twisting his responsibility like a sword in an open wound.

He swung on Ignatius. "This power, this mental force generated by the slaves here—is this all? Nothing else?"

Ignatius went on wiping his sword methodically. "The power is supplemented from a place unknown to any man. This machine, I was instructed during my student days, merely catches and channels that energy, and superimposes the drive of mental effort upon it. When a man calls on the magic of summoning, he draws upon this central well of power from outside this world, harmonises it with the mental force."

"But the operators? The teleport chief?"

"The machine operates alone. They have probably fled. The living quarters are about, rather naturally, I don't know exactly where. Or where the operators have gone."

The sharpness of the student's tone told Justin that his nerve was going. He knew more about this place than any

of them ; yet he was relying on Justin to bring them safely out of their present danger. Through safely—to where ?

Justin wanted to return to his own world. But did the others ?

They'd damn well come with him, and find out if they liked it later.

He glanced up again to the control room. Prato stood up and Ignatius finally stopped wiping his sword. They faced the doorway, flexing their tired arms, rolling their shoulder muscles, waiting for the conflict that could end in only one way.

If power was drawn from another dimension here to channel the mental force, then that power would manifest itself here as magic.

So the reverse might hold true, too.

Magic *here* might be transformed into rational and natural processes *there*.

Justin did not relish the idea of transmitting himself into the core of a plasma fission reactor. But then, he hadn't left the core, had he ! He'd been in the control room.

"Up here, quick ! Prato, Ignatius, bring that man." He pointed to Marten. "And hurry."

They ran up the ladder. As they burst into the control room swordsmen flared out into the chamber, their feet hard and authoritative on the stone. A shout echoed. Justin slammed the door. Inside he saw at a glance the superficial resemblance to the Project's control room ended at the door. He recognised hanging rows of black gowns and cowls worn by Readers and students. This was the robing room for those going on duty. Ignatius fingered a black cloak ; he was remembering too, guessed Justin. Ignatius rolled up the black cloak and thrust it under his arm.

"All right," Justin said, marshalling his thoughts. "There is nothing but death for any of you in this world now. I'm trying to get back to my own world—I'll explain later, if there is a later when we are alive and together. Now—get set for a summoning."

Rose caught his arm. "I believe he's calling me ! I can feel—"

Desperately, Justin thrashed his group into a compact knot, arms linked. Feet clattered on the ladder. Armour clanged like gongs. Marten, slumped, was held up between Ignatius



and Prato. Rose was between Prato and Justin. Justin was conscious of the thrum of blood in his temples. If Karsh, realising the telepower had been resumed, was calling them, the resultant complications might cancel out all Justin's hopes.

Awkwardly, Rose's arm through his, he lifted his hands and formed the patterns with his fingers and concentrated all his will power on the image of this room—as it was in his own world, back in Professor Broster's Project.

He began to speak, quickly, taking them all in with his words. The door crashed open and swordsmen, capes flaring, yelled and made a rush. Prato grunted, freeing his sword arm. Justin was gabbling it out.

"By the radioactive bones of Shosun, I *transmit* us all to Professor Broster's Project."

He was staggering, punch-drunk, every muscle screaming with strain, his mind a monstrous fungoid growth swelling his brain to bursting point. He was plunged into blackness. He experienced a vertiginous sense of falling, of spinning head over heels down into a yawning, waiting darkness that would never end this side of the grave.

His mind screamed that he had been a fool to think he could beat the magic powers of a world that was not his.

Fear mounted like bile into his throat. He could not feel Rose's arm through his. Agonisedly, he waited.

The darkness cleared. The clammy blanket left his limbs. He staggered. Rose's arm was firm and comforting against his. His eyes took in the scene before him.

Prato was whirling into action, his sword swinging, hurling himself against the five swordsmen who had plunged into the control room. Ignatius, with a shout, followed.

So he had failed! They had not left this world of nightmare death and headstrong adventure, where the sword was the last arbiter. With a sigh of defeat, Justin threw himself at the guards, his sword whirling a dance of death before him. Blood spurted. Men screamed.

And, agilely evading a murderous swing at his head, Justin thrust in turn, withdrew, and looked up to stare into the horrified, incredulous face of Professor Broster.

"We made it!" Justin shouted with awful joy. He had not believed—and it had been true! He whirled, seeking Rose. She was struggling in the grip of a guardsman, his hairy arms wrapping her, heading for the ladder beyond the open door

So the guardsmen had not realised that they had been transported through the dimensions into another world. Justin found time to laugh, before leaping forward.

Another swordsman met him breast to breast, armour bright with gilding, shoulder knot red, sword a flicker of cunning death. Somewhere a girl was screaming. Professor Broster, thin white hair and pale face and fluttering hands, sprawled away from this ring of death that had materialised from nowhere—nowhere!—in his control room.

The captain was quick and deadly. Justin met him edge to edge, parried, blocked a hacking back-edge, then straightened his arm and thrust—and felt a flicker of dampness paw his skin—and thrust that much harder, and withdrew, dancing lightly on the balls of his feet. He looked about. Dismay gripped him. He was back in the other world! Grand Peruser Karsh had played a last trump.

The place was packed tight with guards. This must be the end. They would rush; long before he could repeat the magic formula that was scientific teleportation. But they were hanging back, fidgeting, uneasy, their faces working.

And then Justin saw what had been on the point of his sword. He recognised who had received that deadly thrust that had been aimed at the captain on Earth.

Grand Peruser Karsh, both hands to his belly and the red blood oozing between his fingers, folded in half, coughing, and slid to the floor.

Justin saw what he must do. Forming his fingers into the pattern, about to transmit himself, he paused, and then said: "By the radioactive bones of Shosun . . ."

He swallowed. Here he was marooned in this world, able to return to his own only through this magic power. He wanted to bring the guards back here from Broster's control room, to clear them from Earth, to save the lives of his friends there. But if he did that, would he have enough power, enough strength, left to transmit himself?

He went on, speaking strongly. ". . . I summon the guards back from Earth here."

They arrived, bloody, fighting, breathless. Before there was time for the soldiers to react, Justin was saying his piece again. He felt as though he had been run over by a steam roller. He mustn't fail! He had to get back—Rose was waiting.

The dank darkness took him—reluctantly. Minutes later he was standing, swaying, holding Rose and staring blearily at Professor Broster.

In the plate glass windows looking onto the plasma fission reactor, he caught a reflection of himself.

Big, burly, bearded. Clad in blood-bedabbled armour, wearing a plumed helmet that gave a stern, chiselled, unforgiving air of command to his face. A beautiful girl, hair in dishevelled glory covering her body where her clothing had been ripped away, clinging to his left arm. And in his right hand a naked sword, bright with blood to the hilt.

Stephen Justin?

Incredible.

Then the truth of the situation hit him. They'd done it! By the radioactive bones of Shosun, they'd done it!

He laughed deep in his chest. He repeated that aloud. "By the holy spirit of God, we've done it!" he said.

He was speaking English. The words meant the same—but, eerily, they didn't sound the same. He'd understand that, no doubt, later on, when he'd settled down and married Rose and had leisure time to think about this adventure. Right now he had to reassure Broster and convince the poor man that he needn't call out the police, the fire brigade and the local county regiment.

A pale, pimply, flat-chested girl with ghastly yellow hair stared at them, one hand pawing her face. Broster was slowly backing up, his face twitching. The yellow-haired girl swayed. Justin laughed richly.

"Professor Broster," he boomed. "I'm Stephen Justin, your assistant nuclear physicist. And that—" he pointed at the mewling bundle of stinking rags. "That is Tony Marten."

Without a sound Mavis fainted.

Rose was holding him very tightly, looking at him with eyes that were radiant with joy. Ignatius began to wipe his sword methodically, and strolled over to examine the banks of dials and meters and flashing lights in the control room. Prato was whirling his sword about casually, and eyeing the limp form of Mavis on the floor.

And Rose said: "You're home, Justin."

And Justin said: "No, Rose—we're home."

*Theodore Sturgeon has long been noted for the brilliance of his writings—his novels More Than Human and The Dreaming Jewels are milestones of modern fantasy literature—but here in this brand-new short story we feel he has surpassed himself. It was written specially for a new collection of weird stories edited by Groff Conklin and recently published by Ballantine Books in New York under the title of*

# THE GRAVEYARD READER

BY THEODORE STURGEON

---

The stone was included in the price of the plot ; I hadn't known. I hadn't wanted a stone because stones have to say something, and what can you say in a case like this? but unwittingly I'd bought the thing and because I had, the man had put it up—what else? I had anger enough to scatter around heart-deep, but, reasonably, not a flake for the men who had put up the stone.

It was a right and proper stone, I supposed, if one must have one of the things at all : bigger than many of the cheating, bargain sort of stones that stood nearby, and tastefully smaller than the hulking ostentatious ones. *Here lies my wife between poverty and vulgarity.* Now there you go. Have a single elevating thought about that woman and it comes out sounding like that. Soils everything she touches.

The stone called me a liar for that. It was of a whitish granite that would weather whiter still. It had edges of that crinkly texture like matted hair that nothing would stick to because nothing could possibly want to, and a glassy face that nothing would stick to if it wanted nothing else. Whited sepulchre, that's what the hell. The stone is its own epitaph, because look : it's white forever, white and clean, and it has no words—which is to say, nothing. Nothing, and clean, ergo, *Here lies nothing clean.*

What I always say is, there's a way to say anything in the world if you can only think of the way to say it, and I had. I liked this epitaph just fine. There would be no words on this stone, and it had its epitaph.

Laughing out loud is bad form in a graveyard, and stepping down hard on a man's instep is bad form anywhere. This was the moment when, backing off for some perspective on this my masterpiece, I did both these things. The man, apparently, had been standing behind me watching. I whirled and looked him up and down, hoping sincerely that he was offended. There are times in a man's life when he wouldn't want even his friends to like him, and such a time is no time to pay court to the esteem of a stranger.

He was offended. All I got out of him (just then) was a pleasant smile. He had a sort of anybody's face, the like of which you might encounter anywhere, which is to say he had the kind of face you wouldn't be surprised to see visiting a cemetery. I'll say this for him : he was harmonious ; his voice and clothing exactly suited his face, and though he wasn't an old man, the things he said weren't hard to figure, coming from a man like that. You could tell he was experienced.

Neither of us said anything right away when I bumped him. He sort of put his hands on my shoulders for a second either to hold one of us up or to keep the other from falling, which gave the gesture a full fifty per cent chance of being selfish, and I am not about to give away a thank-you in the face of those odds. As for an excuse-me, I didn't want to be excused, I wanted to be blamed. So I glared at first, while he smiled, and after those things got used up there was nothing for it but to stand where we were, side by side, looking at my wife's grave because that was straight ahead and we couldn't just go on looking at each other. It was while we were doing this that he said, " Mind if I read it ?"



I looked at him. Even if this had been the perfect time and place for joking, a face that looked the way his face looked contained no jests. I looked from him to the bland, uncommunicative sheet of stone and the raw mound with its neat planes still unslumped by wind or water, and I looked back at him. It occurred to me then that maybe his eyes weren't so good, and he honestly didn't know there was nothing on the stone. "Yes," I said as offensively as I could, "I mind."

He put up his hands placatingly, and said in that same good-natured way, "All right, all *right*! I won't." And he gave me a sort of friendly half-wave and started off.

I looked at the grave and at his retreating back and "Hey!" I called before I realized I wanted to.

He came back, smiling. "Yes?"

I felt robbed, that's why I had called him back. I'd realized I wanted to see his face when he got close enough to squint at that unmarked stone. I said, "What I mean is, I'd mind if anyone read anything off that. It would give me the creeps."

He didn't even glance toward the grave, but said patiently, "It's all right. I promised you I wouldn't."

I said, "Oh for God's sake," disgustedly, and with an angry motion beckoned him to follow me. I had that oafish feeling you get when you tell a joke and somebody doesn't get it, so instead of letting the matter drop you lay your ears back and start explaining, knowing perfectly well that when you finally get the point across it isn't going to be funny, either to your victim or to yourself. I ranged up on one side of the grave and he came up and crossed over and stood at the other side, not four feet away from the headstone. He was looking right at it, but didn't say anything, so I barked, "Well?"

"Well," he asked politely, "what?"

The oafish feeling intensified. "Don't you find the language of that epitaph a little on the terse side?" I said sarcastically.

He glanced at it. "There's never very much on the stone," he said, and added, as if to himself, "while it's new."

"New or old," I said, and I guess I showed something of the anger I felt, "the way it is is the way it stays. Anything that gets written on that rock, is not going to be written by me."

"Naturally not," he said.

To make it quite clear, I said, "Or by anyone I hire."

"Well," he said comfortingly, "don't worry. I won't read it, now or later."

"You can say that again," I growled. I was finally coming to a certainty about this grave. "The less said about this whole thing, including her *and* her slab, the better. That was her strong point anyway; keeping her mouth shut. At long last, anything she's hiding, she can keep. I don't want to hear it."

"Then you won't," he said peacefully, "and neither will I, because I've promised." After a sort of pause, he added, "I think I ought to warn you, though, that somebody else might come along and read it, not knowing of your objections."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not the only one in the world who can read graves."

"I told you—I'm not putting any inscription on. Not a monogram. Not so much as *Hers*, or even—hey, this would be cute: *Her lies*. Not that she was really ever a liar. She just wouldn't *say*."

"The inscriptions never say very much by themselves," he said in his patient voice, "taken out of context."

"What do you mean, context?"

"I don't think you quite understood me. I didn't say I read gravestones. I said I read graves."

I looked blankly at that tidy, tamped-down mound and the virgin stone, and back at the shovel-patted yellow earth turning grainy in the late warm sunlight, and a more uncommunicative arrangement I had never laid eyes on. It conveyed nothing about her and, for that matter, nothing about anyone else. Me, for instance. No flowers.

"Not this one, you can't," I said finally.

"I wouldn't."

"That promise of yours," I said with a certain amount of smug enmity, "comes in pretty handy, doesn't it? I think I see what you're driving at, and I don't think it's any too funny. You've spent a lot of time ghouling around places like this until you can tell to a dime what the planting cost, how much the survivors give a damn, if any, how long the box has been buried, and how good a job the crew did on the detail. But any time there's a little more than readily meets the eye, like a guy who says he won't have an inscription after paying for a stone you don't have to risk a wrong guess. You just make a gentlemanly promise, casual-like." I snorted through my nostrils.

He still wouldn't let me annoy him. He simply explained where I was wrong. He said, "It isn't like that at all. There's nothing to deduce, or to guess at. It's all there," he said, nodding at but not looking at the grave, "to be read. I'll admit that it's a little harder to do on a very new grave; you might say that it's all in very fine print and a little hard to see unless you read well. But in time it all comes clear—very clear. As to the promise, it's very obvious that you wouldn't want a stranger like myself to know everything about her."

"Everything?" I laughed bitterly. "Nobody knows everything about *her*,"

"Well, it's all there."

"You know what's happened to me," I said a little too loudly and a little too fast, "I'm a little bit out of my head from all that's happened the last week or so, which makes me stand here listening to you as if you made sense."

He didn't say anything.

"By God," I mumbled, not talking to him or to anyone special at the moment, "it wasn't too long ago I'd given anything you like to know some things about that woman. Only since I made up my mind I don't want to know, I feel much better," I said, feeling miserable. "You know what she did, she wasn't home when I got there that night, we'd had a little sort of fight the morning before, and that night she was just gone. No note and she didn't pack anything or take anything but that one green tweed suit and that stupid hat she used to wear with it. If she had any money it wasn't much. Then, nothing for three whole days and nights, until that phone call." My hands got all knotted up and then seemed to get too heavy, pulling my shoulders into a slump. I sat down on the edge of an iron-pipe railing at the edge of the next grave and let the heavy hands dangle down between my thighs. I hung my head down so I could watch them while I talked. Watching them didn't tell me anything. "Phone call from the police who found her driver's licence in her handbag, the one that matched that stupid hat."

I raised my head and looked across the grave at the man. I couldn't see him too clearly until I hit myself across the eyes with my sleeve. The cuff buttons had got themselves turned around, and it hurt. "Eight hundred miles from home with some guy in a sports car, and all she had on was one of those fancified bathrobes, you know, hostess gown, a good one, I

never saw it before. Don't know where the green suit got to or the stupid hat either. Bag was in the car. Car was in an oak tree. No kidding. Upside down in an oak tree fifteen feet off the ground. The police said he had to be going a hundred and twenty to hit as hard as that. I never heard of him before. I don't know how she got there. I don't know why. Well," I said after I thought about it for a minute, "I guess I do know more or less why, but not *exactly* why; not exactly what was in her mind when she did whatever it was she did to get herself into that. I never knew exactly what was in her mind. I could never get her to say. She would—"

I guess at that point I stopped talking out loud, because it all turned into a series of swift pictures, one after the other, inside my head, too fast for words, and too detailed. *What's the matter?* I'd be saying, and her, kissing my hands, looking up at me with tears in her eyes: *Can't you see?* And again: me yelling at her, *Well if what I do makes you unhappy, why don't you tell me what you want? Go ahead, write the script, I'll play it.* And the way she'd turn her back when I talked like that, and I'd hear her voice softly: *If you'd only—and I just—and* then she'd stall, inarticulate, shake her head. She never talked enough. She never *said* the things that . . . that . . . World of feeling, spectrum of sensitivity, and no words, no dammit dammit words. Picture of her smiling, looking off, out, a little up: I say *What are you so happy about?* *Oh*, she says, coming back into the world, *Oh . . .* and whispers my name four times, smiling. Now what is that—communication?

"I got so there was nothing in the world for me, sleeping or waking or working or mixing a drink," I said aloud to the man, "but *Why won't she tell me?* And right to the end, she did that to me. Wondering why she does this or that, why she wears one particular kind of look instead of another, maybe, after all, these things don't matter. But look how she winds up, dead in that new housecoat I didn't buy for her, eight hundred miles from home with a guy I don't know; all in the world I have now is *why? why?* and the idea that she wound it up in the one way where I'd never find out. I mean," I added as soberly as I could, because I was unaccountably out of breath, just from talking to a man, imagine? "I mean, not that I want to find out. Because I don't give a damn any more."

"Well, that's good then," he said, "because you'll save yourself a lot of trouble."

“What trouble?”

“Learning to read graves.”

I got enormously tired of this conversation suddenly. “Now what good would it do me to learn a thing like that?”

“None,” he said in that pleasant way of his. “You have just finished saying that you don’t want to know anything about her, any more.”

“It finally sinks in,” I said sarcastically, “that what you’re trying to tell me is that a person who can read graves can stand in front of one and read it like a book.”

“A biography.” He nodded.

“And get out of it everything that person ever did.”

“Or said, or thought,” he agreed.

I looked at the grave, its empty crumbling bare planes, its emptyfaced headstone. I looked again, but briefly, at the events that had made it be here just where it was, when it was, containing what, and I wet my lips and said, “You’re kidding.”

He never seemed to answer what deserved no answer, that man.

I asked him, “Even things nobody ever knew before?”

“Especially those things,” he said. “What you can see of a human being is only the outside of the top part of the surface. Now if everything—is there—” he pointed—“to be read—*everything*—then it follows that you can read far more than the most penetrating analysis of anything living.” When I had no response to this, he said, “Living things aren’t finished, you see. Everything they have ever been in contact with, each thought they have had, each person they have known—these things are still at work in them; nothing’s finished.”

“And when they’re buried, they . . . do something to the grave? There’s a real difference between one grave and another, or . . . a grave would be different if one person or another was buried in it?”

“It has to be that way,” he said. Again one of those odd, waiting pauses, which I refused to take for myself. He said, “Surely you’ve had that feeling that a human being is too much, has too much, means too much just to go out like a light, or be eroded away like the soil of a dust bowl.”

I looked at the grave. So new, so raw, so . . . blank. In a low voice, I asked, “What do you read?”



He understood what I meant : what are the " letters," the " words," the " grammar " ?

He said, " A lot of things. The curve of the mound, the encroachment of growth on it—grass, weeds, mosses. The kind of vegetation that grows there, and the shape of each stem and leaf, even the veining in them. The flight of insects over it, the shadows they cast, the contours of rain-rivulets as they form, as they fill, as they dry." He laughed deprecatingly. " It sounds like more than a man could learn, doesn't it ?"

I thought it did.

He said, " You are so completely familiar with the act of reading that it never occurs to you how complex an act it is, or how vast is your accomplishment. You take in stride a variety of alphabets—upper case and lower case are very nearly two separate ones, and then upper and lower case in script are quite different from printing or typing. Old English and black-letter faces might slow you down but they won't stop you. Your eye measures light intensities between ink and paper : green letters on a yellow page wouldn't stop you. You select, without effort, just what you read on a page and what you do not. For example, every page of a book might have the book title at the top and a page number at the bottom, and you don't even know they're there. In a magazine or a newspaper, blocks of type might be broken up, carried over, interrupted by pictures or advertisements, and you sail right along reading what you are interested in and nothing else. You might notice a misprint or a misspelling, or even an out-of-context line of type lost in the middle of your paragraph, but in most cases it doesn't bother you much. In addition, you're reading in English—one of the richest of all languages, but also one of the most difficult, with irregular structure, spelling, and some pretty far-fetched semantic shorthand and shortcuts. But all these are the rarefied complications ; to get back to basics, what about the letters themselves ? The letter ' a ' doesn't look like the sound—or several sounds—of ' a. ' It's only a most arbitrary symbol, chosen by custom and usage to mean what it means."

" But . . . at least there's a system. I mean, an established alphabet. Accepted spelling. And—for all their exceptions, there are rules of grammar and syntax."

Again he said nothing, just waiting for me to come up with something or other. To think, perhaps.

I did, and said, " Oh. You mean—there *is* some such

system?" I laughed suddenly. "A crooked thorn for the letter 'b,' and a line of mud for past tense?"

He smiled and nodded. "Not those, but things like those. Yes, that's the idea."

"Not as hard as it seems at first, hm?"

"The thing you try to put over to every first-grader," he agreed. "But—it *is* hard. As hard as anything else you can study. Just as hopeless-looking at times, too, when the over-all pattern just won't emerge and all your work seems useless. Then—it comes clear, and you go on."

I looked at him and said, "I don't know why I believe you."

He waited until I said, "—but I'd like to learn that trick."

"Why?"

I glanced at the bare new grave. "You said . . . 'everything.' You said I could find out what she did, with whom. And—why?"

"That's right."

"So . . . let's go. Where do we start?" I went down on one knee and made an across-the-board gesture at my wife's grave.

"Not here." He smiled. "You don't use Dostoevsky as a first reader."

"Dostoevsky? *Her*?"

"They're all Dostoevskys. They can all express every shade of meaning of every event, and through what they think and feel one can see the meaning of all their world. Isn't that what makes a great writer?"

"I guess it is . . . but . . . great writer? *Her*?"

"She lived," he said. "Now what she was is . . . graven here. Living and feeling are things done by everybody. Writing on their graves is done by everybody. Dostoevsky, now, had what you might term a *previous* skill. He could do it while he was alive. Dead, they can all do it."

This guy made my head spin. I got up slowly and followed him to the . . . 'first reader.' Like most such volumes, it was a very little one.

I went back every evening, after work, for nearly a year. I learned the meaning of the curl of a leaf and the glisten of wet pebbles, and the special significance of curves and angles. A great deal of the writing was unwritten. Plot three dots on a graph and join them; you now have a curve with certain characteristics. Extend that curve while maintaining the

characteristics, and it has meaning, up where no dots are plotted. In just this way I learned to extend the curve of a grass-blade and of a protruding root, of the bent edges of wetness on a drying headstone.

I quit smoking so I could sharpen my sense of smell, because the scent of earth after a rain has a clarifying effect on graveyard reading, as if the page were made whiter and the ink darker. I began to listen to the wind, and to the voices of birds and small animals, insects and people; because to the educated ear, every sound is filtered through the story written on graves, and becomes a part of it.

The man met me every day; early or late, he was around. I never asked him anything about himself. Somehow that never came up. He never read anything to me. He would point out the 'letters' and occasionally the 'letter-groups' like (analogously) '-ing' and '-ous' and 'un-,' and would correct me where I read it wrong. But when I got to where I could read whole sentences, he stopped me. He told me that the one thing I must never do is to read off what I read on a grave, aloud. Not even to him. Those who could read it, would, if they cared to. Those who could not must learn as I was learning, or not know what was written there. "There are reasons enough for not wanting to die," he told me, "without adding the fear that someone like you will go around abusing this privilege."

I would go home at night filled with a grey hope, that at last all the mysteries of that woman would be solved for me, and every sordid, rotten thing she had done and kept secret would be illuminated for me. I didn't sleep very well—I hadn't, since the day she left—and I had lots of time to think over the things she had done to me, and the things she probably had done to me, and the things she was doubtless capable of doing. Maybe this long period of insufficient sleep did something to me; I don't know, but I didn't mind it. I did my work at the office, enough to get along, saving my strength and my brain for the evening; and then I worked at my lessons. I worked.

We went from the 'first readers' into more complicated stuff. You can have no idea how complicated a thing like a three-year-old is when you first start. The only thing that took me through this stage was his promise that however hopeless it looked, sooner or later the pattern would emerge and I'd understand and could go on. He was right. He was always right.

I began to learn about people. I began to find out how many were afraid of the same things—afraid of being shut out, of being found out, of being unloved, unwanted, or—worst of all—unneded. I learned how flimsy were the bases of so many of their fears, and how unimportant, in the long run, were the things on which so many of them pitifully spent their lives. More than anything else, I learned how uncharacteristic of most of them were their cruelties, how excusable their stupidities; in short, how damned decent they were.

I found out the difference between 'the truth' and 'all the truth.' You can know some pretty terrible things about a person, and you can know they're true. But sometimes it makes a huge difference if you know what else is true too. I read something in a book once about an old lady who was walking along the street minding her own business when a young guy came charging along, knocked her down, rolled her in a mud-puddle, slapped her head and smeared handfuls of wet mud all over her hair. Now what should you do with a guy like that?

But then if you find out that someone had got careless with a drum of gasoline and it ignited and the old lady was splashed with it, and the guy had presence of mind enough to do what he did as fast as he did, and severely burn his hands in the doing of it, then what should you do with him?

Yet everything reported about him is true. The only difference is the amount of truth you tell.

Reading a grave, you read it all. All of the truth makes a difference—but what a difference—in the way you feel about people.

One day the man said to me, "I would say that there are only a half-dozen graves here that are beyond you. I think you're a pretty remarkable student."

I said thanks, but I'd blame the quality of the teaching. "You've taken an awful lot of trouble over me."

He shrugged. "It's what I do," he said inclusively. Then he waited.

I wondered what he was waiting for, and so searched back through what he had been saying. "Oh," I said, and with him, looked up at the north corner of the cemetery where my wife's grave lay. It wasn't sharp-planed any more, or bare. Everything about it had changed . . . been changed . . . except, of course, that unsoilable headstone. So, "Oh," I said. "I could read it."

"Easily," he said.

I went up there. I don't know if he followed me. I wasn't thinking about him any more. I came to the grave and stood looking at it for a long time. I thought about her, and about the facts I had. Truths. The truth about her. The time I pried her out of a dark corner at a party with a drunk named Wilfred. The time she snatched a letter off the mantel when I came in and threw it into the fire. The time that guy on the boat laughed when her name was mentioned and then shut up when he found I was married to her. More than anything else, the fact of her death in the sports car, the fact of that housecoat, of the missing tweed suit and stupid hat. Now I could know. Now I could know what, where, and how many times. Now I could know why.

I guess I was up there for longer than I realized. When I came to myself it was almost dark, and growing cold. I almost fell when I started to walk. I walked slowly until my legs woke up and, seeing a light in the caretaker's building, went in to talk to the old fellow for a minute. I didn't see the graveyard reader around anywhere.

I was back the next morning. It was Saturday. The stone-cutter was there already, crouched in front of my plot, tick-ticking away. I'd had to agree to time-and-a-half to get him, but I was willing. When at last I decided on an epitaph for that stone, I wanted it put there, and right *now*.

I walked up there to watch the man work. He knew his trade, that stone-cutter, and he had almost finished. After a few minutes I was aware of someone standing next to me, and sure enough, it was the graveyard reader. "Hi."

"How are you?" he asked—not the way anyone else might ask, but meaning it: how was I? what had happened? how did I feel about it? was I all right?

"I'm all right," I said. Also, not the way you'd say it to just anybody.

Silently we watched the man finish up. I nodded to him and said it was fine. He grinned and gathered up his tools and the tarpaulin with the chips in it, and waved and went away. The reader and I stood looking at the inscription.

I said, a little embarrassed, "Not very original."

"But very effective," he answered.

"You think so? You really think so?"

He nodded, and that made me very, very glad. I hadn't



meant to tell him, but it slipped out in one great big blurt : " I didn't read it."

" No ?"

" No," I said. " I came up here and stood for a long time, thinking about . . . all the work I'd done to be able to read it, and about—the truth, what kind of a difference *all* the truth makes. And I thought a lot about people, and about . . . *her*."

" Yes," he said, interested and . . . non-prying.

" Yes, about her, the things she'd done, the things she could have done. The way she used to talk to me. Do you know, people like her, who aren't so hot with words—they have ways of talking, if you can read them, almost like a grave has ?"

" I think you're right."

" Well, I thought about that too. And my own illiteracy . . ." I laughed in some sort of embarrassment and said, " Anyway, the way it wound up, I didn't read it. I went and ordered this epitaph instead."

" Why that particular one ?"

We read it over together, and I said, " It's taken me over a year, and a pretty tough year at that, but this is what I wanted to say to her. This is what I want her to know, now and from now on, from me."

He laughed.

I confess to being a little annoyed at that, even after all I had gone through with this fellow. " What's funny ?"

" *You're* saying that, to *her* ?"

" Something wrong with that ?"

" Sure is," he said. And he walked off, and when I called, he just waved, but kept on walking.

I turned to look back at the headstone, with its clean new inscription. I'd put it there because I wanted to say something to her that—

*Me* ? say something to *her* ?

No wonder he had laughed. A guy spends more than a year learning to read a grave, and then gets the silly notion that it's reading him.

So I read it again—not the grave ; I would never read that—I read just the inscription. I read what she said to me, now, this morning, new and crisp and for the very first time : *Rest in peace*.

" Thanks, honey," I whispered, " I will," and I went on home and got the first real sleep I'd had since she'd left me.

*Creator of that incorrigible cyberneticist Hek Belov, author Edward Mackin derives a great deal of fun working out impossible situations for his loveable character to overcome. We are inclined to think that this series is one of the best since Stanley Weinbaum's 'van Manderpootz' series over twenty years ago.*

# CHAOTICS

BY EDWARD MACKIN

---

The Hotel Roma, which fronts the north side of Progress Square, is a place, friends, where even a glass of water is brought to you on a silver tray, and served by a waiter who can't answer the simplest question without going through a dance routine. It is not a place for the penny-rubbing, or the penniless. Only people of standing go there.

You will, I suppose, be surprised to learn that there was a time when old Belov dined there regularly. I stopped going because Benjamin Rockall, who made ten million pounds out of tinned potatoes—died red, and labelled Earth Apples—refused to have my small check added to his bill. A gentleman to his finger-tips, his exact phraseology, as reported by the head waiter, was as follows: "Tell this Belov that I have no cousins by marriage, if such a dubious relationship is possible, and that he has a disgusting appetite. Tell him that if he ever tries the trick again I will take great pleasure in ramming this glass carafe down his throat."

I explained to the head waiter that I was really Rockall's natural son by a Swedish dress-designer; but that I didn't want to make a scene. I left immediately; but the word must have got around. The next time I went to that place

the doorman winked at me, and said : " Your dad was in here last night. He was carried out blindo. Never seen anyone so drunk."

That was about a month later. I wouldn't have ventured near the place ; but I was broke, and if that seems a contradiction let me explain that I bumped into Meerschraft, who was in a sad, but generous mood. It appears that he had been hitting the high spots all afternoon, and now in the early evening he particularly wanted to have dinner at the super-de-luxe Roma, and I was invited.

" It is probably the last chance I shall have of sampling the flesh-pots of our stinking civilisation," he said, thickly, and wept.

I dragged him into the nearest food-bar, and made him fill up on strong coffee till his eyeballs turned brown ; but he still wanted to go to the Hotel Roma. So we went.

After the doorman had made his pointed remarks about my adopted father I turned up the collar of my coat, and kept my hat on to avoid being recognised by the head waiter. I was hoping he'd take me for a wealthy eccentric ; but it was no use. He winked at me as I passed.

" Your dad was in here last night . . ." he began.

" I know," I replied, clicking my teeth at him. " He was carried out blindo. Mother was furious."

I gave him my hat. He took it respectfully. He recognised class when he saw it, that man.

" Belov," said Meerschraft, pensively, a little later on, as he toyed with the roast capon, " I've done a silly thing. A very silly thing."

" Haven't we all," I said. " But the girls were just as silly. Put it down to youthful exuberance."

At his age ? There wasn't a chance ; but one has to be charitable.

" Not that sort of thing," he explained, peevishly. " I've contracted for a ten-year tour on the Moon as third electronic engineer."

" You crazy animal !" I said.

It's a thing I never think about. We've had rocket travel for upwards of forty years now, and we've never got any further than that craggy dust desert that used to figure so largely in every other love song. Now it is regarded as the

place where all the money goes—‘a hole in the sky,’ as someone called it recently.

Successive Governments have spent millions developing and extending the base there ; but have never had the courage to boost off anywhere else because of the killing cost. One or two rockets were sent hurtling towards the nearer planets in the old days ; but they never came back. There was a feeling that someone had goofed rather badly, and the project was put into cold storage to await better times.

Meerschraft, it seemed, was going to be third engineer on the base. The pay was fabulous ; but the food was synthetic, and the amusements limited to watching the deepies, or playing some fool game at low-grav, which only made it easier to dislocate your innards.

“My heart bleeds for you,” I told him. “There are only three engineers, then?”

“Four,” said Meerschraft. “Let’s have some brandy.”

I wondered how the fourth had managed to get elected to the species. Meerschraft was a liar, of course. No-one could have an I.Q. as low as that.

“Waiter !” shouted Meerschraft, imperiously, dropping cigar ash all over the place.

Nothing happened.

I crooked my finger, and bellowed a bit louder. A waiter appeared as though he had shot out of a trapdoor. I tell you, friends, I command respect wherever I go. The waiter bent forward with a polite smile on his swarthy Italian face and whispered something. There wasn’t a trace of Italian in his accent, though.

“If you don’t keep your flaming trap shut,” he informed me, “I’ll have you thrown out of here, and I don’t mean maybe !”

Well, friends, I am not the man to be hooliganised or otherwise gyp-jolted by a twopenny-ha’penny grubblasher, and I told him so. I have been thrown out of better places ; but never by so many willing hands.

We went along to *Champagne Shirley’s* after that, and celebrated until two in the morning, and the next thing I remember is being thrust aboard an air-taxi, and someone saying : “Riverton Rocket Base. Blast-off is at three-thirty. Can you make it ?” It sounded like Shirley herself. The pilot said he could, just.

Ninety minutes later my stomach was trying to escape through my head. We were space-borne. Only I didn't know that. I thought I had the very father and mother of all hangovers. I knew I was dying, and I cursed the booze, and damned that flabby toad Meerschraft to hell. Then I passed out.

Someone was talking to me through a wall of porridge three-feet thick. Gradually, his voice became clearer, and it appeared that he was under the impression that I was Meerschraft. I gazed at him through a yellow fog, and didn't argue. I was still trying to work out where I was. He gave me a jab in the arm with a hypo, and I felt a great deal better.

"My name is Hek Belov," I told him, as soon as my tongue would flap. "I'm a cyberneticist, and the best in the business. But perhaps you will be good enough to tell me where I am?"

He told me, and slipping the hypodermic needle back into its case, added that we were about thirty-three thousand miles out. It shook me, I can tell you. Space-travel is maths gone mad. I was out on a trigonometrical limb, and I knew it. I tried to get up; but I found I was strapped into a kind of narrow, metal bunk.

"Turn the ship back at once," I commanded. "There'll be an awful row when the world realises I've gone. Great Heavens, man, what a loss to the community! Turn back before it is too late. My creditors will miss me if no-one else does. You've no idea what I owe. If I should die you'll be in debt for the rest of your life. Turn it back."

"Like to show me how?" asked the pale-faced gargoyle, gazing at me with G-sunk eyes, and flattened features. "I'm just the spare jockey, mister, and I'm always open to learn. Just to wise you up, though, this is a rocket ship, not an air-taxi. No steering. Just compensation boosters for landing adjustments. What did you say your name was?"

I told him. I explained my position, as I saw it. Meerschraft would be broken-hearted. It was a shame, and so on. I had papers that would prove my identity. They were in my inside pocket.

"In *my* inside pocket," corrected the other. "I took them out when you came aboard. They prove your identity all right."

"Of course they do," I said, relieved. "They are mostly threatening letters from people I owe money to."



"No," he said, grinning. "Guess again."

He took the papers from his pocket, and spread them before my eyes.

"You're Meerschraft, without a doubt. These papers prove it. It's all here. Contract, exit permit, flight ticket, the lot. Now lie back, and take it easy. Another ten years and you'll be making the return journey. There's nothing to it."

He gave a dry, cynical laugh, and floated off.

Meerschraft, it seemed, had faked it at the last minute, and had craftily swapped identities. No-one would believe me now. No-one would want to believe me.

No-one did.

Dan O'Brien looked at me with a certain degree of satisfaction spiced with anxiety.

"Welcome to Luna, Mr. Meerschraft," he greeted me. "Am I glad to see you! I've got a problem that would shake old Sherlock down."

"My name," I told him, firmly, "is Hek Belov, not Meerschraft. I shouldn't be here at all. I should be obliged, my friend, if you would kindly radio Earth, and arrange for me to return by the same rocket that brought me."

"At one-hundred pounds a pound! That's likely. You'll have to work it off first. How much do you weigh?"

"Fourteen stone."

"That's one-hundred-and-ninety-six pounds on the hoof," he said, quickly. "That means nineteen-thousand six-hundred pounds sterling. You should work that off in ten years, with a bit to spare. Now then," he added, briskly, "what do you know about electronic brains? Computers, that is."

Professional pride asserted itself.

"Everything," I admitted.

"Just the man," he said, in a relieved fashion. "Come with me."

"But you don't understand . . ." I commenced.

"There are lots of things I don't understand," he cut in, "but there is a problem here that has to be resolved if I am to retain my sanity. I'm an organiser, a get-things-done man, a general manager. I don't know what goes on inside those infernal computers; but we've got two here that have gone completely haywire. And that's not the oddest thing. Come on."

I followed him out of the office, and down a long, tubular steel corridor, illuminated by strip lighting. There were doors, or rather air-locks, at intervals, and these O'Brien explained, led into storerooms, the cookhouse, living quarters, and so on. At the end of the corridor was another air-lock. It led into a large, square room that housed the two computers. Four heavy, glass ports—one in each wall—gave a nightmare view of the Lunar landscape.

O'Brien seemed nervous.

"You'll find all the instruments you want in here," he said. "Switch on the video, and then we can keep in touch while you are working. I'll be in my office."

He was moving off, but I took him by the sleeve.

"Not so fast, my friend," I said. "Old Belov wasn't born yesterday. I've got a nose for fish, and this business is too finny for words."

"What do you mean?" he asked, uneasily.

"You've got experts here," I pointed out. "A first, a second, and a fourth electronic engineer. Why can't they de-bug these things? Why aren't they trying? Where are they?"

"I don't know," he told me, with a slight shiver, as he looked cautiously down the room over my shoulder. "That is, I know where the fourth is. He's in bed having one hysterical fit after another. The doc has to keep shooting him full of sedatives. The other two just—vanished. They were right there before our eyes, by the programming desk, playing their usual game of *chaotics*, and then . . . well, they'd gone! Just like that. We made a futile search of the place; but they'd gone all right."

"And, naturally, you don't want to hang around the place in case the same thing happens to you," I said.

He nodded, dumbly, still looking towards the place where he had last seen his two engineers.

"It only happened to-day," he explained, and shook his head. "I can hardly bring myself to believe it."

"Pity my credulous nature," I said. "How do you open this air-lock?"

Friends, I swear it, there is an unknown and malicious spirit abroad whose sole occupation is channelling the mangiest jobs to old Belov.

"Look," said O'Brien, pleadingly. "If you crack this problem they'll raise a statue to you some day. We're on the edge of something very strange here."

"I've got a good stomach," I told him, "and I'm not swapping it for a stone one. Besides, I'm not photogenic, and it might be the same with statues. They never seem to get my big nose right, somehow. Let's go."

Without another word he led the way back to his office.

"Sit down," he said, unhappily. He pushed a plastic box over to me. "Have a cigarette."

"Thanks," I said.

He took one himself, and leant back in the chair, frowning at the metal ceiling.

"It's like this," he said, at last, in a confiding tone. "In a year's time I retire from this hell-hole on full pension; but this business might set me back. They could fire me now as incompetent, or something of the kind. That means no pension. You've just got to fix those computers."

"And the two men?"

"The hell with them!" he said. "They got on my nerves with their stupid chaotics. It was more than a game with them, it was an obsession."

"Chaotics?" I echoed, uncomprehendingly.

"It was a game they invented themselves. It kept their minds occupied when they had nothing much else to do. These two computers are complementary to each other, and the whole thing is known as a Field Ranger. One is a digital computer, and the other is an analogue. All I know about the digital is that it has a magnetic tape memory unit, or rather two units. Each can be switched in while the other is being re-informed.

"There is also a blank replacement unit. They used this for their game. I never did find out just what went on; but they used to howl with laughter at the answers they got to perfectly simple problems. It didn't make sense to me; but they were maths mad. They worked out an entirely new atomic theory on the basis of one of their chaotics. And then they found on closer examination, so Jones said, that it wasn't so crazy as it seemed; but it would only work in a six-dimensional universe. They talked about nothing else for months. They had me up the wall. Now they've gone, and they've taken my pension with them."

He stubbed his cigarette, and hunched forward, despondently, his eyes closed and his fist to his head, suffering. It didn't seem fair to me ; but life is like that. I felt really sorry for the man ; yet, what could I do ? I gave it careful thought as I emptied the cigarette box into my pockets. Nothing, I decided, with a regretful sigh to cover up any slight noise I might make as I replaced it.

Opening his eyes, he automatically reached out for the cigarette box, flipping up the lid. It was empty, of course. He shuddered. I could see he was afraid to ask me if I'd taken them in case I said no.

"You've simply got to crack this problem," he told me, like a man barely holding on to his sanity. "If you succeed I'll see that you are on the next rocket back to Earth, and that leaves in three days' time. If, on the other hand, you refuse to co-operate with me you have every good chance of serving your full ten years here, and then being clapped into gaol as an imposter at the end of it. What do you say?"

"It's a rough deal," I said, "and if I had one foot on Earth I'd spit in your eye ! Tcha ! I accept."

I drew all the fuses first before I went near the thing, and then I examined the set-up. The drill was to programme the digital, which supplied a set of answers ; but, at the same time, through a converter unit produced an electrical model, represented by a network of resistances, of the actual problem, which was switched into the analogue computer. This came up with the stresses and strains, fields, paths, and present and future velocities in relation to each other.

I put the fuses back at last, and switched on. The question I tapped out was the basic two-plus-two. The answer was twenty-nine. Crazy ; but not if one-plus-one came out as fourteen-and-one-half. Just power trouble. It didn't. One-plus-one, said the digital, was zero.

"You could work an entirely new mathematical system out on that basis," I said to O'Brien, "and construct a complete universe ten miles deep to the inch except in February when the curlew calls, and mauve is Pancake Tuesday."

"Don't," said O'Brien, holding his head. "That's how they used to talk when they were programming a new chaotic. At least, it sounded like that to me. It was my fault, I suppose, for letting them play around. I could be prosecuted. Right

at the end of my second ten-year stretch, too. It doesn't seem fair, somehow."

"My friend," I said, sympathetically, "justice is for the wealthy. Don't look for it. For the rest of us, well, as a great man once said: 'Life is like eating in a rather dirty restaurant, with Time changing the better dishes before you can stab the meat.' But don't despair. Cancel that Wailing Wall, and take heart. Belov has solved the problem."

It had suddenly become blindingly obvious. The present memory unit was cluttered with the last chaotic of the missing engineers, of course, and I replaced this with the spare, which turned out to be the original. Two-and-two made four with this all right. I had one more test to make, and that would prove, or disprove, my supposition.

"I'm damned glad the thing's working properly again," said O'Brien, almost cheerfully; "but what happened to Jones and Parkinson?"

"I can't think any more," I replied. "I've run out of fuel. Where do we eat?"

Consuming a plate of indifferently cooked synthetic stew, I considered the problem from the angle of the missing men. What were they after—if anything? Perhaps they sought a chaotic system that would be logical within the framework of its own chaoticism. Why? Just for the heck of it, or because they were going slowly mad? Slowly sane, perhaps, from the point of view of their own chaoticisms.

Our universe was built on what might, after all, prove to be a purely arbitrary ruling that two-and-two make four. It does here; but somewhere else, maybe in some contiguous universe, it might make five. Take it as a basis, and you could build on it; but nothing we could understand as human beings. The mathematician, of course, is different. His abominable squiggles convert into multi-dimensional Chinese boxes that fit snugly into his conception of the universe. If he succeeds in getting the last box out first, look out for an atom bomb, my friends. Something unpleasant, anyway. He can hide behind an innocent-looking equation and beat the hell out of the rest of us, the swine! I'm not sure but that they shouldn't all be in gaol. A little honest arithmetic, and a screwdriver, is all old Belov needs. The results speak for themselves.



The answer to the problem lay in the fact that everything is possible outside of this space-time continuum. Jones and Parkinson had been playing around with the dark forces that reach right back to primal chaos. I had a shrewd idea as to what had happened.

"Here's your sweet," said the hungry-looking cook, and slammed a plate of dark, grey jelly on the table. "If you want any more just ask. I got a ton."

"Take it away," I told him, with a wave of my hand, "and bring me some cherry pie."

"Sure," he drawled. "Would you like it with cream, or without?"

O'Brien laughed.

"With cream," he said, "and make mine the same, Bert."

"Okay, chief," said the cook, lazily scratching his ginger stubble. "I'll bang a signal off right away, and we'll have it sent up from Earth." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Mister," he said, earnestly, "you're new here; so I'll be patient with you. All we got is this goo. It makes up into a variety of dishes, with a little ingenuity, and a few dried vegetables. Or you can sweeten it with saccharin, and you've got a fine plate of slush for afters. It comes in seven different colours. Ain't that marvellous? Take my advice, and eat it natural. The colour spoils the flavour."

He went away laughing. It seemed I had made his day for him. I shut my eyes, and ate the stuff. It was like swallowing a decayed jelly-fish. But one has to live.

"Have you still got the programme notes, and answers that these two wretches were working on?" I asked O'Brien. He nodded.

"Yes. They'll be exhibit number one at the inquiry."

I stood up.

"Come on," I said. "This should be interesting—if we survive."

I replaced the memory unit with the one that Jones and Robinson had been using. Then we worked through the programme notes, keeping clear of the possible field area until the answers rolled through. Where Jones and Robinson had stood I now had two stools. I tapped my question out, switched in, and fled. Nothing happened until I put the final

question. This asked for the cube of one-plus-one. It was asking for trouble, too. They had asked, in effect, for the cube of zero ; thus, it seemed to me, surrounding themselves with a cage of zero forces. I must have been right, because the stools vanished, and there was no answer. O'Brien's jaw dropped, and he gurgled something incomprehensible.

"That's the answer," I said, triumphantly. "Your two mathematical horrors have whimsied themselves away."

"How, in the name of sanity, could they do that?" He nodded towards the programming desk. "Where did the stools go?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted, "but I think that last chaotic matched a real, and contiguous universe. The queries on those cards built up a situation resolved only by an electronic set-up in the analogue computer that was in phase with this unimaginable hole. For an instant of time they became subject to the laws of that other universe. Don't ask me how, my friend, I'm only theorising. Perhaps its dark edge brushed them. The men went the same way."

He frowned.

"I can't put that in a report," he said. "They'd throw me to the head-shrinkers. We must get those two lunatics back, somehow. Can't you reverse the process?"

"I can try," I said, cautiously. "We don't know the rules of this crazy game, remember. When you say reverse the process, you are trying to impose our idea of orderliness on Hell's own logic, with bells on. I'll ask it what the cube of zero equals, and it won't be one-plus-one."

"Anything," he said, agreeably. "Just so long as it leads somewhere."

I fed the question in, and got out of the way, quick.

Suddenly there were four of us. A tall, dark, bearded fellow, and a small, ginger-haired individual. They gazed at us, blankly. It was obvious, by their next remark, that they had no knowledge of what had transpired.

"That's queer," the tall one said. "I never heard the air-lock open. What do you want, Dan? And whose that you've got with you?"

O'Brien didn't answer. His mouth moved ; but nothing came out. I saw why immediately, because I am naturally observant. The two computers had vanished.

"Oh, well," I said, rubbing my hands together, "that's that. We can all go home now."

"No!" groaned O'Brien, with concentrated anguish. "I don't believe it. This couldn't happen to me. It's an illusion. A clever illusion." He looked at me with the slender straw of hope in his drowning eyes, and clawed the air. "Get them back, Belov!" he entreated. "Get those computers back!"

"How?" I asked, quietly.

I considered that a fair question. After all, we had nothing to work on. All we had was an empty room. He raged and babbled, and almost frothed at the mouth, and then he said, in a weak, pleading voice:

"What about my pension?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the cause of all the trouble, Jones and Parkinson, making their way through the air-lock. Old Belov, it appeared was to be left holding the baby. But one learns to be philosophical about these things—(have you ever met such damned rotters? I could have chewed my suit to rags, and spat the bits at them!)—and the man who can be philosophical in such circumstances is the salt of the earth.

"Mister O'Brien," I said, "you may be better off without a pension. A permanent fixed income tends to sap initiative. The Government issued a White Paper not twelve months since on this very subject. Did you know that not one member enjoys a fixed income? No, my friend, not one member. They vote themselves a substantial increase every year, and then back-date it. That's what you call initiative."

"Look," he said, desperately. "I want those computers back. I don't care how you do it. You can use black magic if you like; but I want them back. Otherwise I warn you, I'll have you arraigned as a saboteur."

"My poor, unfortunate friend," I said, as tactfully as I could, "let's be practical about this. Ask your department to ferry the gear out, and I'll build you a new rig for ten-thousand pounds flat. I can't be fairer than that, now can I? You'll be fired, of course; but we'll split fifty-fifty. It's the chance of a lifetime."

I had to fetch the doctor to him.

"Another case of hysteria," he said, jabbing the laughing, weeping O'Brien in the arm. "What happened to his confounded abacus?" he asked, contemptuously, looking around the room.

"It was spirited away by a white dwarf," I told him.

The quack looked at me and sighed like a man whose reserves of patience were sadly taxed.

"I think you'd better have a jab, too," he said.

Just before she died my aunt Julia gave me some very good advice.

"Don't steal if you can help it, nephew," she said, earnestly.

"And keep out of gaol. The food's terrible!"

She was right. The food *is* terrible.

—Edward Mackin

\*\*\*\*\*  
 \*  
 \* **Back Issues** \*  
 \* \* \* \* \*

For readers and collectors who are missing any of the previous issues we can still supply the following copies but stocks are very limited

Nos. 13, 18, 20 to 30

2/- post free

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.

Maclaren House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1

\*\*\*\*\*

*Following up his successful short story "Little Jimmy" in the last issue we present yet another facet of the del Rey writing technique—the story of a perfect murder written in strict fantasy vein and including all the drama one expects from such a competent writer.*

# NO STRINGS ATTACHED

BY LESTER DEL REY

---

Committing a perfect murder is a simple matter. Drive out some night to a lonely road, find a single person walking along out of sight of anyone else, offer him a ride, knife him, and go home. In such a crime, there's no reason to connect killer and victim—no motive, no clue, no suspect.

To achieve the perfect murder of your own wife, however, is a different matter. For obvious reasons, husbands are always high on the suspect list. Who has a better reason for such a crime?

Henry Ainsworth had been pondering the problem with more than academic interest for some time. It wasn't that he hated his wife. He simply couldn't stand the sight or sound of her; even thinking about her made his flesh crawl. If she had been willing to give him a divorce, he'd have been content to wish her all the happiness she was capable of discovering. But Emma, unfortunately, was fond of being his wife; perhaps



she was even fond of him. Worse, she was too rigidly bound to trite morality to give him grounds to sue.

There was no hope of her straying. What had been good enough for her mother was good enough for her, and saved all need of thinking; a woman needed a husband, her place was in the home, marriage was forever, and what would the neighbours think? Anyhow, she'd have had difficulty being unfaithful, even if she tried; she'd been gaining some ten pounds every year for the eleven years they had been married, and she'd long since stopped worrying about taking care of her appearance.

He looked up at her now, letting the book drop to his lap. She sat watching the television screen with a vacant look on her face, while some comic went through a tired routine. If she enjoyed it, she gave no sign, though she spent half her life in front of the screen. Then the comic went off, and dancers came on. She went back to darning a pair of Henry's socks, as seriously as if she didn't know that he had always refused to wear the lumpy results. Her stockings had runs, and she still wore the faded apron in which she'd cooked supper.

He contrasted her with Shirley unconsciously, and shuddered. In the year since Shirley Bates had come to work in his rare book store, he'd done a lot of such shuddering, and never because of the slim blonde warmth of his assistant. Since that hot day in August when they'd closed the shop early and he'd suggested a ride in the country to cool off, he and Shirley . . .

His pleasant thoughts were interrupted by the crash of scissors to the floor, and his eyes focused on her deepening folds of fat as Emma bent to retrieve them. "Company coming," she said, before he could think of anything to forestall the cliché. Then she became aware that he was staring at her. "Did you take the garbage out, Henry?"

"Yes, dear," he answered woodenly. Then, because he knew it was coming anyhow, he filled in the inevitable. "Cleanliness is next to godliness."

She nodded solemnly, and began putting aside her darning. "That's finished. Mama always said a stitch in time saves nine. If you'd cut your toenails, Henry . . ."

He could feel his skin begin to tingle with irritation. But there was no escape. If he went upstairs to his bedroom, she'd be up at once, puttering about. If he went to the basement, she'd find the canned food needed inventorying. A

woman's place was with her husband, as she'd repeatedly told him. Besides, she probably couldn't stand her own company.

Then he remembered something he'd stored away. "There's a new picture at the Metro," he said as quietly as he could. "Taylor's starred, I think. I was going to take you, before this extra work came up."

He could see her take the bait and nibble at it. She had some vague crush left for Taylor. She stared at the television set, shifted her bulk, and then shook her head reluctantly. "It'd be nice, Henry. But going at night costs so much, and—well, a penny saved is a penny earned."

"Exactly. That's what I meant to say." He even relaxed enough to overlook the platitude, now that there was some hope. "I saved the price of lunch today. The nut who wanted *King in Yellow* was so tickled to get the copy finally, he insisted on treating. You can even take a cab home afterwards."

"That's nice. It'll probably rain, the way my bunion's been aching." She considered it a second more, before turning off the television. He watched as she drew off the apron and went for her coat and hat, making a pretence of dabbing on make-up. She might as well have worn the apron, he decided, as she came over to kiss him a damp good-bye.

He considered calling Shirley, but her mother was visiting her, and the conversation would have to be too guarded at her end. If he only could find some way of getting rid of Emma . . .

It wouldn't even be murder, really. More like destroying a vegetable—certainly no worse than ending the life of a dumb cow to make man's life more worth living. It wasn't as if she had anything to live for or to contribute. It would almost be a kindness, since she lived in a perpetual state of vague discontent and unhappiness, as if somehow aware that she had lost herself. But unfortunately, the law wouldn't look at it in such a light.

He'd only been thinking actively of getting her out of his way since August, however; and somehow, with time, he would come up with some foolproof scheme. There was that alcohol-injection system—but it required someone who would drink pretty freely first, and Emma was a teetotaler. Maybe, though, if he could get her to taking some of those tonics for women . . .

He dropped it for the moment and turned back to the book. It was an odd old volume he'd received with a shipment for appraisal. There was no title or date, but the strange leather binding indicated it was old. Apparently it had been hand-set and printed on some tiny press by the writer, whose name was omitted. It seemed to be a mixture of instructions on how to work spells, conjure demons, and practise witchcraft, along with bitter tirades against the group who had driven the writer out and forced him, as he put it, "to enter a compact with the devil for to be a wizard, which is like to a male witch." Henry had been reading it idly, slowly deciding the book was authentic enough, however crazy the writer was. The book had no particular value as a collector's item, but he could probably get a fine price from some of the local cultists, particularly since there were repeated promises in it that the writer was going to give a sure-fire, positive and simple recipe for conjuring up a demon without need of virgin blood, graveyard earth or unicorn horn.

He skimmed through it, looking for the formula. It turned up on the fifth page from the end, and was everything the writer had claimed. A five-sided figure drawn on the floor with ordinary candle wax, a pinch of sugar inside, a bit of something bitter outside, two odd but simple finger gestures, and a string of words in bad Latin and worse Greek. There was a warning that it would work without the pentagram, sugar and bitters, but at parlous risk to the conjurer without such protection.

He frowned. Too simple for the cultists, he realised—unless he could somehow persuade them that the trick lay in some exact phrasing or gesturing pattern which took experiment. They liked things made difficult, so they'd have a good alibi for their gullibility or faith when the tricks failed. If he could show them in advance that it didn't work, but hint that a good occultist might figure out the right rhythm, or whatever . . .

He read it through again, trying to memorize the whole thing. The gestures were—so—and the words—umm . . .

There was no flash of fire, no smell of sulphur, and no clap of thunder. There was simply a tall creature with jet-black skin and flashing yellow eyes standing in front of the television set. He had short stubs of horns on his head and a sinuous tail draped over one shoulder, with features too

sharp for any human face. There were no scales, however ; his cape and briefs were spangled, and he wore shoes with an odd front that might have looked like hooves at first glance. But in general, he wasn't bad looking.

"Mind if I sit down?" the creature asked. He took Henry's assent for granted and dropped into Emma's chair, curling his tail over one arm and reaching for an apple on the side table. "Glad to see you're not superstitious enough to keep me locked up in one of those damned pentagrams. Drat it, I thought the last copy of that book was burned and I was free. Your signal caught me in the middle of dinner."

Henry swallowed thickly, feeling the sweat trickle down his nose. The book had warned against summoning the demon without the protective devices ! But the thing seemed peaceful enough for the moment. He cleared his voice. "You mean—you mean magic works?"

"Magic—schmagic !" the demon snorted. He jerked a thumb toward the television. "To old Ephriam—the crackpot who wrote the book before he went completely crazy—that set would have been more magic than I am. I thought this age knew about dimensions, planes of vibrations, and simultaneous universes. You humans always were a backward race, but you seemed to be learning the basic facts. Hell, I suppose that means you'll lay a geas on me, when I was hoping it was just an experimental summons !"

Henry puzzled it over, some of his fright leaving him. The scientific sounding terms somehow took some of the hellfire off the appearance of the demon. "You mean those passes and words set up some sort of vibrational pattern . . ."

The demon snorted again, and began attacking the grapes. "Bunk, Henry ! Oh, my name's Alfezar, by the way. I mean I was a fool. I should have gone to my psychiatrist and taken the fifty-year course, as he advised. But I thought the books were all burned and nobody knew the summons. So here I am, stuck with the habit. Because that's all it is—a conditioned reflex. Pure compulsory behaviour. I'm sensitized to receive the summons, and when it comes, I teleport into your plane just the way you pull your hand off a hot stove. You read the whole book, I suppose ? Yeah, just my luck. Then you know I'm stuck with any job you give me—practically your slave. I can't even get back without dismissal or finishing your task ! That's what comes of saving money by not going to my psychiatrist."

He muttered unhappily, reaching for more grapes with his tail, while Henry began to think nothing was going to happen to him, at least physically. Souls were things he wasn't quite sure of, but he couldn't see how just talking to Alfeair could endanger his.

"Still," the demon said thoughtfully, "it could be worse. No pentagram. I never did get mixed up with some of the foul odours and messes some of my friends had to take. And I've developed quite a taste for sugar; tobacco, too." His tail uncoiled all the way and plucked a cigarette out of Henry's pack, then a book of matches. He lighted it, inhaled, and rubbed the flame out on his other palm. "Kind of weak tobacco, but not bad. Any more questions while I smoke this? There's no free oxygen where I come from, so I can't smoke there."

"But if you demons answer such—such summons, why don't people know about it now?" Henry asked. "I'd think more and more people would be going in for this sort of thing. If the wizards were right all along . . ."

"They weren't. It didn't get started until your Middle Ages. And if it hadn't been for old Apalon . . ." Alfeair lighted another cigarette from the first butt, which he proceeded to extinguish on the tip of his sharp tongue. He twitched the horns on his head thoughtfully, and then went on.

"Apalon was studying your worship. You see, we've been studying your race the way you study white rats, using lower races to explain our own behaviour. Anyhow, he got curious and figured out a way to mentalize himself into your plane. He was sort of a practical joker, you might say. So he picked a time when some half-crazy witch was trying to call up the being you worship as Satan to make some kind of a deal. Just as she finished, he popped up in front of her, spitting out a bunch of phosphorus to make a nice smoke and fire effect, and agreed with all her mumbo-jumbo about having to do what she wanted. She wanted her heart fixed up then, so he showed her about belladonna and went back, figuring it was a fine joke.

"Only, he made a mistake. There's something about moving between planes that lowers the resistance to conditioning. Some of our people can take five or six trips, but Apalon was one of those who was so conditioning-prone that he had the habit fixed after the first trip. The next time she did the rigamarole, back he popped. He had to dig up gold



for her, hypnotize a local baron into marrying her, and generally keep on the constant *qui vive*, until she got sloppy and forgot the pentagram she thought protected her and he was conditioned to. But after he tore her to bits, he found she'd passed on the word to a couple other witches. And he knew somebody at the Institute was bound to find what a fool he'd made of himself.

"So he began taking members aside and telling them about the trick of how to get into your world. Excellent chance for study. Have to humour the humans by sticking to their superstitions, of course. One by one, they went over on little trips. It wasn't hard to find some superstitious dolt trying to summon something, since word had got around in your world. One of us would pop up, and that spread the word further. Anyhow, when Apalon was sure each member had made enough trips to be conditioned, he'd tell him the sad truth, and swear him to secrecy on fear of being laughed out of the Institute. The old blaggard wound up with all of us conditioned. There was quite a flurry of witchcraft here, until we finally found a psychiatrist who could break the habit for us. Even then, it was tough going. We'd never have made it without the inquisitions and witch-burnings one of our experimental sociologists managed to stir up."

Alfear put out the third cigarette butt against an eyeball and stood up slowly. "Look, I don't mind a chat now and then, but my wives are waiting dinner. How about dismissing me?"

"Umm." Henry had been thinking while he listened. It had sounded like a reasonable explanation on the whole, except for the gruesome bit about Apalon's tearing the witch apart. Apparently, as long as a man wasn't too unreasonable, there was a certain usefulness to having such friends on call. "What about the price for your help? I mean—well, about souls . . ."

Alfear twitched his horns disgustedly. "What the deuce would I do with your soul, Henry? Eat it? Wear it? Don't be a shnook!"

"Well, then—well, I've heard about wishes that were granted, but they all had a trick attached. If I asked for immortality, you'd give it, say; but then I'd get some horrible disease and beg and plead for death. Or ask for money, and

then find the money was recorded as being paid to a kidnapper, or something."

"In the first place, I couldn't give you immortality," Alfeair said, as patiently as he could apparently. "Your metabolism's not like ours. In the second place, why should I look for tainted money? It's enough nuisance doing what you ask, without looking for tricks to pull. Anyhow, I told you I half enjoy visiting here. As long as you're reasonable about it, I don't mind keeping my end of the compulsion going. If you've got something to ask, ask away. There are no strings attached."

The demon seemed to be quite sincere. Henry considered it briefly, staring at a large tinted picture of Emma, and took the plunge. "Suppose I asked you to kill my wife for me—say by what looked like a stroke, so nobody would blame me?"

"That seems reasonable enough," Alfeair agreed easily. "I could break a few blood vessels inside her skull . . . Sure, why not? Only the picture in your mind is so distorted, I wouldn't know her. If she's like that, why'd you ever marry her?"

"Because she seemed different from other women, I guess," Henry admitted. "When I tipped the canoe over, and I figured she'd be mad because her dress was ruined, but all she said was something about not being sugar, so she wouldn't melt." He shuddered, remembering all the times she'd said it since. "You won't have any trouble. Look, can you really read my mind?"

"Naturally. But it's all disorganized."

"Umm. Well." It gave him a queasy feeling to think of anyone reading his secret thoughts. But demons apparently didn't work by human attitudes, anyhow. He groped about, and then smiled grimly. "All right, then. You can tell I think of her as my wife. And just to make sure, she'll be sure to say something about early to bed and early to rise; she says that every single damned night, Alfeair. She never misses."

Alfeair grunted. "Sounds more reasonable every minute, Henry. All right, when your wife says that, I pop up and give her a stroke that will kill her. How about dismissing me now?"

"No strings?" Henry asked. He watched carefully as Alfeair nodded assent, and he could see no sign of cunning or trickery. He caught his breath, nodded, and closed his eyes.

Watching something vanish was not anything he wanted to witness. "Dismissed."

The apple and grapes were gone when he opened his eyes, but there was no other sign of the demon's having been there. He found some fruit in the refrigerator and restocked the bowl. Then he closed the strange book and put it away. He'd have to buy it himself, and burn it to make sure no one else found the trick, of course. For a moment, uneasiness pricked at him. Yet he was sure Alfeard hadn't been lying, and the story the demon had told made more sense than the older superstitions. Henry adjusted his mind to having a well-conditioned demon on tap and then began the harder job of bracing himself for Emma's incoherent but detailed account of the movie when she came back.

Unfortunately, it had been a more complicated plot than usual and, from the moment she entered the door, she talked on and on. He tried to close his ears to her voice, but he'd never succeeded in that. He yawned, and she yawned back, but went on until the last final morsel was covered for the second or third time.

"He was wonderful," she finally concluded. "Just wonderful. Only I wished you'd come with me. You'd have liked it. Henry, did you take the garbage out?"

"Yes, dear," he answered. "Hours ago."

He yawned elaborately again. She mumbled something about having to keep the kitchen clean because cleanliness was next to godliness, but her automatic yawn muffled the words. Then she glanced at the clock. "Heavens, it's almost one! And early to bed and early to rise . . ."

Henry jerked his eyes away, just as he caught the first glimpse of Alfeard popping into existence beside her. He heard the beginning of a shriek change to a horrible gargling and then become a dying moan. Something soft and heavy hit the floor with a dull thud. Henry turned around slowly.

"Dead," Alfeard said calmly, rubbing one of his fingers. "This business of getting just one finger through the planes into her head cuts off the circulation. There, that's better. Satisfied?"

Henry dropped beside the corpse. She was dead, according to the mirror test, and there wasn't a mark on her. He stared at the puffy, relaxed features; he'd expected an expression of horror, but she seemed simply asleep. His initial feeling of

pity and contrition vanished ; after all, it had been quick and nearly painless. Now he was free !

"Thanks, Alfear," he said. "It's fine—fine. Do I dismiss you now?"

"No need this time. I'm free as soon as the job's done. Unless you'd like to talk awhile . . ."

Henry shook his head quickly. He had to telephone a doctor. Then he could call Shirley—her mother would be gone by now. "Not now. Maybe I'll summon you sometime for a smoke or something. But not now !"

"Okay," Alfear said, and vanished. Surprisingly, seeing him disappear wasn't unpleasant, after all. He just wasn't there.

Waiting for the doctor was the worst part of it. All the legends Henry knew ran through his mind. Alfear could have given her a stroke and then added some violent poison that would show up in an autopsy. He could be sitting wherever he was, chuckling because Henry hadn't restricted his wish enough to be safe. Or any of a hundred things could happen. There was the first witch, who had thought she had Apalon under control, only to be torn to bits . . .

But the doctor took it calmly enough. "Stroke, all right," he decided. "I warned her last year that she was putting on too much weight and getting high blood pressure. Too bad Mr. Aimsworth, but there was nothing you could do. I'll turn in a certificate. Want me to contact a mortician for you?"

Henry nodded, trying to appear properly grief-stricken. "I—I'd appreciate it."

"Too late now," the doctor said. "But I'll be glad to send Mr. Glazier around in the morning." He pulled the sheet up over Emma's body, leaving it on the back-room couch to which they had carried it. "You'd better go to a hotel for the night. And I'll give you something that will make you sleep."

"I'd rather not," Henry said quickly. "I mean, I'd feel better here. You know . . ."

"Certainly, certainly." The doctor nodded sympathetically, but as if it were an old story to him. He left the pills with instructions, said the proper things again, and finally went out.

Shirley's voice was sleepy and cross when she answered, but it grew alert as soon as he told her about Emma's stroke. He was almost beginning to believe the simple version of the story himself.

"Poor Henry," she murmured. Her voice sharpened again. "It was a stroke? The doctor was sure?"

"Positive," he assured her, cursing himself for having let her see some of the thoughts that had been on his mind.

"The doctor said she'd had hypertension and such before."

She considered it a second, and then a faint laugh sounded. "Then I guess there's no use in crying over spilled milk, is there, Henry? If it had to happen, it just had to. And I mean, it's like fate, almost!"

"It *is* fate!" he agreed happily. Then he dropped his voice. "And now I'm all alone here, baby lamb, and I had to call you up . . ."

She caught on at once, as she always did. "You can't stay there now! It's so morbid. Henry, you come right over here!"

Demons, Henry thought as he drove the car through the quiet residential streets toward her apartment, had their uses. They were a much maligned breed. Probably the people who had summoned them before had been ignorant, stupid people; they'd messed up their chances and brought trouble on themselves by not finding out the facts, and putting it all down to superstitious magic. The demons were almost people—maybe even a little superior to humans. If a man would just try to understand them, they could help him, and with no danger at all.

"No strings attached," he said to himself, and then chuckled softly. It fitted perfectly; now there were no strings attached to him. Emma was at peace, and he was free. He'd have to wait a few months to marry Shirley legally, of course. But already, she was as good as being his wife. And if he played up the shock angle just enough, this could be a wonderful evening together . . .

Shirley was unusually lovely when she met him at the door. Her soft golden hair made a halo for her face—a face that said she'd already anticipated his mood, and had decided he was a man who needed sympathy and understanding for what had happened.



There was even time to bring up the idea that he was free, tentatively at first, and then eventually as a matter of course. And the plans expanded as he considered them. There was no need to worry about things now. The quiet marriage became a trip around the world as he confessed to having money that no one knew about. They could close the shop. He could leave town almost at once, and she could follow later. Nobody would know, and they wouldn't have to wait to avoid any scandal. They could be married in two weeks!

Henry was only just realising the values of a friendly demon. With proper handling, a lot of purely friendly summoning, and a reasonable attitude, there was no reason why Alfeard couldn't provide him with every worldly comfort to share with Shirley.

He caught her to him again. "My own little wife! That's what you are, lambkins! What's a mere piece of paper? I already think of you as my wife. I feel you're my wife. That's what counts, isn't it?"

"That's all that counts," she agreed with a warmth that set fire to his blood. Then she gasped. "Henry, darling, it's getting light already! You'll have to get back. What will the neighbours say if they see you coming from here now?"

He tore away reluctantly, swearing at the neighbours. But she was right, of course. He had to go back and take the sleeping medicine to be ready for the arrival of the mortician in the morning.

"It's still early," he protested, automatically trying to squeeze out a few more minutes. "Nobody's up yet."

"I'll heat up the coffee, and then you'll have to go," Shirley said firmly, heading for the kitchen. "Plenty of people get up early around here. And besides, you need some sleep. Early to bed and early to rise . . ."

From the kitchen came the beginning of a shriek. It changed to a horrible gasp, and died away in a failing moan. There was the sound of a body hitting the floor.

Alfeard stood over Shirley's body, rubbing one finger tenderly. His horns twitched uncertainly, as he studied Henry's horror-frozen face. "I told you," he said. "I warned you some of us get conditioned to a habit the first time. And you thought of her as your wife and she said . . ."

Abruptly, he vanished. Henry's screams were the only sound in the apartment.

—Lester del Rey

# THE MISFIT

BY CLIFFORD C. REED

*One of the worst things that could happen to a hardworking demon would be a time-limit assignment on that mad-cap planet Earth. Doubly difficult, too, if he happened to be in the bad books of Old Nick himself—but, there, it's a hell of a life, anyway.*

---

Satan surveyed the class with menace. The assembly quailed. The old man was clearly out for blood.

"The worst bunch of juniors I have ever seen," the harsh voice rasped. "Not one of you with so few as three paltry souls to your credit. *Two* is your best. *One* is your average." His tail lashed. "One—measly—soul!" he snarled. "ONE!"

They trembled, eyeing him askance.

"And there is one incompetent fool," Satan's brow grew darker, "who has not achieved even that minimum." A great arm whipped forward, seized a demon by his tail, and dangled him before the eyes of all. "Bobadil," Satan growled. "Bobadil the Misfit!"

The class, now that a scapegoat had been chosen, promptly capered and howled invective at the unfortunate Bobadil, twirling, head down, between mighty finger and tremendous thumb. "Put him on furnace duty," the class shrieked. "Take away his privileges. Expel him!"

Satan lifted his free hand. "He will be punished," he assured them. "I have a very pretty plan for him."

The class sank back on its haunches, drooling in impatient delight. "Tell us, Master," it pleaded.

"A mission," Satan told them. "There is a man on Earth who's work must fail." The demons pricked their ears forward. "A scientist," the Devil told them, "who seeks to find the fuel which shall send Man's space ships leaping towards the stars. Who must be harried, he and his successors, lest Man should gain this dream." The demons' joyful, eager yelps were silenced by the speaker's roar. "Let Man defy the mysteries of space," he warned, "and all our power over him is ended." They stared at him in doubt. "If Man can conquer space," the Devil growled, "he will no longer fear the awfulness of Hell. If Spencer Stock, or any other man, can once uncover what should best be hid, then Hell itself is doomed, and you are done."

They yelled. They shrieked. They swarmed about his feet. "Send Mammon, Master," they screamed. "Send Belial. Or Behemoth. Not this fool."

Snarling, he beat them off. "Bobadil," he thundered, "and in this fashion." Sullenly they sank down. "In the flesh." A shudder ran through their ranks. Satan smiled. "So that he must pay, on Earth, for any error he commits, before he returns to Hell to pay the penalty for failure." The assembly cackled. "If, by the new moon, in three of Earth's days, he has not shattered his victim, another will be sent who shall not fail. And Bobadil will be yours, to do with as you will."

He flicked his hand, sending the protesting Bobadil up, through the nearest volcanic shaft, high into the outer air.

The last thing the demon heard was Satan's farewell call, "Until the new moon, Bobadil."

Then he was falling back, towards Earth's surface, and he spread his wings, and glided.

Control came through at the same instant. "Course forty west," it instructed. "Speed seven thousand. Maintain strict cloud cover. Out."

His tail, threshing in anger, scarred the clouds with lightning as he flew. It wasn't fair. What hope could a mere probationer have of bringing down a scientist? None. Then why had Satan sent him? He knew the answer to that only too well. Because Satan wanted someone to use as an example, to keep the class up to scratch. Satan hadn't any wish that his messenger should succeed.

But, Bobadil thought, suppose he *did* succeed. By some miracle. What then? What would Satan do? He didn't know. To protect himself, shouldn't he find out? He should!

"Bobadil calling Control," he sent.

"Control to Bobadil. What is your trouble?"

"Conditions," Bobadil suggested. "I know the penalty for failure. What is the reward for success?"

Control gave a distinct snigger. Then, after a pause, "Anything you desire," Control answered. Before contact was cut he heard gleeful squeals in the background, and knew that Control had let all of Hell in on the joke.

He flew on, even more angry than before. He'd show them, he swore. But—how? An idea suggested itself, and he considered it. It might work. At any rate, it would gain him access to the scientist. Which was probably more than he was expected to accomplish.

Night was falling when Control informed him that he was over the target, and that, from this moment, he was on his own.

He landed on the roof of a department store. In the darkness he spoke the incantation, then, no longer winged, without horns and tail, he moved towards a skylight. A searching finger found the electrical alarm, and stilled it. The shutter rose. Silently he dropped inside, and the shutter sank back obediently into its place.

Half an hour later a tall, dark-faced man manipulated a door on the ground level, came out, relocked the door with a finger laid on the surface, restored the alarm, and started on his way.

At ten next morning Bobadil approached the laboratory gate. "Dr. Stock," he demanded.

"Let's see your permit," the guard responded.

Bobadil smiled. The man's pocket was buttoned. The letter in the pocket was folded. Nevertheless he could read what was written. "You want to be careful about your mail," he told the guard. "Letters like that could cause you a lot of grief." He nodded. "If you haven't done anything about telling them what they want to know," he said, "we won't make any trouble for you."

He moved forward. "Turn it in when you come off duty," he instructed, "and see you're more careful in future."

Dazed, the guard permitted him to pass, then lifted the telephone. "Visitor for Dr. Stock," he announced. "One of those Security guys," he added.

If the other humans were as easy as the guard, Bobadil thought, his troubles should soon be over. He stepped out of the elevator feeling more cheerful.

"Dr. Stock's office," his guide announced.

He went in. Then halted. Dr. Stock was not to be seen.

He frowned at the attractive young woman at the smaller of the two desks. "Stock?" he snapped. "Why isn't he here?"

The young woman's voice was as cold as her look. "Because I haven't passed on the glad news that you were coming," she retorted. "Because he's busy. Too busy to see stray callers who don't state their business."

"Security," Bobadil barked. "Now get him, will you?"

"When I've seen your identification," she returned.

He took a deep breath. What this obstinate young woman needed was a lesson—a sharp one. But, unfortunately, this was not the place. Nor the time. Particularly as he had no idea as to what form his identification should take.

"You don't see it," he evaded. "I didn't come to see you."

He did not notice, until it was too late, that her hand had moved to a button set in the desk. Only when he heard the alarm ringing did he realise what she had done. By then it was too late. Already feet were charging down the corridor. Then the door was flung open. Two burly men came in.

Involuntarily he backed. In the flesh he had no guarantee that he was invulnerable to the weapons they were flourishing. Devil help him! How was he to get out of this?

Behind him the glass shattered. Lightning flashed. Thunder rolled. The light dimmed, went out. The day outside was obscured.

He felt himself drawn up, drawn away. Then he was standing in the street of the town, a mile from the laboratory, and a hard-faced individual was considering him in an unfriendly fashion.

"Is that the best you can do?" Satan rasped. "Set the whole place by the ears, and then yell for me? Can't you even conjure up a storm by yourself?" He tapped the offender with a hard finger. "Now, you listen to me," he commanded.



"Forget these impractical inspirations of yours, and go by the book. Every man is vulnerable through the opposite sex. You work on Stock's secretary."

"But that treatment needs time," Bobadil protested. "I've only got thirty-six hours left!"

"Work faster, then," Satan advised callously, and departed round the corner.

Left alone, Bobadil realised that what he wanted most of all was to upset the old man's plans. Well, why shouldn't he try? He couldn't be worse off, not now that Satan had made quite sure that he couldn't win.

He'd have to pretend, of course, that he was carrying out the orders he'd been given. He'd have to make out that he was working on the girl. But there was one thing in his favour. They'd never dream that the worm had turned. They wouldn't be checking on him closely.

His eyes, while he was thinking, continued to probe the pockets of the passers-by. Until one man, walking briskly, set Bobadil's legs in motion. And his fingers also, working a swift spell.

It took only a few seconds. Then Bobadil halted, stepped back against the wall, and examined the documents he had conjured up in imitation of the originals in the man's pocket. He ran a finger across the name on the papers. The name vanished. "X. Bobadil" appeared in its place.

In the evening he made his way to an apartment house. He found her name on the board, "Miss Io Brown," but he did not press the bell push. Instead he manipulated the locked entrance, passed through, and floated up to her floor. He tapped on her door. It opened.

"You!" Io exclaimed. "How did you get in?"

"Through the front door."

He advanced. Somehow she found herself giving way. Then he was inside, and the door was shut.

"No need to be scared," Bobadil assured her. He brought out his manufactured papers. "Satisfied?" he asked.

"Why didn't you show them this morning?" she challenged.

"And — how did you leave?"

"Through the window."

"It's three floors up."

"That's right." He sat down comfortably. "I was in a hurry. I still am. What are you going to tell me about Stock?"

She set her lips. "Nothing." She nodded at the door. "You're wasting your time. You may as well go."

He did not stir. But his eyes were probing round the room. He found what he wanted. In the top drawer of the bureau were papers, signed by Stock. "The letters you're keeping there," he waved his hand towards the bureau, "—from Stock."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know—?" She halted, glaring at him. "There's nothing like that in them either," she flung at him. "They're routine only. Instructions. Memorandums. All old."

"Then why keep them?" He smiled. "Unless you've got ideas." He shook his head. "You're wasting your time," he advised. "He's not your type."

She wanted to go over to the door, to hold it open, to compel him to go away. But she could not move. Staring into his eyes, the room seemed to fade. She felt herself drifting. From a long way off a voice was asking her questions, searching questions, which she did not wish to answer. But which she could not resist. Occasionally the voice commented on her answers, finding them amusing, and she also found her answers amusing, and laughed with the voice.

The morning sun through the window woke Bobadil. He stretched pleasantly. There were sensations, he reflected, which he would miss when he returned to Hell. There had been certain compensations in transferring to human shape.

He heard Io climb out of bed in the next room, and twisted cheerfully to face the door.

She halted in outraged disbelief at the sight of him lying on the couch. "What—? What are *you* doing there?"

He let the smile fade from his face, replaced it with a bewildered look. "But—where else should I be?" he asked. "This is where you wanted me to sleep."

"I did!"

Bobadil nodded. "That's right. After we got back from the minister—"

"Minister!"

He threw the coverings off, and sprang to her side. "Look, darling," he put his arms round her, "just *how* high were you last night?"

She stared up at him. "I—I don't remember anything," she answered.

He bent and kissed her ear. He was finding this very pleasant. "You must remember," he charmed. "After we'd argued—"

"I remember something—?"

"Yes. Well. We got talking. You had a bottle of wine in the kitchen. We were laughing. I kissed you. We had some more wine. I kissed you again. We finished the bottle. You kissed me. We went out. When we got back you said you wanted me to sleep in here. You didn't want to go to bed high, not knowing what you were doing."

"Oh!" She turned in his grasp. "What did you say to that?"

"Me?" He looked at her gently. "I thought it was nice," he answered.

She took a deep breath. "So—we're married. And I don't even know your name!"

"You could look in your bag," he suggested.

Slowly she went back into the bedroom. When she returned she had the certificate in her hand. "Xenophon Bobadil," she said. She looked at him, trying to identify this man with Xenophon Bobadil who was her husband. She shook her head. "I don't understand," she muttered.

He put an arm around her shoulders. "If it's a bad dream," he said, "you'll wake up. If it's good, you won't." He grinned. "Maybe a cup of coffee would help," he suggested.

"Yes." She went into the kitchen.

When she came back he was tidying up the room. "I'm useful to have around," he said gaily.

"Perhaps you could fix the percolator," Io answered.

He walked into the kitchen. He saw the trouble at first glance. A wire had come loose inside the plug. He picked up the fitting. His fingers moved.

"It'll work now," he promised, and pushed the plug home.

Only when he saw her expression did he realise that he had been careless. She was remembering, with an onrush of fear, how he had escaped from the laboratory. How he had gained an entry into this building. How he had, somehow, persuaded her into marriage.

He saw it was no good trying to talk her into accepting all these phenomena.

She shrank back as he moved across the kitchen, towards the living room. "What—what are you going to do?" she whispered.

"Going to see Stock," he answered.

"Why?" He could see that she was afraid, not only for herself, but for Spencer Stock also.

He smiled, trying to lessen her alarm. "Because I've got what he wants," he told her. She did not understand. "He's looking for a fuel, isn't he?" Io nodded. "Well, I've got the answer he wants."

"But—but you're a security officer." She stopped. "Or—are you?"

He shrugged. "I can tell him what he wants to know," he said. "Whatever I am."

Io's eyes hardened. "Whatever else you can do," she shook her head, "you can't do that. There isn't anyone on earth who can teach him anything about that."

"Isn't there?" Provoked, he jabbed a finger at the refrigerator. In smooth silence the gleaming cabinet lifted, and hung three feet clear of the floor. "Now isn't there something I can tell him?" he barked, "or do I have to push the thing through the ceiling before you'll admit it?"

But his wife was slipping down to the floor, eyes closed, and did not hear him.

He let the refrigerator down, and jumped towards her. He picked her up, carried her into the bedroom, and laid her on the bed.

She'd be safe, he told himself. He went out.

At the laboratory he displayed his papers. "Tell Dr. Stock I'm on my way," he commanded, and hurried on.

He'd lost too much time. Satan might well have guessed that his servant was playing his own hand. By now, Io should have been well on the downward path. At any moment some officious demon in the Progress Section might become suspicious of Acolyte Bobadil's strange behaviour. Then the fat would be in the fire. With Acolyte Bobadil to follow.

But it seemed that his luck was still holding. Stock was at his desk.

"You're from Security?" the doctor opened.

Bobadil shook his head. "That was to get in to see you," he admitted. He ignored the man's frown. "The truth is,

"I've got something to sell." He plunged ahead. "You're looking for a fuel, Doctor. Well, I've got the answer to that."

"A new fuel?" Stock was intrigued it seemed.

"Not a fuel, doctor. A principle." He beamed. "I'll demonstrate it for you."

He was surprised at the change in the man's face. Spencer Stock's thin mouth had thinned further, his eyes had gone cold.

"Principles," the scientist informed him, "will not lift space ships."

Bobadil sighed. To have got so far, and then to find the man had a closed mind. He suppressed this defeatist comment. The scientist, however biased he might be, could never deny the evidence of his own eyes. "I said I was prepared to demonstrate, Dr. Stock. Watch this."

He pointed his finger at Io's desk. The desk rose, and hung motionless in the air. "That's the principle," he said. "Anti-gravity. What do you say to that, doctor?"

Stock's expression, however, grew more acid. "If you imagine I shall be impressed by stage magic," he began.

Bobadil choked. Angered, he let the desk down. He leaned across the doctor's desk. Deliberately he pointed his hand at the man behind it. And Dr. Spencer Stock moved up from his chair, and hung a foot below the ceiling.

"Is *that* a trick!" Bobadil asked angrily.

The doctor panted. He shook his fist. "Put me down," he snarled. "You faker! You fraud! Put me down! Immediately!"

Bobadil did not hear the door open; did not see Io staring in.

"You won't admit it?" he demanded unbelievably.

"Put me down," Stock yelled. "Put me down, I say."

Bobadil shook his head with disgust. "I try to tell you something," he said. "To show you what you want, and you won't listen." He allowed Stock to float down again to his chair. He put both his hands on the desk. "What can I do," he pleaded, "to make you understand?"

"Charlatan!" Stock spat. "Get out of here. Get out of here at once, before I have you arrested."

"So!" Bobadil stood upright. He scowled. "Maybe *this* will convince you," he said ominously, and muttered the incantation he had said two nights before.



Before the horrified eyes of the two humans the tall, dark man changed. Two huge wings burst through the back of his coat. A barbed tail whipped out behind him. Two pointed, curving horns sprouted from his skull. "Well, Stock?" the Being said, and took a step towards the shrinking man.

The scientist whimpered. He flung himself down behind the desk, and as he fell his clawing hand struck heavily upon the bell set in the top. "Help!" he screamed.

The clamouring alarm spun Bobadil about. He saw Io. His jaw fell. "You!" he exclaimed.

Next moment the wings had gone. The tail was not. The horns had disappeared.

He swallowed. He hadn't any time to lose. The guards were pounding down the corridor. He jumped forward, snatched up the girl, and launched out through the window, up into the clouds.

"Don't look," he said, and set his course for her apartment. Then dived. He made a landing next to the settee.

"You can open your eyes now," he told her.

"They weren't shut," she answered shakily.

He let her slide down upon the settee, and dropped, himself, into the nearest chair. There was nothing he could do now, except wait until the moon came up, and he was hauled back to whatever punishment awaited him.

"You *are* the Devil, aren't you?" a nervous voice enquired.

He jumped. He'd completely forgotten that Io, having seen, would be expecting the worst. Hurriedly he tried to reassure her. The easiest way, he found, was to tell her the whole story.

"The trouble with Stock is that he's a specialist," he concluded. "If a thing is out of his particular field, then it's suspect."

"Well," she qualified, "it *is* magic—"

"It's as much science as his test tubes," Bobadil corrected. "As radio. Or television." He nodded. "Look, I'll show you. I'll show you Stock, right now, and you can see."

Bending down, he traced a circle on the carpet, then waved one hand across it. The area brightened.

Io craned forward. "Oh!" she exclaimed.

Bobadil grunted.

"He's drunk," she declared. "Oh, my goodness!" She grasped Bobadil's arm. "Look, they're throwing him out."

"Shock." Bobadil was more miserable than before. "When he sobers up he'll talk about having seen a devil. They'll take him off the project. That'll delay things. So the old man's won. I've done what he wanted, not meaning to."

"Oh!" Io said again, but on a different note.

Bobadil looked down. Then swept his hand across the circle.

"You've stopped it," the girl complained.

"Yes." Bobadil was severe. "You shouldn't see that sort of thing," he said.

"Why, Xenophon!"

He shook his head. "You shouldn't. Girls like you aren't supposed to know about—" He stopped.

Abruptly he leaped to his feet. "Fool!" he shouted. "Idiot that I am!"

He bent to the wondering Io. "Look," he asked, "if I could stay here, on Earth, as a human being, what would you do?"

"Do?" she asked. "Why, what could I do?"

"Would you divorce me?"

She hesitated. She put a finger to her lips. "Well," she admitted finally, "I don't know. In some ways you're rather sweet."

"That's good enough," her husband declared. He dropped down beside her. "Listen," he said. "Listen very carefully," he commanded.

After a while he stood up. "Here we go, darling," he warned.

His chin dropped to his chest. He breathed deeply. A muffled chant filled the room. He ended, suddenly, on a deep note, flinging his arms wide.

"Well, Bobadil?" a testy voice enquired.

Bobadil swallowed. "Our bargain," he said. "I claim my reward."

There was an ominous silence. "Claim?" Satan growled.

"Claim," Bobadil repeated. "I have seen Spencer Stock in the mirror. He is finished. They will not keep him now with what they think are hallucinations. Apart from the scandal. Drunk. Disorderly conduct. They must find a replacement."

"So," Satan said. He fingered his chin. "Admitting that you've proved your point," he conceded, "what is it you want? Promotion?"

"No," Bobadil returned. "I don't like the way I've been treated. I want to be released. I want to stay here."

Satan was livid. "A human being, eh?" He glared. "After those remarks, I think you would be well advised not to think of returning to Hell." His eyes shone red. "I'll go further," he grated, "I'll warn you, Bobadil, that if, at the end of your life as a human, you find yourself in Hell, I'll honour you with my own attention."

He raised his palms to face his rebellious subject. turned them, and drew them back towards his chest. "Your powers of Hell," he intoned, "return to Hell again."

Slowly his arms came down. "Good riddance," he snapped. He disappeared.

"He didn't remember," Io crowed.

Bobadil raised a quivering hand. "You O.K., dear?" he asked.

"I'm fine." She pushed him into a chair. "He didn't think of it," she repeated. She flung her arms round her husband's neck. "Darling, we've won!"

"You haven't forgotten how to do it?" he asked anxiously. "Maybe he didn't forget. Maybe he took it away from you without your knowing. Maybe he guessed that I'd told you, and was only pretending to have forgotten."

She rumped his hair. "Watch," she commanded.

She pointed an imperious finger at the settee. The settee floated up towards the ceiling.

He gave a sigh of relief. "Some time you can teach *me* how to do it," he said happily.

Io's lips twitched. She nodded. "After we're properly married," she bargained. "After you've talked me into it. Without—science."

"Is it all right," Bobadil asked, "to use magic? A different magic?"

"You could try," Io answered encouragingly.

—Clifford C. Reed

*The modern fantasy story is a far cry from the old 'fairies-at-the-bottom-of-the-garden' type. Take the following ingredients, for instance: Mars, a robot, a small-town police force, gangsters and a hold-up—not very fantastic. But when shaken up by author Harry Harrison you have a first rate fantasy cocktail.*

# ARM OF THE LAW

BY HARRY HARRISON

---

It was a big, coffin-shaped plywood box that looked like it weighed a ton. This brawny type just dumped it through the door of the police station and started away. I looked up from the blotter and shouted at the trucker's vanishing back.

"What the hell is that?"

"How should I know," he said as he swung up into the cab. "I just deliver, I don't X-ray 'em. It came on the morning rocket from Earth is all I know." He gunned the truck more than he had to and threw up a billowing cloud of red dust.

"Jokers," I growled to myself. "Mars is full of jokers."

When I went over to look at the box I could feel the dust grate between my teeth. Chief Craig must have heard the racket because he came out of his office and helped me stand and look at the box.

"Think it's a bomb?" he asked in a bored voice.

"Why would anyone bother—particularly with a thing this size? And all the way from Earth."

He nodded agreement and walked around to look at the other end. There was no sender's address anywhere on the outside. Finally we had to dig out the crowbar and I went to work on the top. After some prying it pulled free and fell off.

That was when we had our first look at Ned. We all would have been a lot happier if it had been our last look as well. If we had just put the lid back on and shipped the thing back to Earth! I know now what they mean about Pandora's Box.

But we just stood there and stared like a couple of rubes. Ned lay motionless and stared back at us.

"A robot!" the chief said.

"Very observant; it's easy to see you went to the police academy."

"Ha ha! Now find out what he's doing here."

I hadn't got to the academy, but this was no handicap to my finding the letter. It was sticking up out of a thick book in a pocket in the box. The Chief took the letter and read it with little enthusiasm.

"Well, well! United Robotics have the brainstorm that . . . robots, correctly used will tend to prove invaluable in police work . . . they want us to co-operate in a field test . . . robot enclosed is the latest experimental model; valued at 120,000 credits."

We both looked back at the robot, sharing the wish that the credits had been in the box instead. The Chief frowned and moved his lips through the rest of the letter. I wondered how we got the robot out of its plywood coffin.

Experimental model or not, this was a nice looking hunk of machinery. A uniform navy-blue all over, though the outlet cases, hooks and such were a metallic gold. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to get that effect. This was as close as a robot could look to a policeman in uniform, without being a joke. All that seemed to be missing was the badge and gun.

Then I noticed the tiny glow of light in the robot's eye lenses. It had never occurred to me before that the thing might be turned on. There was nothing to lose by finding out.

"Get out of the box," I said.

The robot came up smooth and fast as a rocket, landing two feet in front of me and whipping out a snappy salute.



"Police Experimental Robot, serial number XPO-456-934B reporting for duty, sir."

His voice quivered with alertness and I could almost hear the humming of those taut cable muscles. He may have had a stainless steel hide and a bunch of wires for a brain—but he spelled rookie cop to me just the same. The fact that he was man-height with two arms, two legs and that painted-on uniform helped. All I had to do was squint my eyes a bit and there stood Ned the Rookie Cop. Fresh out of school and raring to go. I shook my head to get rid of the illusion. This was just six feet of machine that the boffins and brain-boys had turned out for their own amusement.

"Relax Ned," I said. He was still holding the salute. "At ease. You'll get a hernia of your exhaust pipe if you stay so tense. Anyways, I'm just the sergeant here. That's the Chief of Police over there.

Ned did an about face and slid over to the Chief with that same greased-lightning motion. The Chief just looked at him like something that sprang out from under the hood of a car, while Ned went through the same report routine.

"I wonder if it does anything else beside salute and report," the Chief said while he walked around the robot, looking it over like a dog with a hydrant.

"The functions, operations and responsible courses of action open to the Police Experimental Robots are outlined on pages 184 to 213 of the manual." Ned's voice was muffled for a second while he half-dived back into his case and came up with the volume mentioned. "A detailed breakdown of these will also be found on pages 1035 to 1267 inclusive."

The Chief, who has trouble reading an entire comic page at one sitting, turned the 6-inch thick book over in his hands like it would maybe bite him. When he had a rough idea of how much it weighed and a good feel of the binding he threw it on my desk.

"Take care of this," he said to me as he headed towards his office. "And the robot too. Do something with it." The Chief's span of attention never was great and it had been strained to the limit this time.

I flipped through the book, wondering. One thing I never have had much to do with is robots, so I know just as much about them as any Joe in the street. Probably less. The book

was filled with pages of fine print, fancy mathematics, wiring diagrams and charts in nine colours and that kind of thing. It needed close attention. Which attention I was not prepared to give at the time. The book slid shut and I eyed the newest employee of the city of Nineport.

"There is a broom behind the door. Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes sir."

"In that case you will sweep out this room, raising as small a cloud of dust as possible at the same time."

He did a very neat job of it.

I watched 120,000 credits worth of machinery making a tidy pile of butts and sand and wondered why it had been sent to Nineport. Probably because there wasn't another police force in the solar system that was smaller or more unimportant than ours. The engineers must have figured this would be a good spot for a field test. Even if the thing blew up, nobody would really mind. There would probably be someone along someday to get a report on it. Well they had picked the right spot all right. Nineport was just a little bit beyond nowhere.

Which, of course, was why I was there. I was the only real cop on the force. They needed at least one to give an illusion of the wheels going around. The Chief, Alonzo Craig, had just enough sense to take graft without dropping the money. There were two patrolmen. One old and drunk most of the time. The other so young his lips were still puckered from the feeding bottle. I had ten years on a metropolitan force, Earthside. Why I left is nobody's damn business. I have long since paid for any mistakes I made there by ending up in Nineport.

Nineport is not a city, it's just a place where people stop. The only permanent citizens are the ones who cater to those on the way through. Hotel keepers, restaurant owners, gamblers, barkeepers, and the rest.

There is a space port, but only some freighters come there. To pick up the metal from some of the mines that are still working. Some of the settlers still came in for supplies. You might say that Nineport was a town that just missed the boat. In a hundred years I doubt if there will be enough left sticking out of the sand to even tell where it used to be. I won't be there either, so I couldn't care less.

I went back to the blotter. Five drunks in the tank, an average night's haul. While I wrote them up Fats dragged in the sixth one.

"Locked himself in the ladies' toilet at the spaceport and resisting arrest," he reported.

"D and D. Throw him in with the rest."

Fats steered his limp victim across the floor, matching him step for dragging step. I always marvelled at the way Fats took care of drunks, since he usually had more under his belt than they had. I have never seen him falling down drunk or completely sober. About all he was good for was keeping a blurred eye on the lockup and running in drunks. He did well at that. No matter what they crawled under or on top of, he found them. No doubt due to the same shared natural instincts.

Fats clanged the door behind number six and weaved his way back in. "What's that?" he asked, peering at the robot along the purple beauty of his nose.

"That is a robot. I have forgotten the number his mother gave him at the factory so we will call him Ned. He works here now."

"Good for him! He can clean up the tank after we throw the bums out."

"That's *my* job," Billy said coming in through the front door. He clutched his nightstick and scowled out from under the brim of his uniform cap. It is not that Billy is stupid, just that most of his strength has gone into his back instead of his mind.

"That's Ned's job now because you have a promotion. You are going to help me with some of my work."

Billy came in very handy at times and I was anxious that the force shouldn't lose him. My explanation cheered him because he sat down by Fats and watched Ned do the floor.

That's the way things went for about a week. We watched Ned sweep and polish until the station began to take on a positively antiseptic look. The Chief, who always has an eye out for that type of thing, found out that Ned could file the odd ton of reports and paperwork that cluttered his office. All this kept the robot busy, and we got so used to him we were hardly aware he was around. I knew he had moved the packing case into the storeroom and fixed himself up a cosy sort of robot dormitory-coffin. Other than that I didn't know or care.

The operation manual was buried in my desk and I never looked at it. If I had, I might have had some idea of the big changes that were in store. None of us knew the littlest bit about what a robot can or cannot do. Ned was working nicely as a combination janitor-file-clerk and should have stayed that way. He would have too if the Chief hadn't been so lazy. That's what started it all.

It was around nine at night and the Chief was just going home when the call came in. He took it, listened for a moment, then hung up.

"Greenback's liquor store. He got held up again. Says to come at once."

"That's a change. Usually we don't hear about it until a month later. What's he paying protection money for if China Joe ain't protecting? What's the rush now?"

The Chief chewed his loose lip for awhile, finally and painfully reached a decision.

"You better go around and see what the trouble is."

"Sure," I said reaching for my cap. "But no one else is around, you'll have to watch the desk until I get back."

"That's no good," he moaned. "I'm dying from hunger and sitting here isn't going to help me any."

"I will go take the report," Ned said, stepping forward and snapping his usual well-greased salute.

At first the Chief wasn't buying. You would think the water cooler came to life and offered to take over his job.

"How could *you* take a report?" he growled, putting the wise-guy water cooler in its place. But he had phrased his little insult as a question so he had only himself to blame. In exactly three minutes Ned gave the Chief a summary of the routine necessary for a police officer to make a report on an armed robbery or other reported theft. From the glazed look in Chief's protruding eyes I could tell Ned had quickly passed the boundaries of the Chief's meager knowledge.

"Enough!" the harried man finally gasped. "If you know so much why don't you make a report?"

Which to me sounded like another version of "*if you're so damned smart why ain't you rich?*" which we used to snarl at the brainy kids in grammar school. Ned took such things literally though, and turned towards the door.

"Do you mean you wish me to make a report on this robbery?"

"Yes," the Chief said just to get rid of him, and we watched his blue shape vanish through the door.

"He must be brighter than he looks," I said, "He never stopped to ask where Greenback's store is."

The Chief nodded and the phone rang again. His hand was still resting on it so he picked it up by reflex. He listened for a second and you would have thought someone was pumping blood out of his heel from the way his face turned white.

"The holdup's still on," he finally gasped. "Greenback's delivery boy is on the line—calling back to see where we are. Says he's under a table in the back room . . ."

I never heard the rest of it because I was out the door and into the car. There were a hundred things that could happen if Ned got there before me. Guns could go off, people hurt, lots of things. And the police would be to blame for it all—sending a tin robot to do a cop's job. Maybe the Chief had ordered Ned there, but clearly as if the words were painted on the windshield of the car, I knew I would be dragged into it. It never gets very warm on Mars, but I was sweating.

Nineport has fourteen traffic regulations and I broke all of them before I had gone a block. Fast as I was, Ned was faster. As I turned the corner I saw him open the door of Greenback's store and walk in. I screamed brakes in behind him and arrived just in time to have a gallery seat. A shooting gallery at that.

There were two holdup punks, one behind the counter making like a clerk and the other lounging off to the side. Their guns were out of sight, but blue-coated Ned busting through the door like that was too much for their keyed up nerves. Up came both guns like they were on strings and Ned stopped dead. I grabbed for my own gun and waited for pieces of busted robot to come flying through the window.

Ned's reflexes were great. Which I suppose is what you should expect of a robot.

"*Drop your guns, you are under arrest.*"

He must have had on full power or something, his voice blasted so loud my ears hurt. The result was just what you might expect. Both torpedoes let go at once and the air was filled with flying slugs. The show windows went out with a crash and I went down on my stomach. From the amount of noise I knew they both had recoilless .50's. You can't stop one

of those slugs. They go right through you and anything else that happens to be in the way.

Except they didn't seem to be bothering Ned. The only notice he seemed to take was to cover his eyes. A little shield with a thin slit popped down over his eye lenses. Then he moved in on the first thug.

I knew he was fast, but not that fast. A couple of slugs jarred him as he came across the room, but before the punk could change his aim Ned had the gun in his hand. That was the end of that. He put on one of the sweetest hammer locks I have ever seen and neatly grabbed the gun when it dropped from the limp fingers. With the same motion that slipped the gun into a pouch he whipped out a pair of handcuffs and snapped them on the punk's wrists.

Holdupnik number two was heading for the door by then, and I was waiting to give him a warm reception. There was never any need. He hadn't gone halfway before Ned slid in front of him. There was a thud when they hit that didn't shake Ned, but gave the other a glazed look. He never even knew it when Ned slipped the cuffs on him and dropped him down next to his partner.

I went in, took their guns from Ned, and made the arrest official. That was all Greenback saw when he crawled out from behind the counter and it was all I wanted him to see. The place was a foot deep in broken glass and smelled like the inside of a Jack Daniels bottle. Greenback began to howl like a wolf over his lost stock. He didn't seem to know any more about the phone call than I did, so I grabbed hold of a pimply looking kid who staggered out of the storeroom. He was the one who had made the calls.

It turned out to be a matter of sheer stupidity. He had worked for Greenback only a few days and didn't have enough brains to realize that all holdups should be reported to the protection boys instead of the police. I told Greenback to wise up his boy, as look at the trouble that got caused. Then pushed the two ex-holdup men out to the car. Ned climbed in the back with them and they clung together like two waifs in a storm. The robot's only response was to pull a first aid kit from his hip and fix up a ricochet hole in one of the thugs that no one had noticed in the excitement.



The Chief was still sitting there with that bloodless look when we marched in. I didn't believe it could be done, but he went two shades whiter.

"You made the pinch," he whispered. Before I could straighten him out a second and more awful idea hit him. He grabbed a handful of shirt on the first torpedo and poked his face down. "You with China Joe," he snarled.

The punk made the error of trying to be cute so the Chief let him have one on the head with the open hand that set his eyes rolling like marbles. When the question got asked again he found the right answer.

"I never heard from no China Joe. We just hit town today and—"

"Freelance, by God," the Chief sighed and collapsed into his chair. "Lock 'em up and quickly tell me what in hell happened."

I slammed the gate on them and pointed a none too steady finger at Ned.

"There's the hero," I said. "Took them on single-handed, wrestled them for a fall and made the capture. He is a one-robot tornado, a power for good in this otherwise evil community. And he's bulletproof too." I ran a finger over Ned's broad chest. The paint was chipped by the slugs, but the metal was hardly scatched.

"This is going to cause me trouble, big trouble," the Chief wailed.

I knew he meant with the protection boys. They did not like punks getting arrested and guns going off without their okay. But Ned thought the Chief had other worries and rushed in to put them right.

"There will be no trouble. At no time did I violate any of the Robotic Restriction Laws, they are part of my control circuits and therefore fully automatic. The men who drew their guns violated both robotic and human law when they threatened violence. I did not injure the men—merely restrained them."

It was all over the Chief's head, but I liked to think *I* could follow it. And I *had* been wondering how a robot—a machine—could be involved in something like law application and violence. Ned had the answer to that one too.

"Robots have been assuming these functions for years. Don't recording radar meters pass judgement on human

violation of automobile regulations? A robot alcohol detector is better qualified to assess the sobriety of a prisoner than the arresting officer. At one time robots were even allowed to make their own decisions about killing. Before the Robotic Restriction Laws automatic gun-pointers were in general use. Their final development was a self-contained battery of large anti-aircraft guns. Automatic scan radar detected all aircraft in the vicinity. Those that could not return the correct identifying signal had their courses tracked and computed, automatic fuse-cutters and loaders readied the computer-aimed guns—which were fired by the robot mechanism.”

There was little I could argue about with Ned. Except maybe his college-professor vocabulary. So I switched the attack.

“But a robot can’t take the place of a cop, it’s a complex human job.”

“Of course it is, but taking a human policeman’s place is not the function of a police robot. Primarily I combine the functions of numerous pieces of police equipment, integrating their operations and making them instantly available. In addition I can aid in the *mechanical* processes of law enforcement. If you arrest a man you handcuff him. But if you order me to do it, I have made no moral decision. I am just a machine for attaching handcuffs at that point . . .”

My raised hand cut off the flow of robotic argument. Ned was hipped to his ears with facts and figures and I had a good idea who would come off second best in any continued discussion. No laws had been broken when Ned made the pinch, that was certain.

But there are other laws than those that appear on the books.

“China Joe is not going to like this, not at all,” the Chief said, speaking my own thoughts.

The law of Tooth and Claw. That’s one that wasn’t in the law books. And that was what ran Nineport. The place was just big enough to have a good population of gambling joints, bawdy houses and drunk-rollers. They were all run by China Joe. As was the police department. We were all in his pocket and you might say he was the one who paid our wages. This is not the kind of thing, though, that you explain to a robot.

“Yeah, China Joe.”

I thought it was an echo at first, then realized that someone had eased in the door behind me. Something called Alex.

Six feet of bone, muscle and trouble. China Joe's right hand man. He imitated a smile at the Chief who sank a bit lower in his chair.

"China Joe wants you should tell him why you got smart cops going around and putting the arm on people and letting them shoot up good liquor. He's mostly angry about the hooch. He says that he had enough guff and after this you should—"

"I am putting you under Robot Arrest, pursuant to article 46, paragraph 19 of the revised statues . . ."

Ned had done it before we realized he had even moved. Right in front of our eyes he was arresting Alex and signing our death warrants.

Alex was not slow. As he turned to see who had grabbed him, he had already dragged out this cannon. He got one shot in, square against Ned's chest, before the robot plucked the gun away and slipped on the cuffs. While we all gaped like dead fish, Ned recited the charge in what I swear was a satisfied tone.

"The prisoner is Peter Rakjomskj, alias Alex the Axe, wanted in Canal City for armed robbery and attempted murder. Also wanted by local police of Detroit, New York and Manchester on charges of . . ."

"*Get it off me!*" Alex howled. We might have too, and everything might have still been straightened out if Benny Bug hadn't heard the shot. He popped his head in the front door just long enough to roll his eyes over our little scene.

"Alex . . . they're puttin' the arm on Alex!"

Then he was gone and when I hit the door he was nowhere in sight. China Joe's boys always went around in pairs. And in ten minutes he would know all about it.

"Book him," I told Ned. "It wouldn't make any difference if we let him go now. The world has already come to an end."

Fats came in then, mumbling to himself. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder when he saw me.

"What's up? I see little Benny Bug come out of here like the place was on fire and almost get killed driving away?"

Then Fats saw Alex with the bracelets on and turned sober in one second. He just took a moment to gape, then his mind was made up. Without a trace of a stagger he walked over to the Chief and threw his badge on the desk in front of him.

"I am an old man and I drink too much to be a cop. Therefore I am resigning from the force. Because if that is whom I think it is over there with the cuffs on, I will not live to be a day older as long as I am around here."

"Rat." The Chief growled in pain through his clenched teeth. "Deserting the sinking ship. Rat."

"Squeek," Fats said and left.

The Chief was beyond caring at this point. He didn't blink an eye when I took Fat's badge off the desk. I don't know why I did it, perhaps I thought it was only fair. Ned had started all the trouble and I was just angry enough to want him on the spot when it was finished. There were two rings on his chest plate, and I was not surprised when the badge pin fitted them neatly.

"There, now you are a real cop," Sarcasm dripped from the words. I should have realized that robots are immune to sarcasm. Ned took my statement at face value.

"This is a very great honour, not only for me but for all robots. I will do my best to fulfill all the obligations of the office." Jack Armstrong in tin underwear. I could hear the little motors in his guts humming with joy as he booked Alex.

If everything else hadn't been so bad I would have enjoyed that. Ned had more police equipment built into him than Nineport had ever owned. There was an ink pad that snapped out of one hip, and he efficiently rolled Alex's fingertips across it and stamped them on a card. Then he held the prisoner at arm's length while something clicked in his abdomen. Once more sideways and two instant photographs dropped out of a slot. The mug shots were stuck on the card, arrest details and such inserted. There was more like this, but I forced myself away. There were more important things to think about.

Like staying alive.

"Any ideas Chief?"

A groan was my only answer so I let it go at that. Billy, the balance of the police force, came in then. I gave him a quick rundown. Either through stupidity or guts he elected to stay, and I was proud of the boy. Ned locked away the latest prisoner and began sweeping up.

That was the way we were when China Joe walked in.

Even though we were expecting it, it was still a shock. He had a bunch of his toughest hoods with him and they crowded through the door like an overweight baseball team. China Joe

was in front, hands buried in the sleeves of his long mandarin gown. No expression at all on his asiatic features. He didn't waste time talking to us, just gave the word to his own boys.

"Clean this place up. The new police Chief will be here in a while and I don't want him to see any bums hanging around."

It made me angry. Even with the graft I like to feel I'm still a cop. Not on a cheap punk's payroll. I was also curious about China Joe. Had been ever since I tried to get a line on him and never found a thing. I still wanted to know.

"Ned, take a good look at that Chinese guy in the rayon bathrobe and let me know who he is."

My, but those electronic circuits work fast. Ned shot the answer back like a straight man who had been rehearsing his lines for weeks.

"He is a pseudo-oriental, utilizing a natural sallowness of the skin heightened with dye. He is not Chinese. There has also been an operation on his eyes, scars of which are still visible. This has been undoubtedly done in an attempt to conceal his real identity, but Bertillon measurements of his ears and other features make identity positive. He is on the Very Wanted list of Interpol and his real name is . . ."

China Joe was angry, and with a reason.

"That's the *thing* . . . that big-mouthed rusty radio set over there. We heard about it and we're taking care of it!"

The mob jumped aside then or hit the deck and I saw there was a guy kneeling in the door with a rocket launcher. Shaped anti-tank charges, no doubt. That was my last thought as the thing let go with a "whoosh."

Maybe you can hit a tank with one of those. But not a robot. At least not a police robot. Ned was sliding across the floor on his face when the back wall blew up. There was no second shot. Ned closed his hand on the tube of the bazooka and it was so much old drainpipe.

Billy decided then that anyone who fired a rocket in a police station was breaking the law, so he moved in with his club. I was right behind him since I did not want to miss any of the fun. Ned was at the bottom somewhere, but I didn't doubt he could take care of himself.

There were a couple of muffled shots and someone screamed. No one fired after that because we were too tangled up. A punk named Brooklyn Eddie hit me on the side of the head with his gunbutt and I broke his nose all over his face with my fist.

There is a kind of a fog over everything after that. But I do remember it was very busy for awhile.

When the fog lifted a bit I realized I was the only one still standing. Or leaning rather. It was a good thing the wall was there.

Ned came in the street door carrying a very bashed looking Brooklyn Eddie. I hoped I had done all that. Eddie's wrists were fastened together with cuffs. Ned laid him gently next to the heap of thugs—who I suddenly realized all wore the same kind of handcuffs. I wondered vaguely if Ned made them as he needed them or had a supply tucked away in a hollow leg or something.

There was a chair a few feet away and sitting down helped.

Blood was all over everything and if a couple of the hoods hadn't groaned I would have thought they were corpses. One was, I noticed suddenly. A bullet had caught him in the chest, most of the blood was probably his.

Ned burrowed in the bodies for a moment and dragged Billy out. He was unconscious. A big smile on his face and the splintered remains of his nightstick still stuck in his fist. It takes very little to make some people happy. A bullet had gone through his leg and he never moved while Ned ripped the pants leg off and put on a bandage.

"The spurious China Joe and one other man escaped in a car," Ned reported.

"Don't let it worry you," I managed to croak. "Your batting average still leads the league."

It was then I realized the Chief was still sitting in his chair, where he had been when the bruhaha started. Still slumped down with that glazed look. Only after I started to talk to him did I realize that Alonzo Craig, Chief of Police of Nineport, was now dead.

A single shot. Small caliber gun, maybe a .22. Right through the heart and what blood there had been was soaked up by his clothes. I had a good idea where the gun would be that fired that shot. A small gun, the kind that would fit in a wide Chinese sleeve.

I wasn't tired or groggy any more. Just angry. Maybe he hadn't been the brightest or most honest guy in the world. But he deserved a better end than that. Knocked off by a two-bit racket boss who thought he was being crossed.



Right about then I realized I had a big decision to make. With Billy out of the fight and Fats gone I was the Nineport police force. All I had to do to be clear of this mess was to walk out the door and keep going. I would be safe enough.

Ned buzzed by, picked up two of the thugs, and hauled them off to the cells.

Maybe it was the sight of his blue back or maybe I was tired of running. Either way my mind was made up before I realized it. I carefully took off the Chief's gold badge and put it on in place of my old one.

"The new Chief of Police of Nineport," I said to no one in particular.

"Yes sir," Ned said as he passed. He put one of the prisoners down long enough to salute, then went on with his work. I returned the salute.

The hospital meat wagon hauled away the dead and wounded. I took an evil pleasure in ignoring the questioning stares of the attendants. After the doc fixed the side of my head, everyone cleared out. Ned mopped up the floor. I ate ten aspirin and waited for the hammering to stop so I could think what to do next.

When I pulled my thoughts together the answer was obvious. Too obvious. I made as long a job as I could of reloading my gun.

"Refill your handcuff box, Ned. We are going out."

Like a good cop he asked no questions. I locked the outside door when we left and gave him the key.

"Here. There's a good chance you will be the only one left to use this before the day is over."

I stretched the drive over to China Joe's place just as much as I could. Trying to figure if there was another way of doing it. There wasn't. Murder had been done and Joe was the boy I was going to pin it on. So I had to get him.

The best I could do was stop around the corner and give Ned a briefing.

"This combination bar and dice-room is the sole property of he whom we will still call China Joe until there is time for you to give me a rundown on him. Right now I've got enough distractions. What we have to do is go in there, find Joe and bring him to justice. Simple?"

"Simple," Ned answered in his sharp Joe-college voice. "But wouldn't it be simpler to make the arrest now, when he is leaving in that car, instead of waiting until he returns?"

The car in mention was doing sixty as it came out of the alley ahead of us. I only had a glimpse of Joe in the back seat as it tore by us.

"Stop them!" I shouted, mostly for my own benefit since I was driving. I tried to shift gears and start the engine at the same time, and succeeded in doing exactly nothing.

So Ned stopped them. It had been phrased as an order. He leaned his head out of the window and I saw at once why most of his equipment was located in his torso. Probably his brain as well. There sure wasn't much room left in his head when that cannon was tucked away in there.

A .75 recoil-less. A plate swivelled back right where his nose should have been if he had one, and the big muzzle pointed out. It's a neat idea when you think about it. Right between the eyes for good aiming, up high, always ready.

The *Boom Boom* almost took my head off. Of course Ned was a perfect shot—so would I be with a computer for a brain. He had holed one rear tire with each slug and the car flap-flapped to a stop a little ways down the road. I climbed out slowly while Ned sprinted there in seconds flat. They didn't even try to run this time. What little nerve they had left must have been shattered by the smoking muzzle of that .75 poking out from between Ned's eyes. Robots are neat about things like that so he must have left it sticking out deliberate. Probably had a course in psychology back in robot school.

Three of them in the car, all waving their hands in the air like the last reel of a western. And the rear floor covered with interesting little suitcases.

Everyone came along quietly.

China Joe only snarled while Ned told me that his name really was Stantin and the Elmira hot seat was kept warm all the time in hopes he would be back. I promised Joe-Stantin I would be happy to arrange it that same day. Thereby not worrying about any slip-ups with the local authorities. The rest of the mob would stand trial in Canal City.

It was a very busy day.

Things have quieted down a good deal since then. Billy is out of the hospital and wearing my old sergeant's stripes. Even Fats is back, though he is sober once in a while now and has trouble looking me in the eye. We don't have much to do because in addition to being a quiet town this is now an honest one.

Ned is on foot patrol nights and in charge of the lab and files days. Maybe the Policeman's Benevolent wouldn't like that, but Ned doesn't seem to mind. He touched up all the bullet scratches and keeps his badge polished. I know a robot can't be happy or sad—but Ned *seems* to be happy.

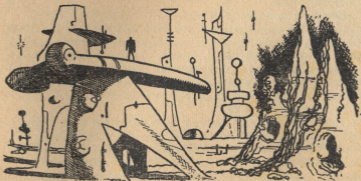
Sometimes I would swear I can hear him humming to himself. But of course, that is only the motors and the things going around.

When you start thinking about it, I suppose we set some kind of precedent here. What with putting on a robot as a full-fledged police officer. No one ever came around from the factory yet, so I have never found out if we're the first or not.

And I'll tell you something else. I'm not going to stay in this broken down town forever. I have some letters out now, looking for a new job.

So some people are going to be *very* surprised when they see who their new Chief of Police is after *I* leave.

—Harry Harrison





# *The New Nova Magazine*

Action Packed Adventure Stories  
in the current issue of

**SCIENCE FICTION  
ADVENTURES**

**2/-**  
Bi-Monthly

**NOW ON SALE**

Containing :

2 Action-packed Novels

*Mission To Oblivion*

by JOHN VICTOR PETERSEN

*The World Otalmi Made*

by HARRY HARRISON

Plus Short Stories by

**RALPH BURKE, BASIL WELLS**

and **DAVID MASON**

★ ★ ★

**DON'T MISS YOUR COPY—ORDER NOW**  
**NOW ON SALE**

---

**NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD**

Maclaren House, 131 Gt. Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1.



*Another famous Nova Magazine*

# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

1957 World Science Fiction Convention Achievement  
Award Winner for the Best British Science Fiction  
Magazine

**128 pages Monthly 2/-**

Famed for outstanding serials during the past  
five years, yet another unusual two-parter  
commences in No. 75 (now on sale)

## EQUATOR

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

Unusual inasmuch as Earth peacefully offers  
sanctuary to the inhabitants of an alien star-  
ship without knowing if they come in  
peace. It is the story of whether alien and  
Earthman can live together and is full of  
intrigue and political implication.

ALSO

## SPACE IS A PROVINCE OF BRAZIL

by JOHN WYNDHAM

The final novelette in the colonisation  
of the Solar System—as it might well  
happen.

PLUS SHORT STORIES

★ Articles

★ Features

**NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD**

Maclaren House, 131 Gt. Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1.