STREET & SMITH'S

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SINISTER BARRIER

By

Eric Frank Russell

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At the bowling alleys, one man tells another there's something *new* in dentifrices . . . the New Listerine Tooth Paste supercharged with Luster-Foam detergent.

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STREET & SMITH'S

UNKNOWN

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FEATURE NOVEL

SHORT STORIES

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.

UNKNOWN

Street & Smith present herewith a new magazine, dedicated to a new type of entertainment. *UNKNOWN* is both our title and our only classification; the material we plan to present is to be like none that has ever, anywhere, been presented consistently before.

No terms, then, have been evolved to describe this magazine; as it has never before existed. We will deal with the Unknown, but in a manner uniquely and completely different from the stories you have seen in the past.

One rule only we apply as limitation to an author's imagination; that the resultant story must be pure entertainment. Whether it be the chuckle over *Trouble with Water* or the thrill of uncertain discomfort evoked by *Sinister Barrier*, somewhere the story must stimulate imagination and enjoyment.

There will be further strange, disquieting blendings of fact and imagination such as *Sinister Barrier* to leave you uncertain of your certainty that it is pure fiction. Perhaps you're wrong, you know. The facts Russell states *are* facts. A man may well strike truth in what is meant as fiction—

But each month we will bring either a full novel-length story, complete, or two thirty-thousand-word short novels, plus some forty thousand words of short stories and novelettes.

And each month we shall bring you a magazine wherein the authors are bound by but one rule—pure entertainment. Beyond that—read and determine by our offering this month, the quality and the material we cannot otherwise or better define.

THE EDITOR.

OF THINGS BEYOND

On March 10th comes the second issue of UNKNOWN. This issue will give you some impression of what we plan. In the next issue we will amplify and clarify that definition of intentions with another ninety thousand words of unique stories.

Incidentally, you are personally invited to send letters giving your definition of pure entertainment, and your comments on the works we are offering.

First is L. Ron Hubbard's *The Ultimate Adventure,* a story that, for quality and entertainment, stands side by side with some of Washington Irving's better *Tales of the Alhambra.* In its own—and different—way, it is a classic to rank with this month's *Sinister Barrier.*

Arthur J. Burks brings *The Changeling,* the evil god, the second-generation weakling, vicious and mean, that has sprung into being today among the great old gods of Olympus. Cideus, the Killer—sneaking, butchering son of the old, bluff warrior, Mars, and the knowledge of Minerva—stalks the world—

And E. Hoffman Price offers a shorter yarn called *Strange Gateway.* You won't like it unless you read it at the dinner hour in a crowded hotel lobby. It's bad for the nerves.

There will be others—short stories and novelettes—as yet not definitely scheduled. William G. Bogart's *You Thought Me Dead,* for instance. But, save for the guarantee that they will be pure entertainment, type, subject, manner of handling will, of course, be

UNKNOWN

THE EDITOR.

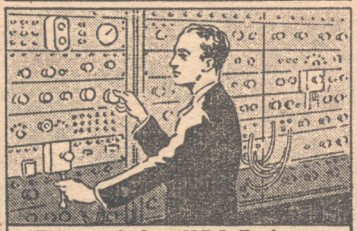
I jumped from $18 a week to $50
-- a Free Book started me toward this
GOOD PAY IN RADIO

HERE'S
How it Happened
by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

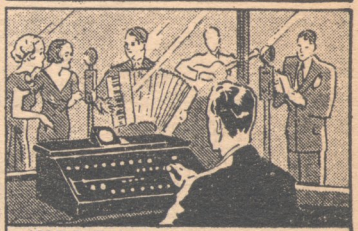
"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."

"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5, $10, $15 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."

"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."



"N.R.I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast. The field is wide open to properly trained men."

J. E. SMITH,
President
National Radio
Institute
Established 1914

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Find Out What Radio Offers You

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J. E. SMITH,
President,
Dept. 9BD,
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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out spare time and full time opportunities in Radio, and explains your practical method of training at home in spare time to become a Radio Expert. (Please write plainly.)

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M & M is what they order,
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Mattingly & Moore

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A blend of straight whiskies—90 proof—every drop is whiskey.
Frankfort Distilleries, Incorporated, Louisville and Baltimore.

SINISTER BARRIER

Author's Note: It would be idle to pretend, and dishonest to suggest that "Sinister Barrier" is anything else than fiction. Some may regard it as fantasy, because it is placed in the future and depicts certain developments that have been predicted by those qualified to forecast the coming triumphs of science. But I regard it as a sort of fact-fiction solely because I do sincerely believe that *if ever a story was based upon facts it is this one.*

"Sinister Barrier" is as true a story as it

BY
ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

is possible to concoct while presenting believe-it-or-not truths in the guise of entertainment. It derives its fantastic atmosphere only from the queerness, the eccentricity, the complete inexplicability of the *established* facts that gave it birth. These facts are myriad. I have them in the form of a thousand press clippings snatched from half a hundred newspapers in the Old World and the New. A thousand more were given me by adventurers hardier than myself; people who have explored farther and more daringly into forbidden acres than I have done.

To these people I acknowledge my indebtedness. To the Fortean Society of America, and to Charles Fort, author of "The Book of the Damned," "New Lands," "Lo!" and "Wild Talents." I have derived inspiration from J. W. N. Sullivan's "Limitations Of Science," and been greatly assisted by H. Gordon Garbedian's "Major Mysteries Of Science." Professor E. A. Milne's evolution of a post-Einsteinian cosmology has been of much help; while the symbiotic aspect of terrestrial life I conceived with the unwitting aid of my respected friend, W. Olaf Stapledon, author of "Last And First Men," "Star Maker," etc. Finally, I owe much to another and equally respected friend, Lieutenant Commander Rupert T. Gould, R. N., author of "Oddities," "Enigmas," etc.

But perhaps my greatest debt is to two friends, one of whom asked me, "Since everybody wants peace, why don't we get it?" while the other posed me this one, "If there are extra-terrestrial races further advanced than ourselves, why haven't they visited us already?" Charles Fort gave me what may well be the answer. He said, *"I think we're property."* And that is the plot of "Sinister Barrier."

I wrote the story—but it isn't mine. It is a posthumous collaboration. For Fort, with other imaginative and inquiring minds, such as Bierce, Weinbaum, Daniels, and Lovecraft, has been "removed" with expedition, and with subtle cunning.

Critics are entitled to say, "If you believe your plot has a factual basis, you are running an awful risk of 'removal' by merely developing it." I run no risk. "Sinister Barrier" is not fiction offered as truth: it is offered only as fiction. Therefore, it will not be believed. The natural skepticism of my readers is my safeguard.

Eric F. Russell.

Clipping from a current daily:

TO BE READ IN A DIM LIGHT, AT NIGHT

The late Charles Fort, who was a sort of Peter Pan of science and went about picking up whimsies of fact, mostly from the rubbish heaps of astronomy, would have been interested in an incident that occurred Sunday morning on Fifth Avenue between Twenty-ninth and Thirtieth Streets.

Eight starlings in flight suddenly plummeted to the feet of Patrolman Anton Vodrazka, dead. There was no sign of a wound or any other indication of what caused their end. It was at first thought that they might have been poisoned, as were some pigeons at Verdi Square, Seventy-second Street and Broadway, recently.

S. P. C. A. agents said it was most unlikely that eight birds, even if they had been poisoned, would succumb at the same moment in mid-flight. Another report from the same neighborhood a few minutes later didn't help any. A starling, "excited and acting as if pursued by some invisible terror," had flown into a Childs Restaurant on Fifth Avenue, banged into the lights and fallen in the front window.

What killed the eight starlings? What frightened the ninth? Was there some Presence in the sky? . . . We hasten to pass the idea on to the nearest writer of mystery stories.

And here's the story:

I.

QUICK death awaits the first cow that leads a revolt against milking," mused Professor Peder Bjornsen. He passed long, slender fingers through prematurely white hair. His eyes, strangely protruding, filled with uncanny light, stared out of his office window, which gaped on the third level above traffic swirling through Stockholm's busy Hötorget. He wasn't looking at the traffic.

"And there's a swat ready for the first bee that blats about pilfered honey," he added. Stockholm hummed and roared. The professor continued to stare in silent, fearful contemplation. Then he drew back from the window, slowly, reluctantly, moving as if forcing himself by sheer will power to retreat from a horror that enticed him toward it.

He raised his hands, pushed, pushed at thin air. His eyes, cold, hard but bright, followed with dreadful fascination an invisible point that crept from window to ceiling. He turned and ran, his eyes staring, his mouth open and expelling breath soundlessly.

Halfway to the door he emitted a brief gasp, stumbled, fell. Clutching the calendar from his desk, he dragged it down with him. Then he sobbed, hugged hands to his heart, and lay still. The calendar's top leaf fluttered in a cold breeze from nowhere. The date was May the seventeenth, 2015.

Bjornsen had been five hours dead when they found him. The medical examiner diagnosed heart disease. Police Lieutenant Baeker found on the professor's desk a scratch pad bearing a message from the grave.

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. It is humanly impossible to order my thoughts every minute of the day; to control my dreams every hour of the night. It is inevitable that sooner or later I shall be found dead, in which case you must—"

"Must what?" asked Baeker. There was no reply. The voice that could have answered was stilled forever. Baeker heard the medical officer's report, then burned the note. Heart disease it was, actually and officially.

ON May the thirtieth, Dr. Guthrie Sheridan walked with the deliberate, jerky step of an automaton along Charing Cross Road, London. His frozen-looking eyes were on the sky, while his feet found their own way. He had the vague appearance of a blind man treading a familiar route.

Jim Leacock saw him wending his mechanical way, and yelled, "Hey, Sherry!" He dashed up, boisterous as usual, all set to administer a hearty slap on the back. He stopped, appalled.

Turning upon him pale, strained features framing eyes that gleamed like icicles seen in twilight, Guthrie seized an arm, and said: "Jim! By heavens! I'm glad to see you." His breath came fast, his voice grew urgent. "Jim, I've *got* to talk to somebody or go crazy. I have discovered the most incredible fact in the history of mankind. It is almost beyond belief. Yet it explains a thousand things that we have merely guessed at, or completely ignored."

"What is it?" demanded Leacock, studying Sheridan's distorted face.

"Jim, let me tell you that man is not the master of his fate, nor the captain of his soul. The very beasts of the field—" He broke off, grabbed at his listener, and screamed: "I've thought it! I've thought it, I tell you!" His legs bent at the knees. "I'm done for!" He slumped to the sidewalk.

Hastily, Leacock stooped over the doctor, tore open his shirt, slid a hand down his chest. No beat was discernible. Sheridan was dead. Heart disease, apparently.

At exactly the same hour of the same day, Dr. Hans Luther did a very similar thing. He carried his deceptively

plump body at top speed across his laboratory, raced down the stairs, along the hall. He fled with many frightened glances over one shoulder, and the glances came from eyes like polished agate.

Reaching the telephone in the hall, he dialed with shaking finger, got the Dortmund *Zeitung,* shouted for the editor. With his eyes still upon the stairs, while the telephone receiver trembled against his ear, he bawled into the mouthpiece: "Vogel, I have for you the most astonishing news since the dawn of time. Earth is belted with a warning streamer that says: KEEP OFF THE GRASS!"

"Ha-ha!" responded Vogel dutifully. His heavy face moved in the tiny vision screen above the telephone, and took on the patient expression of one who is accustomed to tolerate the eccentricities of scientists.

"Listen!" screamed Dr. Luther. "You know me. I do not joke. I tell you nothing which I cannot prove. So I tell you that now, and perhaps for thousands of years past, this world of ours . . . a-ah! . . . *a-a-ah!*"

The receiver swung at the end of its cord, and gave forth a reedy shout of: "Luther! Luther! What's happened?"

Dr. Hans Luther made no response. He sank to his knees, rolled his eyes upward, then fell on his side. His tongue licked his lips slowly, very slowly, once, twice.

Vogel's face bobbed in the vision screen. The dangling receiver made noises for ears that could no longer hear.

BILL GRAHAM knew nothing of these earlier tragedies, but he knew about Mayo. He was on the spot when it happened.

He was walking along West Fourteenth, New York, when for no particular reason he flung a casual glance up the sheer side of the Martin Building, and saw a human figure falling past the twelfth floor.

Down came the body, twisting, whirling, spread-eagling. It smacked the sidewalk and bounced nine feet. The sound was halfway between a squelch and a crunch. The sidewalk looked as if it had been slapped with a giant crimson sponge.

Twenty yards ahead of Graham, a fat woman stopped in mid-step, lay carefully on the concrete, closed her eyes, and mumbled nonsense. A hundred pedestrains made themselves into a rapidly shrinking circle with the thing on the sidewalk as its center.

The dead had no face. Sodden clothes were surmounted only by a mask like scrambled berries and custard. Graham felt no qualms as he bent over the body. He had seen worse in war.

His strong, brown fingers plucked at the pocket of a sticky vest, drew out a messy pasteboard. He looked at the card, permitted himself a whistle of surprise.

"Professor Walter Mayo! Good heavens!"

Swallowing hard, he looked once more at the pathetic remnant sprawled at his feet, then forced his way through the swelling, heaving, muttering crowd. The revolving doors of the Martin Building whirled behind him as he sprinted for the pneumatic levitators.

Fumbling the card with unfeeling fingers, Graham strove to compose his jumbled thoughts while his one-man disk was wafted swiftly up its tube. Mayo, of all people, to pass out like that!

At the sixteenth floor the disk stopped with a rubbery bounce and a sigh of escaping air. Graham raced along the passage, reached Mayo's laboratory, found the door ajar.

There was nobody in the laboratory. Everything appeared peaceful, orderly, bearing no signs of recent disturbance.

A thirty-foot-long table carried a lengthy array of apparatus which Graham recognized as an assembly for destructive distillation. The apparatus

was cold, lifeless, unused. Evidently the experiment had not commenced.

He counted the flasks, decided the setup was arranged to extract the sixteenth product of something which, when he opened the electric roaster, proved to be a quantity of dried leaves. They looked and smelled like some sort of herb.

Papers on an adjacent desk danced in the breeze from a widely opened window. Graham went to the window, looked out, down, saw the crowd surrounding four blue-coated figures and a crushed form. He frowned.

LEAVING the window open, he searched hastily through the papers littering the dead professor's desk. He could find nothing to satisfy his pointless curiosity. With one last keen glance around, he left the laboratory. His dropping disk carried him past two ascending policemen.

There was a line of phone booths in the foyer. He entered one, spun the dial, and saw a girl's clear features grow into the circular visor.

"Give me Mr. Sangster, Hetty," he requested.

"Yes, Mr. Graham."

The girl's face dissolved from the screen, was replaced by the broad, leathery face of a man.

"Mayo's dead," said Graham, without preamble. "He fell down the front of the Martin, about twenty minutes ago. He dived past sixteen stories. Dropped almost at my feet. His face was unrecognizable, but I knew the scars on his hands."

"Suicide?" The other raised thick brows inquiringly.

"That's how it looks," Graham admitted, "but I don't think it is."

"Why?"

"Because I knew Mayo exceedingly well. As the government liaison officer between scientists and the U. S. department of special finance, I have dealt with him over a period of ten years. You will remember that I have negotiated four loans for the furtherance of Mayo's work."

"Yes, yes." Sangster nodded.

"Scientists are an unemotional crowd," continued Graham, "and Mayo was perhaps the most phlegmatic of the lot." He stared earnestly at the little screen. "Believe me, sir, Mayo was not capable of self-destruction; at least, not while in his right mind."

"I believe you," replied Sangster, without hesitation. "What do you wish to have done?"

"The police have every reason to treat this as a simple case of suicide, and I cannot interfere because I have no status in such cases. I suggest that the necessary strings be pulled to make sure that the police dismiss this matter only after the most thorough investigation."

"It shall be as you suggest," assured Sangster. His rugged features grew large as they were brought nearer the distant scanner. "The appropriate department will intervene, and see that the matter is sifted to the bottom."

"Thank you, sir," Graham responded.

"Not at all! You hold your position only because we have complete faith in your judgment." Sangster's eyes lowered to a desk not visible in the screen. A rustling of papers came over the wires. "Mayo's case has a parallel today."

"What?" ejaculated Graham.

"Dr. Irwin Webb has died. We were in contact with him two years ago. We provided him with sufficient funds to complete some research which resulted in our war department acquiring a self-aligning gunsight operating on magnetic principles."

"I recall it well," indorsed Graham.

"Webb died half an hour ago. The police phoned because they found a letter from us in his wallet." Sangster's face became grim. "The circumstances surrounding his death are very strange.

The medical examiner says Webb died of heart disease, yet he expired shooting at nothing."

"Shooting at nothing!" echoed Graham incredulously.

"He had an automatic pistol in his hand, and he had fired two bullets into the wall of his office."

"Ah!"

"From the viewpoint of our country's welfare and scientific progress," continued Sangster, speaking deliberately, "the deaths of such able men as Mayo and Webb are too important to be ignored when attended by mysterious circumstances. Webb's case seems the more peculiar of the two. I want you to look into it. I would like you, personally, to examine any papers he may have left behind."

"But I have no official standing with the police," Graham protested.

"The officer in charge of the case will be notified that you have governmental authority to examine all Webb's documents."

"Very well, sir." Sangster's face faded from the visor as Graham hung up. "Mayo!—and now Webb!"

THE THIRD floor of the Jameson Building contained Webb's office only. Unlike Mayo, this scientist had maintained a separate laboratory in the country a dozen miles from New York.

Webb was on the carpet midway between the door and the window. He lay peacefully on his back, his eyes open, the pupils almost hidden where they turned up and under the top lids. A segmentary automatic was grasped in the cold fingers of his right hand. The wall toward which it pointed bore eight abrasions; a small group of weals where quarter sections of two split bullets had struck home.

"He was shooting at something along this line," Lieutenant Wohl said to Graham, stretching a thin cord from the center of the weals to a point four or five feet above the body.

"It looks like it," agreed Graham.

"But he wasn't shooting at anything," asserted Wohl. "Half a dozen people were passing along the passage outside when they heard his shots. They burst in immediately, and found him breathing his last. Nobody could have got in or out of this office without being seen. We've checked up on the six, and they're all above suspicion. Besides, the M. E. says it's heart disease."

"Maybe it is," said Graham, "and maybe it isn't!"

A cold eddy wafted through the room as he spoke the last words. A subtle tingling slid up his spine, stirred his back hairs, and passed away. His inward self was filled with a vague unease, like that of a rabbit that suspects the presence of a hawk it cannot see.

"All the same, I'm not satisfied," continued Lieutenant Wohl. "I've got a hunch that this Webb suffered from delusions. Since I've never heard of heart disease causing hallucinations, I reckon he's taken something that's caused both."

"You mean that he's a drug addict?" Graham queried.

"I mean just that! I'll bet an autopsy will show that my hunch is correct."

"Let me know if it does," requested Graham.

He opened the doctor's desk, commenced to search carefully through the neatly arranged files of correspondence. There was nothing to satisfy his interest, nothing to which he could attach special significance.

Closing the desk, he turned his attention to the wall safe. Wohl produced the keys, saying: "They were in his right-hand pocket. I'd have looked through that safe, but I was told to hold off for you."

Graham nodded, inserted a key. The cumbersome door swung slowly on its bearings, exposed the interior. Graham

and Wohl gave vent to a simultaneous gasp. Facing them hung a large sheet of paper bearing a hasty scrawl:

"Eternal vigilance is the impossible price of liberty. See Bjornsen if I go."

"Who the deuce is Bjornsen?" snapped Graham, plucking the paper from the safe.

"Don't know. Never heard of him." Wohl stared hard at the sheet in Graham's grasp, and said, suddenly: "Give it to me. It carries marks of writing from a sheet above it. We'll get the parallel light beam on it, and see if we can throw the imprints into relief."

He took the paper to the door, handed it outside with a quick utterance of instructions.

THE NEXT half-hour was spent in careful examination of the safe's contents; an examination that revealed nothing, except that Webb had been a painstaking bookkeeper, and had kept a close watch on the business side of his activities.

They found a small pile of ash in the grate. It was churned to a fine powder, and beyond all hope of reclamation. Ash of papers carrying words beyond reach.

"Grates are relics of the twentieth century," declared Wohl. "It looks as if he hung on to this one so that he could burn documents in it. Evidently he had something to conceal."

The telephone buzzed, and Wohl hastened to answer it, saying: "If this is the station, maybe they'll be able to tell us what Webb was hiding."

It was the station. The face of a police officer spread across the visor, while Wohl pressed the amplifier stud so that both he and Graham could hear.

"We brought out the words on that sheet," the officer said. "They seem incoherent, but maybe they'll mean something to you."

"Read it," ordered Wohl. Both he and Graham listened intently while the distant police officer recited from a typewritten copy.

"Sailors are notoriously susceptible. Must extend the notion, and get data showing how seaboard dwellers compare with country folk. Degrees of optical fixation ought to differ. Look into this. Must also persuade Fawcett to get me data concerning the incidence of goiter in imbeciles. Schizophrenics especially."

The reader looked up, and said, "There's two paragraphs, and that's the first."

"Go on! Go on!" said Graham impatiently. The officer continued while Graham listened intently, and Wohl looked more and more mystified.

"There is a real connection between the most unexpected and apparently ill-assorted things. Fireballs, and howling dogs, and Negroes who are not so simple as we think. Inspiration, and emotion, and everlasting cussedness. Bells that chime, ships that vanish, lemmings that migrate to the valley of the shadow. Arguments, ferocity, ritualistic rigmarole, and pyramids with unseen peaks. It would seem a surrealist hodge-podge —if I didn't know Bjornsen was right! It is a picture that must be shown the world—if it can be shown without massacre!"

"What did I tell you?" asked Wohl. He tapped his forehead significantly. "A narcotic nut!"

"We'll see about that." Graham brought his face closer to the telephone's scanner, and said to the distant officer: "File that sheet where it'll be safe. Make two typewritten copies, and have them sent to Sangster, care of the U. S. department of special finance, at the local office in Bank of Manhattan."

He switched off the amplifier, pronged the receiver. The little television screen dulled, went blank.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to go with you to the station," he told Wohl.

They went out together; Wohl con-

vinced that here was work for the narcotic squad; Graham pondering the possibility of the two deaths being natural despite their element of mystery. As they crossed the sidewalk, both felt a strange, nervous thrill. Something peered into their minds, grinned, and slunk away.

II.

NO NEW information was to be gained at the station. Fingerprint men had returned from Mayo's laboratory as well as from Webb's office, and had developed and printed their photographs. There was a mass of prints, some clear, some blurred. Most had been brought out with powder; a few—on fibrous surfaces—with iodine vapor. The great majority were prints left by the scientists themselves; the rest were not on police files.

Experts had gone with complete thoroughness through the dead men's rooms, and had discovered nothing to arouse their own suspicions, or confirm Graham's. They reported with the faint air of men compelled to waste their time on other people's fads.

"There's nothing left but the autopsy," declared Wohl finally. "If Webb's a drug addict, the case is cleared up. He died while shooting at his own imagination."

"And Mayo jumped into an imaginary bathtub?" queried Graham.

"Huh?" Wohl looked startled.

"I suggest an autopsy on both," suggested Graham. He reached for his hat. "Phone Sangster, and let him know the results." He hurried out with characteristic energy.

A PILE of wreckage cluttered the corner of Pine and Nassau. Graham caught a glimpse over the heads of the surging crowd, saw two crumple gyrocars which appeared to have met in head-on collision. The crowd thickened rapidly, pushed, stood on tiptoe, murmured with excitement. Graham could sense their tension as he passed. It was like moving through an invisible aura of vibrancy.

"Disaster is to crowds what sugar is to flies," he commented to himself.

He turned into the huge pile of Bank of Manhattan Building, took a pneumatic levitator to the twenty-fourth floor. Pushing through a gold-lettered door, he said, "Hello, Hetty!" to the smiling girl at the switchboard, and passed on to a door marked "Mr. Sangster." He knocked and entered.

While Sangster listened quietly, Bill Graham made a full report, then concluded: "That's all there is, sir. It leaves us with nothing except my own doubts concerning Mayo, and the peculiar fact of Webb firing a pistol."

"And it leaves us this person Bjornsen," said Sangster shrewdly.

"Yes. The police have not been able to get a line on him. They have hardly had time yet."

"Do the postal authorities hold any mail for Webb, from Bjornsen?" asked Sangster.

"No. Wohl phoned and asked them. Neither the mail carrier nor the sorters remember letters from anybody named Bjornsen. Of course, this unknown—whoever he may be—might not have sent letters, or, if he did, they may not have carried the sender's name on the envelope. The only mail for Webb is two conventional letters from scientist friends of his college days. Most scientists seem to maintain a correspondence with other scientists, especially fellow experimenters working along parallel lines."

"Which this Bjornsen may have been," suggested Sangster.

"That's an idea!" Graham pondered it a moment, then reached for the phone. He got his number, absent-mindedly pressed the amplifier stud, winced when the receiver promptly bellowed into his ear. Laying the receiver on Sangster's

desk, he said into the mouthpiece: "Is that the Smithsonian Institute? May I speak to Mr. Harriman?"

Harriman came on, his dark eyes upon his screen. "Hello, Graham. What can I do for you?"

"Walter Mayo's dead," Graham told him, "and Irwin Webb, too. They passed away this morning." Harriman's face expressed his sorrow while Graham gave him brief details of the tragedies. Graham asked, "D'you know of any scientist named Bjornsen?"

"Yes. He died on the seventeenth."

"Died!" Both Graham and Sangster shot to their feet, and the former said, "Was there anything unusual about his death?"

"Not that I know of. He was an old man, well past his allotted span. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind. Do you know anything more concerning him?"

"He was a Swedish scientist specializing in optics," replied Harriman, obviously mystified, "and he passed his prime twelve years ago. Some people thought him in his second childhood. His death gained eulogies in a few Swedish papers, but I have noticed no mention of it in the press over here."

"Anything more?" persisted Graham.

"Not much. He was rather obscure. If I remember aright, he commenced his decline when he made himself a laughingstock with some paper he read to the 2003 International Scientific Convention, at Bergen. It was a lot of gibberish about visual limitations, with plenty of spooks and djinns thrown in. Hans Luther also brought the vials of wrath on his own head by being the only one to treat Bjornsen seriously."

"And who is Hans Luther?" Graham demanded.

"A German scientist, and a very clever man. He's dead, too."

"What, another!" shouted Graham and Sangster together.

"WHAT'S the matter?" Curiosity was the key of Harriman's tones. "Scientists die just like other people, don't they?"

"When they die just like other people," replied Graham grimly, "we feel regrets, but no suspicions. Do me a favor, Harriman. Get me a complete list of all the internationally known scientists who have died since the first of May, together with every detail you can manage to rake up."

"I'll phone you as soon as I can," promised Harriman, and rung off. He came on again almost at once, and said, "I forgot to tell you that Luther died in his Dortmund laboratory while gabbling some incoherent nonsense to his local paper. He had a heart attack. His death was attributed to dementia and cardiac exhaustion, both brought on by overwork."

Harriman hung on, watching for the effect, openly hoping for information. Then he gave it up, repeated, "I'll phone you as soon as I can." He disconnected.

"This thing gets crazier the further we look into it," commented Sangster. "If the deaths of Mayo and Webb weren't natural, they certainly weren't supernatural. Which makes murder the only alternative."

"Murder for what?" inquired Graham.

"That's just the hell of it! Where's the motive? There simply isn't any! I can imagine half a dozen countries who might regard the amputation of America's best brains as a suitable prelude to war, but when Swedish and German scientists get dragged in, the entire situation becomes complicated to the point where it is absolutely fantastic." He picked up his typewritten copy of Webb's hidden notes, waved it dismally. "As fantastic as this." He cocked a speculative eye at Graham. "Your hunches started us on this hunt after Heaven-alone-knows-what. Have you got any ideas to back them up?"

"None," Graham confessed. "Not

one! We haven't found enough facts on which to base a plausible theory. It's up to me to dig out some more details."

"From where?"

"I'm going to see this fellow Fawcett whom Webb mentioned in his jottings. He ought to be able to tell me something interesting."

"Do you know Fawcett?" asked Sangster, looking surprised.

"I've never heard of him," Graham replied. "But Dr. Curtis, who is Webb's half-sister, may be able to put me in touch. I know Dr. Curtis well."

"Best of luck!" wished Sangster. "If only we can obtain something more substantial than mere suspicions we can get the Federal bureau of investigation on the job."

"I'll see what I can do." The telephone shrilled as Graham reached the door. He hesitated while Sangster grabbed the receiver, laid it on the desk, pressed the ampilfier stud.

The broad features of Wohl spread over the screen. He could not see Graham, who was standing outside the scanner's angle of vision. He looked straight at Sangster while he spoke.

"Webb must have had the itch."

"The itch?" echoed Sangster. "Why?"

"He'd painted his left arm, from shoulder to elbow, with iodine."

"What the devil for?" Sangster asked, throwing a meaning look to the listening Graham.

"Nothing. There wasn't anything the matter with his arm. My theory is he had the itch, or did it to satisfy his artistic instincts." Wohl's face cracked into a grin. "We haven't held the autopsy yet, but I thought I'd better let you know about him. When you've given it up, I can pose you another."

"Out with it, man!" snapped Sangster.

"Mayo had the itch, too."

"D'you mean he'd painted his arm as well?"

"Yes, with iodine," confirmed Wohl, enjoying himself. "Left arm, shoulder to elbow."

Staring steadily at the screen, Sangster drew in a long, deep breath, then said, "Thanks!" He replaced the receiver, looked despairingly at Graham.

"I'm on my way," said Graham. The door slammed behind him.

DR. CURTIS was essentially feminine despite her strict, professional air. Her aura of calm efficiency failed to hide the woman beneath, and Graham found it quite easy to admire her crisp, black curls while paying full attention to her talk.

"Irwin had been behaving strangely for more than a month," she told Graham. "He would not confide in me despite my concern which, I'm afraid, he chose to regard as feminine curiosity. Last Thursday, his queer attitude changed to one of such ill-concealed apprehension that I began to wonder if he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I advised him to take a rest."

"Did anything occur last Thursday that might have caused him to worry?"

"Nothing," Doctor Curtis assured him with confidence. "Or nothing that could affect him so seriously as to make him unbalanced. He seemed to be very upset by the news of the death of Dr. Sheridan, but I don't see why that—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Graham. "Who was Sheridan?"

"An old friend of Irwin's. A British scientist. He died last Thursday; of heart disease, I believe."

"And still they come!" murmured Graham.

"I beg your pardon?" Dr. Curtis opened large eyes inquiringly.

"A pointless comment," evaded Graham. He leaned forward, his muscular face intent, and asked, "Did Irwin have a friend or acquaintance named Fawcett?"

Her eyes widened more. "Oh, yes. He is Dr. Fawcett, the resident special-

ist at the State Asylum. Surely he cannot be involved in Irwin's death?"

"Not at all." Graham noted the frank puzzlement that had replaced her tranquil pose. He was tempted to take advantage of it, and put several more questions he wished to ask, but some queer subconscious quirk, a subtle hint of warning, made him desist. Feeling himself a fool to obey his mental impulses, he said, "My department has a special interest in your brother's work, and his unfortunate death has left us with several features to clear up."

Apparently satisfied, she gave him her cool hand. "I do hope you will permit me to assist you."

Thanking her a little more profusely than was necessary, Graham hastened out. He ran down the steps leading from the twentieth-floor surgery to the skyway that stretched past mighty walls three hundred feet above ground level.

A POLICE gyrocar whined along the skyway, stopped before the surgery in time to meet Graham as he got to the bottom of the steps. Lieutenant Wohl thrust his head out the side window.

"Sangster said you'd be here. I've come to pick you up."

Clambering into the sleek machine, Graham asked, "Has something broken?"

"Maybe." Wohl pressed the accelerator stud, the two-wheeled speedster plunged forward, its incased gyroscope emitting a faint hum. "One of the boys discovered that Webb's and Mayo's last phone calls were both made to a fellow named Professor Dakin. His place is on William Street, right near your own sanctuary. Know him?"

"Like my own hands," responded Graham. "You ought to know him, too."

"Me? Why?" Wohl twisted the wheel, took a skyway bend at reckless pace. The gyrocar kept rigidly upright, while its occupants rolled sidewise on their seats.

"When did the police abandon the moulage method of making casts?"

"Five years ago," said Wohl. "We now photograph impressions with stereoscopic cameras. Impressions on fibrous surfaces are photographed in relief with the aid of the parallel light beam."

"I know all that," Graham told him. "But why is that method now used?"

"Because it's handier, and absolutely accurate. It has been used ever since they found a way to measure stereoscopic depth by means of . . . *heck!*"—he risked a swift glance at his passenger, and concluded—"the Dakin stereoscopic vernier."

"Correct," indorsed Graham. "This fellow is the Dakin who invented it. My department financed his preliminary work."

Wohl refrained from further comment while he concentrated upon his hurtling machine. William Street slid rapidly toward them, its skyscrapers resembling advancing giants.

With a swift turn that produced a yelp of rubber from the rear wheel, the gyrocar spun off the skyway, and on to a corkscrew. It whirled around the spirals with giddying effect.

They hit ground level, and Wohl straightened out, saying, "Those whirligigs sure give me a kick!"

Graham swallowed a suitable remark, his attention caught by the long, streamlined, aluminium-bronze shape of another gyrocar. It flashed along William Street toward them, passed with an audible swoosh of air, sped up the ramp to the corkscrew from which they had just descended. As it passed, Graham's sharp eyes caught sight of a pale, haggard face staring fixedly through the machine's flexible glass windshield.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Graham. "Quick, Wohl—that was Dakin!"

FRANTICALLY spinning his wheel, and turning the gyrocar in its own length, Wohl fed current into the powerful dynamo. The machine leaped forward, hogged a narrow gap between two other cars, and charged madly up the ramp.

"He'll be about six turns above us, and near the top," Graham guessed.

Grunting assent, Wohl gripped his controls while the police speedster spiraled rapidly upward. The fifth turn brought them behind an ancient four-wheeled automobile holding the center of the shute, and struggling along at a mere thirty.

They gave an impromptu demonstration of the greater mechanical advantage of two wheels with power on both. Wohl cursed violently, swerved, fed juice, and shot past the antiquated obstruction at fifty, leaving its driver jittering in his seat.

Like a monster silver bullet, their vehicle burst from the corkscrew onto the skyway, scattered a flock of private machines, dropped them behind. The speedometer said ninety.

Half a mile ahead, their aluminium-bronze quarry hummed along the elevated artery, and maintained its lead.

Wohl moved his emergency lever, and said, "This is going to make junk of the batteries"

The gyrocar surged until its speedometer needle trembled over the hundred mark. The gyroscope's casing broadcast the noise of a million imprisoned bees. The tubular steel supports of the skyway railing zipped past with no intervals apparent between them.

"The Grand Intersection humpback!" shouted Graham warningly.

"If he hits it at this speed he'll jump a hundred feet," growled Wohl, "and although his 'scope will give him a square landing, it won't save his tires. One of them'll burst, for sure. He's driving like a maniac!"

"That's what makes it so obvious that something is damnably wrong," Graham responded. He held his breath while they cut round another decrepit four-wheeler whose driver gesticulated wildly.

"Every jellopy ought to be banned from the skyways," Wohl snarled. He narrowed his eyes, stared ahead. Their quarry was whirling headlong around the bend leading to Grand Intersection. "We've gained a bare hundred yards He's driving all out. You'd think somebody was chasing him."

"*We* are," remarked Graham dryly. His eyes sought the rear mirror while his mind considered the possibility of Dakin being pursued by others than themselves. What was Dakin running from, anyway? What did Mayo jump from, and Webb shoot at? What wiped out Bjornsen, and made Luther die with a gabble on his lips?

He gave up the speculation, noted the road behind was temporarily clear, then raised his eyes as something darkened the gyrocar's transparent roof. It was a police autogyro, hanging from spinning vanes, its landing wheels a yard above the hurtling car.

The two machines raced level for a few seconds. Wohl jabbed an authoritative finger at the police star across his machine's bonnet, then waved urgently toward the crazy car ahead.

ITS VANES speeding up their revolutions, the autogyro gained height, turned over great roofs, and roared through the air in a frantic attempt to cut the skyway bend and beat Dakin's vehicle to the intersection.

Making no effort to slacken pace, Wohl met the bend at the full hundred. Tires shrieked piercingly as they felt the sidewise drag. Graham leaned heavily against the nearside door; Wohl leaned crushingly on him.

While centrifugal force kept them in that attitude, and the tormented gyroscope struggled to keep the machine up-

right, the tires gave up the fight, and the gyrocar executed a sickening double-eight. It swooped across the concrete, missed a dawdling phaëton by a hairbreadth, flashed between two other gyrocars, wiped the fender off a dancing four-wheeler, and slammed to the side. The rails held.

Wohl gulped, nodded toward the hump where the skyway curved over another elevated route that swept under it at right angles.

"Look!" he gasped.

Four hundred yards away, the crest of the hump bisected the midget windows of a more distant pile of masonry. Dakin's machine was exactly in the center of the crest, the police autogyro hovering above it.

The fleeing car did not sink below the crest, as it should have done under normal circumstances. It appeared to float slowly into the air until it reached the tops of the farther windows, and exposed a line of panes between its wheels and the crest. Then, still slowly, it sank from sight.

"Mad!" breathed Graham. "Utterly and completely mad!"

He slid his window downward until a deep dent in its flexible glass prevented it from descending farther. Both men listened intently. There came a short, sharp sound of rending metal, a few seconds' silence, then a muffled crash.

Without a word, both crawled out, sprinted along the skyway, and over the long, smooth hump. They found a dozen machines, mostly modern gyrocars, drawn up beside a thirty-foot gap in the rails. White-faced drivers were grasping twisted posts while they bent over and peered into the canyon beneath.

Graham and Wohl shouldered through, looked down. Far below, on the side of the street opposite to the lower and transverse skyway, a mass of shapeless metal made a tragic heap on the sidewalk. There were marks on the face of the pile that reared itself ten floors from the spot; the ruts of the road to oblivion.

A DRIVER jabbered to nobody in particular, "Terrible! Terrible! He must have been out of his mind He came over like a shell from a monster gun, smacked through the rails, and into that building. I heard him land down there." He covered his eyes. "Terrible!"

The speaker's emotions were voiced for the rest. Graham could sense their awe, their horror. He could sense the excitement, the corporate soul-stirring of the inevitable crowd that was assembling three hundred feet below. Mob hysteria is contagious, he thought, as he felt it rising like an invisible and hellish incense. One could get drunk on it. Men who were cold sober individually could be drunk collectively; drunk on mass emotions. Emotions—the unseen intoxicant!

Another feeling drove out these thoughts as he stared downward: a feeling of guilty fear, like that of a man holding dangerous and punishable opinions. The sensation was so strong that he made a tremendous effort to discipline his mind, dragged his fascinated eyes from the sight beneath, and nudged Wohl into attention.

"There's nothing we can do Let's get going."

Moving reluctantly, Wohl backed from the gap. He turned, saw the defeated autogyro landing on the skyway, hastened toward it.

"Wohl, homicide squad," he said briefly. "Call Center Station on your short-wave, ask them to have my machine towed in for repairs, and tell them I'll phone through shortly."

He returned to the still staring group of drivers, found one who was bound for William Street. As they sped from the scene, he said to Graham, "I'm letting you tote me around because I've

got to do as I'm told, but I've still no notion of what we're looking for. Does your department know something that isn't for publication?"

"We know nothing more than you do," admitted Graham. "It all started with me having some vague suspicions, and my superiors backing them up." He gazed determinedly at the windshield. "I smelled the skunk, and I'm going to dig it out."

"Well, I've got to hand it to you for getting hunches, and having the nerve to play them." Wohl grinned, and added, "I can see by the way things are shaping that I'll finish up playing with sirup and feathers. But I'm with you as long as we stay sane."

"Thanks!" Graham responded gratefully. He looked at his companion. "By the way, what's your other name?"

"Art."

"Thanks, Art," said Graham.

III.

THEIR CAREFUL search of Dakin's place revealed nothing worthy of note; no last message, no hidden jottings, no feature that could be considered in any way abnormal.

Finding the now-dead scientist's original and somewhat crude model of his vernier, Wohl amused himself by projecting its standard stereoscopic cube upon a small screen. He twiddled the micrometer focusing screw that controlled the cube's perspective, made the geometrical skeleton flat enough to appear almost two-dimensional, then deep enough to resemble an apparently endless tunnel.

"Cute!" he murmured

Graham came out from the back room, holding a small, nearly empty vial of iodine in his fingers.

"I looked for this on another hunch. It was in the medicine chest, which means just exactly nothing." He put it down in disgust. "I want to see Dr. Fawcett, at the State Asylum. Can you run me there?"

"I'll phone first," said Wohl. Using Dakin's instrument, he talked to his station, then told Graham, "There will be no autopsy on Dakin—he's merely a pulp. Come along."

Darkness was a shroud spread over the sleeping Hudson. A sullen moon scowled through ragged clouds Somewhat incongruously, a distant neon sign flashed its message in blood-red letters fifty feet long: BEER HERE.

They watched the sign gloomily, while fidgeting upon the sidewalk, waiting for the gyrocar which Wohl had ordered over the phone.

When the machine appeared, Wohl said to the driver, "I'll take her myself. We're going to Albany."

He got into the seat, eased the machine forward, after Graham had plumped beside him. The car picked up speed, pelted northward, reached Albany in two hours—good going, even for Wohl.

"This is well outside my stamping ground," he remarked, as they pulled up outside their destination, "so as far as I'm concerned, you've merely brought a friend along."

The new State Asylum sprawled its severe, ultramodern architecture over a square mile of former parkland. It was very evident that Dr. Fawcett was the leading light in its administration.

He was a skinny little runt, all dome and duck's feet, his top-heavy features sloping in toward a goatee beard, his damn-you eyes snapping behind rimless pince-nez

His small form even smaller behind a desk that looked the size of a field, he sat stiffly upright, wagged Graham's copy of Webb's jottings. When he spoke, it was with the air of one whose every wish is a command, whose every opinion is the essence of pure reason.

"A most interesting revelation of my poor friend Webb's mental condition.

Very sad, very sad!" Unhooking his pince-nez, he used them to tap the paper, and emphasize his pontifications. "I suspected him of having an obsession, but must confess that I did not realize he had become so completely unbalanced."

"What made you suspicious?" Graham asked.

"Our friendship was founded upon a mutual fondness for chess. We had little else in common. Webb was entirely a physicist whose work had not the slightest connection with mental diseases; nevertheless, he showed a sudden and avid interest in the subject. At his own request, I permitted him to visit this asylum, and see some of our patients."

"Ah!" said Graham, leaning forward. "Did he give any reason for his interest?"

"He did not offer one, nor did I ask for one," replied Dr. Fawcett, dryly. "The patients who interested him most were those with consistent delusions coupled with a persecution complex. He concentrated particularly upon the schizophrenics."

"And what may those be?" put in Wohl, innocently.

Dr. Fawcett raised his brows. "Persons suffering from schizophrenia, of course."

"I'm still no wiser," Wohl persisted.

With an expression of ineffable patience, Dr. Fawcett said, "They are schizoid egocentrics."

Wohl gave it up, but Graham chipped in, saying, "You must pardon our ignorance, doctor. Could you explain in less technical terms?"

"Schizophrenics," answered Fawcett, speaking as one speaks to a child, "are persons suffering from what a century ago was described as dementia præcox. They have a split personality, live in a world of fantasy which, to them, is infinitely more real than the world of reality. While many forms of dementia are accompanied by hallucinations that vary both in strength and character, the fantastic world of the schizophrenic is vivid and unvarying."

"I see," Graham commented, doubtfully.

Putting on his glasses with meticulous care, Fawcett stood up. "I will let you see one of the inmates in whom Webb was interested."

SHOWING THEM through the door, Fawcett conducted them along a series of passages to the asylum's east wing. Here, he reached a group of cells, stopped outside one, gestured silently.

They peered through a small barred opening, saw a naked man. He was standing by his bed, his legs braced apart, his distended abdomen thrust out. The sufferer's ghastly eyes were fixed upon his own stomach with a hellish concentration.

Fawcett whispered rapidly "It is a peculiarity of schizophrenia that the victim often strikes a pose, sometimes obscene, which he can maintain, without stirring, for a period of time impossible to the normal human being. This case is a typical poseur. He is convinced that he has a live dog inside his abdomen, and he spends endless hours watching for a sign of movement."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Graham, shocked.

"A characteristic delusion, I assure you," sobbed Fawcett. "It was Webb's irrational comments about this case that made me think him a little eccentric."

"What was Webb's reaction?" inquired Graham. He glanced again at the cell, turned his eyes thankfully away.

"He was fascinated by this patient, and he said to me, 'Fawcett, that poor devil has been prodded around by unseen medical students. He is mutilated trash tossed aside by super-vivisectionists.'"

A shudder ran through Graham's

heavy frame. Despite iron nerves, he felt sick. Wohl's face, too, was pale, and both felt some inward relief when Fawcett led the way back to his office.

"I asked Webb what the deuce he meant," Dr. Fawcett continued, quite unperturbed, "but he merely laughed, and quoted that adage about when ignorance is bliss it is folly to be wise. A week later, he phoned me and asked if I could get him data concerning the incidence of goiter in imbeciles."

"Did you get it?"

"Yes." Fawcett went behind his huge desk, slid open a drawer, extracted a paper. "I have got it here, but since Webb is dead, the information comes too late." He shoved the paper across to Graham.

"Why," Graham exclaimed, "this states that there is not one case of goiter among the two thousand inmates of this asylum. Reports from other places give it as unknown, or exceedingly rare."

"Which doesn't mean anything except that inbeciles are not very susceptible to a disease which isn't common," Fawcett commented suavely.

"What causes goiter?"

"A deficiency of iodine," replied Fawcett.

Iodine! Graham and Wohl exchanged pregnant glances, then the former asked, "Has a superfluity of iodine anything to do with imbecility?"

His goatee wagging, Fawcett laughed openly. "If it did, there would be a great proportion of idiots among seafaring folk who eat foods rich in iodine."

A message flashed through Graham's mind. Wohl's face betrayed the fact that it had occurred to him also.

Sailors are notoriously susceptible.

Susceptible to what? To illusions, and to maritime superstitions based upon illusions?—the sea serpent, the sirens, the Flying Dutchman, mermaids, and the bleached, bloated things whose clammy faces bob and wail in the moonlit wake?

Must extend the notion, and get data showing how seaboard dwellers compare with country folk.

DISPLAYING a casualness he did not feel, Graham retrieved Webb's notes from Fawcett's desk, and said, "Thanks, doctor. You've been a great help."

"Don't hesitate to get in touch with me if I can be of further assistance," Fawcett advised.

They returned to New York as fast as they had left, their speculative silence being broken only once, when Wohl remarked, "The whole affair suggests an epidemic of temporary insanity among scientists whose brains have been overworked."

Graham grunted, offered no comment.

"Genius is akin to madness," persisted Wohl, determined to bolster up his theory. "Besides, knowledge can't go on increasing forever without some minds giving way when they strain to encompass the lot."

"No scientist tries to know the lot," answered Graham. "Knowledge is already far too much for any one mind, and that is why every scientist is a specialist in his own field though he may be an ignoramus about things totally outside the scope of his work."

It was Wohl's turn to grunt. He concentrated on his driving, uttered not another word until he arrived at Graham's address. Then he dropped his passenger with a brief, "See you in the morning, Bill," and hummed away.

The morning was bright, symbolic of a new day that brought early developments. Graham was standing before his mirror, his electric shaver whirring busily, when the telephone shrilled. The youth in the visor blinked, said, "Mr. Graham?"

"Yes. I'm Graham."

"This is the Smithsonian," responded the other. "Mr. Harriman had a message for you late last night, but couldn't get hold of you."

"I was in Albany," Graham told him. "What's the message?"

"Mr. Harriman said to tell you he has been on to all the news agencies, and finds they've reported the deaths of eighteen scientists within the last five weeks. Seven of them were foreigners, and eleven American. The number is six times the normal for the period, as the news agencies have never reported more than three deaths per month."

"Eighteen!" ejaculated Graham. He stared at the face picked up by the far-away scanner. "Have you got their names?"

"Yes." The youth dictated them, while Graham copied them down. "Anything more, Mr. Graham?"

"Will you convey my thanks to Mr. Harriman, and ask him to phone me at the office when he arrives?"

"Very well, Mr. Graham." The youth disconnected, leaving Graham pondering.

"Eighteen!"

ON THE OTHER side of the room, the television receiver's news gong chimed softly. Graham crossed, raised the dull entertainment screen, exposed the dummy lid covering the press screen which, in his set, was licensed for the New York *Sun's* transmissions.

Opening the long trap at one side of the press screen, he took out the roll of paper, the printing and fixing of which had been notified by the gong. The roll was the *Sun's* early morning edition.

He spread it on the table, glanced through it quickly, found an item headed: SCIENTIST'S DEATH DIVE.

"Professor Samuel C. Dakin, fifty-two-year-old William Street physicist, took the Grand Intersection humpback in his sports gyrocar last evening, and plunged to his end at more than a hundred miles an hour."

The report ran right down the column, included a photograph of the wreck, several references to "this departed genius," and stated that the police were looking into the cause of the tragedy. It concluded with a comment that this was the third death of a New York scientist since the previous morning, "those of Walter Mayo and Irwin Webb having been reported in our yesterday evening edition."

From the storage locker below the current edition compartment, Graham extracted the *Sun's* evening issue. Mayo's and Webb's cases were in juxtaposition; the former headed: MAYO FALLS FROM MARTIN; and the latter: ANOTHER SCIENTIST DIES. Both reports were superficial, saying little more than that, "the police are investigating."

Wohl turned up just then. He charged into the apartment, his eyes agleam. He waved the *Sun* aside with a short, "I've seen it."

"What's all the excitement about?"

"My hunch," announced Wohl, sitting down, and breathing heavily. "You're not the only one who gets hunches." He puffed, grinned apologetically, puffed again. "They've held the autopsies, and Mayo and Webb were full of dope."

"They were drugged?" asked Graham incredulously.

"It was mescal," Wohl went on. "A special and very highly refined form of mescal. Their stomachs contained traces of it." A pause while he got his breath. "And their kidneys were rich in methylene blue."

"Methylene blue!" echoed Graham, his mind struggling to make something rational of the information.

"The boys followed up these facts pretty fast. They found mescal,

methylene blue, and iodine, in Mayo's, Webb's, and Dakin's laboratories. We'd have found them ourselves if we'd known what to look for."

Graham nodded agreement. "It seems fair to assume that an autopsy on Dakin would have produced the same results."

"I would think so," Wohl indorsed. "The boys also discovered that the junk in the furnace of Mayo's distillation apparatus was Indian hemp. It looks as if he must have been about to experiment with drugs other than mescal."

"If he was," declared Graham positively, "it was solely by way of scientific experiment. Mayo was never a drug addict."

"So it seems," said Wohl, dryly.

"Come on, let's get to the office." Hastily completing his dressing, Graham snatched up his hat and coat. They left in a police gyrocar.

Sangster had just arrived. He had with him a tall, middle-aged individual of military appearance, a man he introduced as Colonel Leamington.

"The whole investigation has been taken out of this department's hands," said Sangster, without beating about the bush. He reached over his desk, handed Graham a paper.

THE SHEET rustling in his fingers, Graham read, "Your application for immediate transfer to the United States Intelligence Service has been approved, and said transfer is effected as from today. You will take your commission, and accept orders from Colonel John H. Leamington, who, until further notice, you will regard as your departmental superior."

Gulping as he noted the famous signature at the bottom of the letter, Graham looked questioning at Sangster. "But I haven't made any such application, sir."

"You may tear the letter up," Sangster remarked.

Colonel Leamington intervened, saying, "The position, Mr. Graham, is that we wish you to continue your investigation with better facilities than are accorded you in your present position."

"Thank you," Graham answered, somewhat dazed.

"One of our news-agency men reported the questions made by Harriman on your behalf." He stroked his neatly clipped mustache, his face serious, very serious. "Eleven of these departed scientists were American. They were men of incalculable value to their country. The Government cannot ignore their sudden and mysterious demise."

"I see."

"You will accept the commission?" pressed Colonel Leamington.

"Yes, yes, of course!" answered Graham. He studied the letter with a thrill of pride that was not lessened by Wohl's open envy. To be one of the United States government's most tried and trusted band! To be one of Uncle Sam's most privileged operators!

He took his ring from Leamington, put it on the third finger of his left hand. It fitted perfectly, and he knew that it must have been prepared in anticipation of his acceptance. He also knew that upon its super-hard iridium inner surface were inscriptions too small to be seen with the naked eye; microscopic data giving his name, height, weight, Bertillon measurements, and fingerprint formulas, as well as his Service number, and a faithful though infinitely small copy of his own signature.

This modest ornament was his only badge, his only evidence of authority, its meaning concealed from all but those equipped to read. It was the open sesame to officialdom everywhere.

As these thoughts passed through his mind there came a faint sense of overhanging peril; a warning note, vague, indefinite, but disturbing. He looked

again at his ring, and knew that it might also serve to identify him in horrible, mangling death—as many others had been so identified.

What was it that Webb had talked about?—"Mutilated trash cast aside by super-vivisectionists."

Pushing the thought aside, he said, "One thing, colonel: I would like to have the continued coöperation of Lieutenant Wohl."

He evaded Wohl's look of gratitude, listened while Leamington replied.

"Har-humph! I think it can be arranged. I have little doubt that the chief of police can be persuaded to grant Lieutenant Wohl a roving commission."

"Thanks," said Graham and Wohl together.

SANGSTER'S phone called for attention, he answered, passed it to Graham, saying, "Harriman."

"Hello, Harriman," called Graham. "Yes. I got your list. Much obliged!" He paused as the other phone clamored, and Sangster moved over to answer it. "Sorry, Harriman, I can't tell you anything just yet. Yes, six times the monthly average is something that calls for an explanation, and that's what I'm out to get."

He stopped speaking while Sangster put down the other phone, and whispered, "Dr. Curtis, for you."

"Listen, Harriman," continued Graham hurriedly, "all these scientists are people of different nationalities, ages, and types, but they *must* share one thing in common—the thing that brought about their deaths. I want to find that common denominator. Rake me up every detail you can discover about the persons on your list, and phone them to"—he looked inquiringly at Leamington, was given a number, and said—"to Colonel Leamington, at Boro 8-19638."

Ringing off, he grabbed the second phone, spoke rapidly. The others studied his changing expression as he talked.

Finishing, he told them, "Dr. Curtis has just received a long-distance call from Professor Edward Beach. He said that he had just read the report of Webb's and Mayo's deaths. He expressed much sorrow, but Dr. Curtis thought him unusually curious about the details of the tragedies."

"Well?" prompted Leamington.

"This Beach is an old friend of Webb's, according to Dr. Curtis. I know him, too. He's the man who designed the stereoscopic owl-eye camera which the police use in conjunction with Dakin's vernier. He is employed by the National Camera Company, at their Silver City plant, in Idaho. Beach is just the sort of scientist who may have some valuable information concerning Webb, Mayo and Dakin." He stopped a moment, to lend impressiveness to what he was about to say, then concluded, "Especially since he asked Dr. Curtis whether she knew if Webb, like Mayo and Dakin, had been working on Bjornsen's formula prior to his death."

"Bjornsen!" ejaculated Sangster.

"I'm going to see Beach before he becomes the nineteenth on the list." Graham looked at his watch. "With luck, I can catch the 10:30 strat-plane for Boise."

Turning to Wohl, he said quickly, "Phone Battery Park Stratosphere Station for me, Art, and book me a seat on the 10:30. Then get in touch with the police in all the places where these eighteen scientists died, ask for full and complete particulars of the deaths. Get them to check up on every detail, no matter how minute or seemingly unimportant. See if you can persuade them to obtain exhumation orders, and conduct autopsies."

Snatching his hat, he was gone, bound for Battery Park, the 10:30 strat-plane, and the worst disaster in the history of the New World.

IV.

THE New York-Boise-Seattle stratosphere express dived down from the atmosphere's upper reaches, leveled with a thunderous burst of rockets, swept beneath the undersides of fleecy clouds.

The little town of Oakley nestling on its banks, Goose Creek rolled under the fleet vessel's bow. Far to port, and well to stern, gleamed the northern fringes of Utah's Great Salt Lake. About a hundred and fifty miles to go—a mere ten minutes' run!

A cigarette that Graham had lit over Oakley was still only half consumed when the strat-plane banked from the valley of the Snake, curved toward Boise. The turn brought Silver City on the port side, where it was easily perceivable in the dry, dustless atmosphere of the locality.

Thrusting his feet at the footrests to resist the body-surge caused by the ship's rapid deceleration, Graham glanced through his window at the far vista of Silver City. One moment it was there, detailed and clear upon the horizon; the next moment it was gone in a mighty cloud of heaving vapor.

He crushed his cigarette, half rose in his seat, his eyes staring at the distant spectacle. The cloud bloomed hugely, swelled with the threatening vigor of an approaching dust storm. Small black specks soared high above its upper edge, hung momentarily in midair, dropped back into obscurity.

"God in heaven!" breathed Graham. His eyes strained unbelievingly. He knew that for the strange specks to be perceivable from such a distance they must be big, very big—as big as complete buildings.

The strat-plane's tail swung round, concealed the far-away scene. Unaware that anything abnormal was taking place, the pilot brought his vessel down in a long, dexterous curve that dropped Silver City behind intervening spurs of the Rockies. Making a perfect landing, the great machine rushed over concrete, its rockets blasting spasmodically. It made a neat turn, stopped alongside a tower-topped building that bore in large, white letters the word: BOISE.

Graham was the first out. He hit concrete, made to run around his machine's tail, but stopped, appalled.

There were a hundred people on the stratosphere station's runway, but none advanced to meet the new arrival, none hastened to greet its passengers. They stood stock-still at various points around the space, their faces to the south.

In that direction, sixty miles away, yet thrusting high above minor sprawls of the Rockies, was the cloud. It had become an awful pillar that reached to the very floors of heaven; a great, ghastly erection of swirling, flowing, sullen gases that poised like an infernal column of woe.

The noise! The noise of the far phenomenon was infinitely terrible even though muted by distance; a sound of tortured, disrupted air; a sound as if something Gargantuan was running amok through the cosmos, ripping, tearing, rending everything on which it could lay its mammoth hands.

All faces were pale, while the distant column poked its sable finger into the belly of the void, and from the void came an eldritch yammering like stentorian laughter booming through the caverns of beyond. Then, abruptly, the cloud collapsed.

It dropped from sight with all the shocking suddenness of a condemned felon plunging through a trap. The thing was gone, but its hellish rumbles and muffled roars persisted for several seconds before they faded, and died away.

THE GAPING hundred stirred. Five officials moved stupidly toward the strat-plane, their minds confused by the vision in the south. To one side of the con-

crete area, a private flier paced slowly and thoughtfully toward his sports machine. Graham beat him to it.

"Quick! Take me to Silver City—government business."

"Eh?" The flier regarded him with uncomprehending eyes.

"Silver City," repeated Graham urgently. His powerful fingers gripped the other's shoulder, shook it to emphasize his words. "Get me to Silver City as quickly as you can."

The note of authority in his voice had its effect, brought the flier to life. "Yes, sure!" The fellow didn't ask who Graham was, but clambered hastily into his highly streamlined machine, waited for his passenger to be seated, then blew the tail rockets. The sports model sprinted along the concrete, lifted, curved sharply into the blue.

Their destination lay beneath a pall of dust that was slowly settling as they progressed. It was just as they roared immediately overhead that a vagrant wind puffed away the last remnants of desiccated murk, and bared the former site of Silver City.

The pilot looked down, screamed something that was lost in the bellow of the stern tubes, fought to regain the controls that had momentarily slipped from his grasp. With cherry-red exhausts vomiting fire, the ship zoomed close to the ground, brought into near view a scene that made Graham's stomach contract sickeningly.

Silver City was gone; the area it once had occupied was now an enormous scar on the face of Idaho, a scar spattered with wreckage through which moved a pathetically small number of survivors.

Jittery with shock, the pilot made a forced landing. He chose a smooth stretch of sand on the north fringe of the scar, brought his machine down, touched, lifted, touched, tilted, dug the starboard wing-tip into soft soil. The machine reeled in a semicircle, tore its wing off, fell on its starboard side, with its port wing sticking grotesquely into the air. The pair scrambled out unhurt. They stood in complete silence, and stared.

Only an hour ago this had been a neat, clean and prosperous city of thirty-five thousand souls. Now it was a field torn from the domain of hell, a crater-pitted terrain relieved only by mounds of shattered bricks, tangles of distorted girders. Cobras of smoke still waved and undulated to the tune of distant groans. Here and there, a stone parted clatteringly from its neighbor, a girder contracted with rasping sounds.

There were other things—things from which eyes avert and minds recoil; gaudy gobs and crimson clots inextricably mixed with tatters of wool and shreds of cotton.

"Worse than the Krakatoa explosion," declared Graham, his voice soft, low. "Even worse than the Mont Pelée disaster."

"What a blast! What a blast!" recited the pilot, his hands jerking with nervous excitement.

A figure emerged from behind a pyramid of twisted girders in the middle distance. It limped around craters, sidestepped shapeless but infinitely terrible obstructions, made a lopsided run toward the waiting pair.

It was a human being, a man whose rags flapped around his raw legs as he progressed. He came up to them, showing dirt and blood on a sheet-white face that framed a pair of glowing, half-mad eyes.

"All gone," announced the newcomer, waving a trembling hand toward the place whence he had come. "All gone." He chuckled crazily. "All but me and the little flock who are worthy in the sight of the Lord."

He squatted at their feet, rolled his red-rimmed eyes upward, mumbled in tones too faint to understand. Blood seeped through the rags dangling on his left hip.

THE PILOT went to his plane, returned with a flask of brandy. The sitting man took the flask, gulped, gasped, gulped again. He emptied it, handed it back, rocked to and fro on his hams. Slowly the light of sanity crept back into his eyes.

Struggling to his feet, he teetered while he stared at the others, then said, "I had a wife, and a couple of kids. I had a real good wife, and two damn fine kids. Where are they now?" His eyes blazed as they shifted from one to the other, seeking the answer that none could give.

"Don't give up hope," soothed Graham. "Don't give up hope until you know for certain."

"Tell us what happened," suggested the pilot.

"I was fixing a no-draft cowl on a chimney in Borah Avenue, and I was just reaching for a piece of wire when Silver City went up. Something grabbed me, threw me all over the sky, then dropped me. When I got up, there wasn't any Silver City any more."

"Do you know what caused it?" Graham inquired.

"Yes," declared the man, his voice pure venom, "the National Camera Company, and may everyone connected with it be blasted body and soul, now and for evermore."

"You mean the explosion was located in their plant?" put in Graham, stemming the tirade.

"Sure!" The speaker's fierce orbs mirrored his hate. "Their tanks blew up. They had a battery of huge tanks holding a million gallons of silver nitrate solution, and every gallon went up at once, and sent everything to Hades." He spat, rubbed his lip. Death was in the set of his jaw. "Wiped out peaceful homes, and happy families, and—"

"But silver nitrate in solution won't disrupt like that."

"Won't it?" retorted the victim, his tones sheer sarcasm. He gestured all-embracingly. "Look!"

His listeners looked. They found nothing to say.

Cars poured along the road from Boise, advance guard of a veritable cavalcade that was to continue for a week. A plane swooped overhead, another, and another.

A thousand pairs of feet trod carefully through the graveyard of the West, a thousand pairs of hands pulled cautiously at wreckage, plucked maimed but living creatures from the soil.

Ambulances whined up, departed only to come again and again. Stretcher-bearers stamped a broad, firm path that later was to become the exact route of Mercy Street. Flying journalists soared and banked a few hundred feet above, their televisors recording the horror below, broadcasting agony and pathos to a hundred newspaper offices, whence it was transferred to the press screens of a hundred million television receivers.

Graham and his pilot slaved with the rest, slaved long after dusk had fallen, and night had spread its shroud over the dead that yet remained.

A GORE-SMEARED gyrocar, with silent driver, carried Graham back to Boise. He found a hotel, washed, put a call through to Colonel Leamington.

The news of the disaster had shaken the world, said Leamington. Already the president had received messages of sympathy from fifteen foreign governments, as well as from countless individuals.

"If it so happens, Graham, that this awful disaster proves to have the slightest connection with your investigation, you must drop it immediately you discover the fact, and you must get into touch with me. In such circumstances, the whole affair would be too great for one man to handle."

"There is nothing to suggest such connection," Graham pointed out.

"Nothing—until you uncover something," retorted Leamington. "In view of what has gone before, I feel mighty suspicious. Unless he is one of the few survivors, Beach is now the nineteenth on the list. Graham, I repeat, if you find any sort of a link between this disaster and the work upon which you are engaged, you must drop everything, and report to me without delay."

"Very well, sir."

"In that event, the best brains in the country must be conscripted to meet the issue." Colonel Leamington's voice trailed off, then came back strongly. "What do you think of it yourself?"

Graham hesitated before replying. He knew that he was as far from the truth as he had been at the start, but he could not force aside the strange, uncanny feeling that had obsessed him since the death of Mayo. It seemed ridiculous to attach importance to sensations which, though strong and persistent, were elusively vague. Was that feeling akin to the hunch which had put him on the track of something yet to be found? Was it second sight, or empty superstition, or merely jumpy nerves?

Coming to a decision, he spoke slowly but emphatically, saying, "Chief, I've still no idea of what's behind all this, but I've a notion that it's something dangerous to talk about." A thought was born in his mind, and he added, "I believe it's dangerous even to *think* about."

"Absurd!" scoffed Leamington. "How the devil can any investigation be conducted without thought?"

"It cannot," said Graham dryly. "Therefore I must take the risk."

He put down his receiver, a queer light in his eyes. Somehow, he knew that he was right in his estimate of danger. He must take a risk, an awful risk, against odds infinitely terrible because completely unknown. *Eternal vigilance is the impossible price of liberty.* If he must succumb in vain effort to pay that price, well, so be it!

POLICE CHIEF CORBETT found one in the top ward of overflowing Center Hospital. According to him, this fellow was the only employee of the National Camera Company so far found among three thousand survivors rescued from what was left of Silver City.

The patient was bandaged from head to feet, his eyes being covered, only his mouth exposed. A strong odor of tannic acid exuded from him, mutely bore witness to his extensive burns. Graham sat one side of his bed, Corbett the other.

A weary nurse said, "Five minutes, no more. He's very weak, but stands a chance if you'll give him one."

Putting his lips close to a bandage-covered ear, Graham asked, "What exploded?"

"The tanks," came a faint whisper.

"Silver nitrate?" inquired Graham, doing his best to convey incredulity in his tones.

"Yes."

"Can you explain it?"

"No." A dry, swollen tongue licked along cotton fringes over burned lips.

"What was your job?" Graham put quietly.

"Lab worker."

"Research?"

"Yes."

Graham wasted a meaning glance on the listening Corbett, then said to the man on the bed, "On what work were you engaged at the time of the disaster?"

There was no reply. The mouth closed under its wrappings, the breathing became inaudible. Alarmed, Corbett signaled a nurse.

The girl hurried up, fussed over the patient, said: "He's all right. You've got two more minutes." She dashed away, her face pale, lined with long duty.

Graham put his question again, got

no answer. With a frown, he signed Corbett to speak.

"This is Police Chief Corbett, of Boise," declared that official. "Your questioner is a member of the United States Intelligence Service. More than thirty thousand people died in yesterday's blast, and the discovery of the cause of their deaths is more important than your loyalty to your employers. I advise you to speak."

The mouth remained stubbornly closed, so Graham brought his own lips near, and murmured, "Dr. Beach authorizes you to tell all you know."

"Beach!" exclaimed the man on the bed. "Why, he told me to say nothing!"

"He told you—" Graham was thoroughly startled. "He told you when? Has he seen you?"

"An hour before you came," responded the other in a low voice.

WITH A MIGHTY effort, Graham suppressed a desire to shout, "Then he's alive!" but kept his wits, and said, coolly, confidently: "Much may happen in an hour. You can speak without fear."

"We found the new emulsion the day before yesterday," the other uttered feebly. "Under Beach's supervision, we'd been looking for it nearly three months. It would have taken an individual worker ten years to develop it, but there were sixty of us on the job, with all of the company's scientific resources at our disposal. Wyman found it Wednesday morning, but we didn't know for certain that he'd actually got it until we tested it a few minutes before the explosion."

"What kind of an emulsion was it, and how did you test it?" pursued Graham.

"It was a photographic emulsion susceptible to frequencies far into the infrared, reaching the ultra-radio band. According to Beach, such an emulsion ought to record things like suns—I don't know why; none of us knew why. We made routine exposures with Wyman's compound, and, sure enough, we developed negatives recording things like little suns."

"Go on! Go on!" urged Graham.

"We looked them over curiously, and talked about them plenty. These suns were simply small spheres of invisible radiation, three or four of them, floating high above the roof of No. 4 Extraction Shed. Somehow, the sight of them made us greatly excited in a sort of horrible, heart-leaping way. Beach was home at the time the test turned up positive, so Wyman phoned him, and was in the middle of telling him about it when—*wham!*"

"Thanks!" Graham responded. "You've helped a lot."

He left his chair, walked out, followed by the deeply puzzled Corbett. They paced along the curved drive leading to the road, stopped by the police chief's gyrocar.

In response to some weird impulse, some strange but urgent notion he could not explain, Graham drove his thoughts away from the recent examination, and compelled them to concentrate elsewhere. It was difficult to govern his own mind in such dictatorial fashion, and for several seconds he sweated in mental turmoil. Eventually, he fastened his attention upon a woman, a tall, dark-haired woman of soothingly serene personality; Dr. Curtis—it was easy to think of her.

His memory was still looking into eyes like tranquil pools when Corbett got into his car, saying, "Hey, we didn't ask that guy what those sun things might be."

"No," agreed Graham, hardly hearing. He closed the gyrocar's door upon the burly chief. "I'll call around to your office after dinner." He walked away, the vision still held firmly in the grasp of his own imagination.

Corbett called after him, "Those little suns need investigating, I reckon." Receiving no comment, the chief prodded

a switch with a thick forefinger.

The gyrocar whined, slid forward, built up speed. The speed increased until the machine was screaming along like a monster bullet, and, still like a bullet, it flashed through a momentary gap in cross traffic at the end intersection, beating the automatic signals, sending shocked pedestrians scuttling. Madly, it plunged past another block, made a slight curve when crossing the second intersection, plunged headlong into the concrete wall of a corner building. The sound of its impact was a minor explosion that reverberated crashingly along adjacent streets.

The noise reached the ears of the self-mesmerized Graham. He fought fearfully, desperately, half-insanely to hold a feminine face before his mental vision, to reject, keep out, beat off the knowledge that yet another had paid the penalty for being curious about little suns.

While crowds, protected by their own ignorance, milled and gaped around the distant wreck, Graham, made vulnerable by suspicion, threatened by the unseen, battled with himself as he walked steadily away—battled to view a mirage to the complete exclusion of everything else. As he walked he fought; as he fought, he won.

V.

THE PATH was a crazy snake, mottled in the moonlight, twisting and turning as it crawled upward, ever upward. Graham ducked into the shadow of a natural obelisk that poised at one side of the track. The bilious moon spewed its beams over sullen rocks and musing pines, illuminating the rough landscape in pale ghastliness.

The hidden man's feverish eyes searched the pools of shadow that lined and pitted the route he had just traversed; his ears strained to catch sounds different from the rustling of branches, scrape of boughs, burble of distant waters—sounds that he could attribute only to things that invariably were silent.

For a full five minutes he stood thus, watching, waiting, his nerves strained, his muscles taut, his mind and body prepared to meet whatever menace might explode from the silence and the dark. But there was nothing, nothing—only harsh rocks that thrust ragged outlines toward equally ragged clouds, only sentinel pines standing guard around the camp of night.

Several times had he stopped and watched the trail behind, and each time the path remained empty, undisturbed.

Those stalkers in the ebon hours, slinking in his steps, skulking furtively through the gloom, were creatures of his own imagination. He knew they were strange products of his tired, overburdened mind, yet he could not forbear to seek occasional vantage posts, and compel his sleep-hungry eyes to seek confirmation of the fantasies within his brain.

He stared until he had convinced himself that he was deluded, then emerged from the black bar cast by the obelisk, continued up the trail. Stumbling over broad cracks, slipping in deep ruts, tripping over loose stones half hidden in the the sickly light, he hastened along.

The path curved around the mountain, ended in a tiny, elevated valley obscured by towering walls. A building squatted at the farther end. It was no ramshackle erection, but a sturdy conglomeration of concrete and native rock, low-built, drab, ominous in its complete seclusion.

At the mouth of the valley stood a finger post, its faded board bearing in awkward scrawl the words: MILLIGAN'S STRIKE. Graham looked at the board, then turned anxious eyes back along the path. Nothing stirred.

Jet shadows cast by surrounding cliffs

swallowed his own shadow as he stole through the valley, reached the silent building, surveyed its cold, dark windows. There were no sounds of movement within those grim walls, no sound save that of a stone rolling somewhere back along the trail.

Graham rapped heavily upon the door, tried its handle, found it locked. He knocked again, using a large pebble to increase the noise. There was no response. Turning his back to the door, his bloodshot eyes peering through the gloom toward the distant, moonlit post, he swung a steel-shod boot at the woodwork, digging his heel into the panels until the entire building echoed and reechoed a steady succession of thuds.

Horror clawed at his heart while he hammered frantically for entry. Perhaps others had got in before him; others who had not knocked, yet had quietly passed inside—others at whom it was futile to shoot, from whom it was useless to run.

Fighting off his panic, he gave the strong, thick door a final tremendous blow. If there was no answer within one minute, he was going to bust that door wide open, using a good, heavy rock as a battering-ram. Putting his ear to the panels, he listened intently, heard a faint humming that became a low whine.

RELIEF brightened his features as the whine ceased; a short, metallic rattle followed; slow, deliberate feet approached the door. A chain clanged, the lock snapped back, the door opened a bare six inches.

From the blackness, a deep, rich voice demanded, "Well?"

Graham introduced himself, then asked, "Are you Professor Beach?"

The chain came off the door, which opened wide, and the speaker in the gloom said quickly: "Come in, Graham. We've met before. I could not identify you in this infernal darkness."

Entering, Graham heard the door slam and lock behind him. A hand grasped his arm, steered him across a completely obscured room, stopped him at the other side. Metal grated and clanged before his face, the floor sank under his feet. An elevator, of all things, in such a place as this!

Light floated upward, the floor ceased its descent. Graham saw the other's face in revealing rays. The scientist was still the same tall, thin-featured, dark-haired personage that he used to be. The burden of time rested lightly upon this man, for Graham could note little difference in the face he had not seen for several years. But there was one difference, a startling one—*the eyes.*

Beach's thin, curved, hawklike nose jutted between a pair of hard, cold optics unearthly in their brilliance. There was something hypnotic in their deliberate, calculating stare, something overpowering in their weird glow.

"Why the darkness upstairs?" questioned Graham, still fascinated by those uncanny orbs.

"Light attracts nocturnal creatures," replied Beach, his face sardonic. "They are a nuisance."

He ushered Graham into a small, book-lined room, gave him a chair. Carefully shutting the door, he sat himself opposite his visitor. His fingers built a church and steeple, while his eyes bored steadily into the other.

"I am indeed sorry that we should meet again in such terrible circumstances," said Beach suavely. "I presume that your visit is connected with the Silver City disaster?"

"It is."

"But since the department of special finance is not involved, it cannot have an interest in the matter?" Beach's dark, finely curved brows lifted questioningly.

"No," agreed Graham. Taking off

his ring, he handed it across. "The inside surface bears a microscopic inscription which is my warrant as a member of the United States Intelligence Service."

"Ah, the Intelligence!" The eyebrows sank into a frown. Beach rolled the ring between his fingers, gave it back without inspecting it. "If you want to know why the silver nitrate exploded, I cannot tell you. I have been asked about it a dozen times by policemen, factory inspectors, and press reporters. I am totally unable to explain it."

"You lie!" declared Graham flatly.

WITH A DEEP sigh, the scientist came to his feet, walked slowly to the door through which they had entered. He found a hooked rod, used it to drag down a large screen from its slot in the ceiling. Satisfied that the screen completely covered the door, he returned calmly to his seat.

"Why do I lie?"

Back hairs were erect on Graham's neck as he answered: "Because you, and you alone, know that the stuff was mysteriously disrupted by some weird phenomena that you were trying to photograph."

He swallowed hard, feeling certain that in some way the statement had signed his own death warrant, and amazed that he still lived. Studying Beach for the effect of his words, he noted only the tighter clutch of folded hands, an almost indiscernible flicker in the burning eyes.

"Whatever it was that wiped out Silver City," continued Graham determinedly, "is the same thing or things that eliminated eighteen of the world's best scientists. It is my investigation of the deaths of those scientists that has brought me to you."

Feeling in his pocket, he found a telegram, passed it across to Beach. The latter murmured the words as he read them:

GRAHAM CARE OF BOISE POLICE: SOLE COMMON DENOMINATOR DASH ALL WERE FRIENDS OF BJORNSEN OR FRIENDS OF HIS FRIENDS STOP HARRIMAN

"That means the eighteen." Graham stabbed an accusing finger at the scientist. "*You* were a friend of Bjornsen's!"

"True," admitted Professor Beach, looking his opponent straight in the face. "I was a very old friend of Bjornsen. I will also confess that I have much information that I intend to keep entirely to myself. What are you going to do about it?"

The scientist's bold defiance might have beaten others less persistent than Graham, but the investigator was not to be so easily defeated. Leaning forward, arms akimbo on broad knees, his muscular face intent, the Intelligence man did his best to convey the impression that he knew far more than the other suspected.

"Webb left a concealed message that we deciphered, a message telling much of what he had discovered," said Graham earnestly. "He declared that it was a picture that must be shown the world, if it can be shown without massacre."

"Massacre!" Beach's voice was harsh. "Is not the fate of Silver City enough? Why, even now your own thoughts are your most dangerous enemy. If that fluorescent screen over the door happens to glow, neither I nor the strength of the civilized world can save you from instant death."

"I am aware of the fact," responded Graham evenly. "My risk is no greater than your own, and cannot be increased by knowing the things that you know." He didn't look round at the screen, but kept his whole attention upon the brilliant eyes opposite. "Since there has been massacre despite the fact that the truth is not generally known, matters

could hardly be worse if the truth was known."

"An assumption," scoffed Beach. His gaze slid to the concealed door, moved back again.

"The value of which I am willing to discuss with you, once I have heard the facts," Graham retorted.

"The facts are beyond belief."

"Do you believe them?"

"A fair question," Beach conceded. "Of course, I believe them. The evidence already accumulated leaves no room for disbelief in understanding minds."

"Then what are the facts?" demanded Graham, his fixed, authoritative stare fairly urging the scientist to speak. "What wiped out Silver City? What cut short the experiments of eighteen sane scientists, ending their lives in a manner that might easily have aroused no suspicion? What murdered Police Chief Corbett this afternoon?"

"Corbett? Has he gone, too?" His blazing eyes directed over his listener's shoulder toward the hidden door, Beach pondered deeply. There was deathly silence in the room, while one mind worked frantically, and the other waited with grim determination. Finally, Beach got up, switched out the lights.

"WE CAN OBSERVE the screen more easily in darkness," said Beach. "Sit next to me, keep your eyes on it, and if it glows, force your thoughts elsewhere—or Heaven help you!"

Shifting his chair next to the scientist's, Graham stared through the gloom. He knew that at last the case was about to break, and his conscience kept nagging him unmercifully:

"You ought to have obeyed orders! You ought to have got in touch with Leamington as you were instructed! If Beach becomes the ninteenth corpse, and you the twentieth, the world will know nothing except that you have failed—failed because you refused to do your duty!"

"Graham," commenced Professor Beach, his voice rasping through the darkness, cutting short the investigator's mental reproaches, "the world has been given a scientific discovery as great, as important, as far-reaching in its implications as the telescope and the microscope."

"What is it?"

"A means of extending the visible portion of the spectrum far into the infrared."

"Ah!"

"Bjornsen discovered it," Beach went on, "and, like the telescope and microscope, it has revealed a new and hitherto-unsuspected world. When Galileo peered through his telescope he found data that had stood before millions of uncomprehending eyes for countless centuries, data that upset the officially indorsed but thoroughly fatuous Copernican system of astronomy."

"It was a wonderful find," agreed Graham.

"The microscope provides a better analogy," continued Beach, his voice rising slightly. "The microscope disclosed a fact that had been right under the world's nose since the dawn of time, and yet had never been suspected—the fact that we shared our world, our whole existence, with a veritable multitude of living creatures hidden beyond the limits of our natural sight, hidden in the infinitely small.

"Think of it!" urged Beach, his excitement now obvious. "Living, active creatures swarming around us, within us, breeding, fighting, dying even in our own blood streams, yet remaining completely concealed, unguessed-at, until the microscope lent power to our inadequate eyes."

"That, too, was a very great discovery," Graham indorsed. He started as the other's hot hand found his in the gloom, clutched it strongly.

"Just as these things completely evaded us for generation after generation, some by hiding in the enormously great, some in the exceedingly small, so have others eluded us by skulking in the absolutely colorless." Beach's voice was now vibrant, hoarse. "The scale of electro-magnetic radiations extends over sixty octaves, of which the human eye can see but one. Beyond that sinister barrier of our limitations, outside that poor, footling range of vision, bossing every one of us from the cradle to the grave, invisibly preying upon us, are our malicious, all-powerful lords and masters, the creatures who really own the Earth."

"What the devil are they?" breathed Graham. A cold sweat beaded his forehead; his eyes swiveled toward the screen. No glow, no ominous glow penetrated encompassing darkness, a fact he noted with much relief.

"TO EYES equipped to see them, they appear as floating spheres of pale-blue luminescence," explained Beach. "Because of their luminescence, allying them to the photons of light, and because they live, I concocted for them the name of Vitons. They are alive, intelligent. They are the lords of Terra; we, the sheep of their fields. They are cruel sultans of the unseen; we, their mumbling, sweating slaves, so indescribably stupid that only now have we become aware of our fetters."

"You can see them?"

"I can!" The scientist's breathing was loud in the small room. "All who duplicated Bjornsen's experiment became endowed with the ability to penetrate that barrier of sight. Those who saw the Vitons got excited about it, thought about the discovery, and walked in the shadow of death. The Vitons can read human thoughts from within a limited distance, and, naturally, they take action to prevent the broadcasting of news which eventually might lead to our challenging their age-old predominance. Those of Bjornsen's copyists who failed to control the knowledge within their mind, or, perhaps, were betrayed by dreams while helpless in their slumbers, have had their minds and mouths closed forever." He paused, then added, "As ours may yet be closed."

"I suspected something of the sort."

"You did?" Surprise was evident in Beach's tones.

"Since I started my investigation I have had moments when I felt that it was tremendously important to shift my thoughts elsewhere. More than once I have obeyed a crazy but powerful impulse to think of other things, feeling, somehow, that it was safer to do so."

"It is the only thing that has spared you," Beach declared.

"Then is my mental control greater than that of accomplished men such as Bjornsen, Luther, Mayo and Webb?" asked Graham.

"No. You were able to exercise control more easily because what you were controlling was merely a vague hunch, and, unlike the others, you did not have to conquer a full and horrible knowledge."

"Thank Heaven for my hunches!" murmured Graham gratefully.

"It was really more than a hunch," Beach said, his voice conveying respect. "If your feeling, though vague, was powerful enough to command obedience in defiance of your rational instinct, it is evident that you have extra-sensory perception developed to an unusual degree."

"Ah! I did not think of that."

"The power, though not common, is very far from being unique." Getting up from his chair, Beach switched on the light, pulled a drawer from a large filing cabinet. He raked through a mass of press clippings that filled the drawer, extracted one, looked it over.

"I have clippings concerning many such cases going back for a hundred and

fifty years. Here is one, taken from British *Tit Bits,* dated March 19, 1938.* The case of Ilga Kirps, a Latvian shepherdess, of Riga, a young girl, of average intelligence, but a scientific curiosity. A committee of leading European scientists subjected her to a very thorough examination, then stated that she undoubtedly possessed the power of extra-sensory perception developed to such an amazing degree that it was superior to her natural eyesight."

"Stronger than mine," commented Graham as the scientist closed the drawer, turned off the light, resumed his seat.

"The power varies. Ilga Kirps was a Viton hybrid. Extra-sensory perception is a Viton trait."

"WHAT!" His fingers clenching the arms of his chair, Graham sat bolt upright.

"It is a Viton trait," repeated Beach calmly. "Ilga Kirps was the fairly successful result of a Viton experiment. Your own case was less fruitful, perhaps because your operation was natal. They are always meddling, experimenting, practicing their super-surgery on their cosmic cattle."

"But why, why?"

"To see if it is possible to endow human beings with Viton abilities." There was silence for a moment, then Beach said dryly: "Why do men teach parrots to curse, try to breed talking dogs, train elephants to perform absurd tricks?"

"I see the parallel," acknowledged Graham.

"I have a thousand clippings telling about people endowed with inhuman powers, suffering from abnormal or supernormal defects, giving birth to atrocious monstrosities, enduring inexplicable experiences, unnatural fates. Remember the case of Daniel Home, the man who floated from a first-floor window before the astounded eyes of several prominent and absolutely trustworthy witnesses? His was a thoroughly authentic case of a person possessing the power of levitation—the Viton method of locomotion."

"Good heavens!"

"Then there's the case of Kaspar Hauser, the man from nowhere," Beach went imperturbably on, "and the reverse of it, the man who went nowhere; the case of the disappearance of Benjamin Bathurst, British ambassador extraordinary to Vienna, who, on November 25, 1809, walked around the heads of a couple of horses—and vanished forever."

"I don't quite see the connection," Graham protested. "Why the devil should these super-creatures make people disappear?"

"Why do medical students make stray cats disappear? From what wondering, puzzled pond vanishes the frogs that are later to be dissected?" Beach's cold grin was hidden by the darkness. "Disappearances are commonplace. What happened to the crew of the *Marie Celeste?* Were they suitable frogs snatched from a convenient pond? What happened to the *Waratah?* Did the man who, at the last moment, refused to sail on the *Waratah* have extra-sensory perception, or was he warned off because he was an unsuitable frog? Only this morning I was studying some clippings taken from the London *Evening Standard,* May 16, 1938, and from the *Daily Telegraph* of following dates. They recounted the extremely sudden but very complete disappearance of the 5,456-ton vessel *Anglo-Australian.*"

"Yes, I've heard about that case," Graham indorsed.

"She was an excellent boat," continued Beach, "and she was sailing in smooth, tranquil seas when she and her crew

* Every back-dated press item mentioned in this story is absolutely authentic, and may be inspected in the files of libraries and newspaper offices. These clippings *are not fantasy but hard fact.* E. F. R.

of thirty-eight abruptly became as if they had never been. She vanished in mid-Atlantic, within fifty miles of other ships, shortly after sending a radio message stating that all was well. Where has she gone? Where are the thousands of people who have been listed for years by the bureau of missing persons?"

"You tell me," Graham suggested. His eyes searched the darkness for the screen, failed to find it. Somewhere in the black it was standing, a silent sentry, waiting, guarding them, yet unable to do more than warn them of invaders that they alone must resist.

"I DON'T know," confessed Beach. "Nobody knows. All we can say is that they have been seized by agencies only now within our ken, powers unfamiliar, but in no way supernatural. They have been taken for purposes at which we can but guess. They have gone as they have been going since the beginning of history, and as they will keep on going in the future."

"Maybe."

"Only a month ago, the New York-Rio strat-plane passed behind a cloud over Port of Spain, Trinidad, and didn't reappear. Nothing has been heard of it since. Nine months ago the Soviet's Moscow-Vladivostok new streamliner vanished in a similar way. That hasn't been heard of, either. There have been a whole series of such cases going back for decades, right back to the early days of aëronautics."

"I recall some of them," Graham commented.

"What happened to Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan; to Lieutenant Askar Omdal, Brice Goldsborough and Mrs. F. W. Grayson; to Captain Terence Tully and Lieutenant James Medcalf; to Nungesser and Coli? Some, perhaps, crashed, but I have little doubt that others did not. They were taken, as human beings have been taken for century after century, singly, in groups, in shiploads."

"The world must be told, be warned," swore Graham.

"Who can tell, can warn—and live?" asked Beach caustically. "Eighteen scientists lie tongue-tied in their graves, and eighteen thousand can be silenced as efficiently. To talk is to think, and to think is to be betrayed, and to be betrayed is to die. Even we, in this lonely hide-out, may eventually be found by some roaming invisible, overheard, and made to pay the penalty for our inability to camouflage our knowledge. The Vitons are ruthless, utterly ruthless, and it is ghastly evidence of the fact that they wiped out Silver City immediately they found that we had discovered a means of photographing them."

"Nevertheless, the world must be informed," Graham said stubbornly. "Ignorance is a bond, but knowledge is a weapon. Humanity must know its oppressors to throw off the yoke."

"Fine-sounding words," scoffed Professor Beach. "You do not know enough to appreciate the impossibility of what you suggest."

"Then tell me all, tell me everything that you can possibly tell."

"And after that?"

"I shall take the responsibility and the risk!"

Silence in the darkness while the two sat side by side; a grim, brooding silence during which the fate of a world was weighed in the balance of one man's mind.

Suddenly, Beach said, "Come!" He switched on the light, opened a door opposite the still-dull screen, turned on more lights that revealed the neat, orderly length of a long, narrow and well-equipped laboratory.

Darkening the room they were leaving, Beach closed the connecting door, indicated a bell on the laboratory wall, and told Graham: "If the screen in the other room glows, an electric eye will cause this bell to ring, and if it does ring, you had better muddle your thoughts, or prepare for the worst."

"I understand."

"Sit there," ordered Beach. "I'll treat you according to Bjornsen's formula, and while the reaction takes place, and your sight undergoes adjustment, I'll tell you every detail I have been able to gather." He picked up a tiny vial, a pad of cotton wool. "Listen," he commanded.

VI.

THERE WERE streamers across the sinking moon, a deep, almost solid blackness in the valley. The low building squatting sullenly at one end was completely hidden in the jetness of night, and also hidden was the figure that edged through its front door and flitted through the gloom toward the pines.

For a moment, the figure was a man-shaped silhouette in the moonlight by the crumbling finger post, then it faded into the background of brooding trees. A pebble clattered on the trail, a twig snapped farther on, then there was only the whispering of many leaves, the sigh of night breezes through a multitude of boughs.

At the other end of the trail a mountain ash spread protective arms above a narrow, racy cylinder of highly polished metal. Something dodged around the trunk of the ash, merged with the cylinder. Came the soft click of a well-oiled lock, a low but powerful hum. A startled nightbird squawked its alarm as the cylinder projected itself from the black beneath the tree, flashed along the highway, bounded headlong over the distant crest.

The same cylinder stood on the Boise Strat-Station at dawn. On one side, pale stars still twinkled against a background of dark gray; on the other, the sky held silvery promise of day. Morning mists were a gauzy veil on the Rockies.

Yawning, Graham said to Police Lieutenant Kellerher: "There are very special reasons why Beach and myself are going at different times, and by different routes. It is imperative that one of us reaches Washington. I hold you personally responsible for picking up Beach in one hour's time, and seeing him safely on the *Olympian.*"

"He'll be on it, never worry," Kellerher assured.

"Good! I'll leave it to you." With another wide yawn, Graham climbed into the rear cockpit of the racy-looking army monoplane that was waiting to bear him eastward.

The pilot bent forward in his seat, gave his machine the gun. Fire spat backward from the high-speed vessel's tail, and from tubes flushed into the trailing edges of its polished metal wings. With a rising howl, they dived into the morning sky, their crimson tail sweeping down to the ground, the intense thundering of their rockets splashing

across the strat-station, reverberating from the mountains.

Whizzing high over jagged peaks that speared the now-pink dawn, the pilot brought his vessel down to a more modest altitude, leveled it off. Graham gaped repeatedly, stared over the side with eyes whose bleariness failed to conceal their underlying luster.

The rockets changed their thunder to a loud, persistent snore. Graham's chin sank onto his chest, his eyelids drooped, fluttered, then closed. He snored in sympathy with the rockets.

A bump, a swift rush of wheels along the runway awoke him. Washington! The pilot stared backward, grinned, gestured to his clock. They had made excellent time.

Four figures hurried toward the machine as Graham climbed out. He recognized two of them: Colonel Leamington and Lieutenant Wohl. The others were burly individuals, carrying themselves with an authoritative air.

"Got your wire, Graham," said Leamington, his sharp, gray eyes afire with anticipation. He pulled the message from his pocket, read it aloud. " 'Case cleared up. Solution important to peace of world and must be brought to presidential attention. Meet me army special due Washington port two-thirty.' " He looked questioningly at the investigator. "Your information must be of terrific consequence?"

"It is!" Graham's eyes turned to the sky, his cold, shining orbs focused on seeming nothingness. "I must take very great care, or else I shall not live to tell it. You will have to hear me in some subterranean place such as the basement of a government building. I'd like you to have a Blattnerphone running, so that you can have a record of what I've said if it so happens that, despite my care—and luck—my story is stopped halfway through the telling."

"That's easily arranged," agreed Leamington.

Ignoring the curious expressions with which the others listened to his remarks, Graham went on: "I also want you to have somebody take Dr. Beach off the *Olympian* when it reaches Pittsburgh tonight. He can be flown here, and can confirm my statements—or complete them."

"Complete them?"

"Yes, if they don't get completed by me."

"You talk very strangely, Graham," opined Leamington, conducting the other toward a waiting gyrocar.

"No more strangely than men have died." Getting into the machine, the rest following, he added, "I'll talk more plainly where it's safer."

TALK HE DID; to an audience of thirty seated on rows of hard, uncomfortable chairs in a cellar far below street level. A fluorescent screen, obtained at short notice from a government laboratory, covered the only door, its sensitive coating inert, lifeless, but prepared to emit a warning glow with the passage of invisible intruders. Overhead, a stony barrier between the secret session and the snooping skies, towered the mighty bulk of the War Department Building.

It was a mixed audience, uneasily attentive, half-believing. There sat Colonel Leamington, with Wohl and the two Intelligence men who had met Graham on his arrival. Left of them, fidgeted Senators Carmody and Dean, confidants of the country's chief executive. Willetts C. Keithley, supreme head of the United States Intelligence Service, was a broad-shouldered, phlegmatic figure on the right, his personal secretary by his side.

Behind these were a number of scientists, government officials, and advisory psychologists to a total of two dozen. That shrewd face, topped with a white mane, showed the presence of Professor Jurgens, expert on mass psy-

chology or, as his friends described it, "mob reaction." The thinner, darker features staring over his shoulder belonged to Kennedy Veitch, leading ray expert. Surrounding these were men equally able, some internationally famous, some unknown.

The attention of all was fixed upon the speaker, whose glittering eyes, hoarse voice, and expressive gestures drove into their minds the full and dreadful import of his subject. In one corner, steel tape ran smoothly through the indifferent Blattnerphone, recording the revelation with mechanical accuracy.

"Gentlemen," commenced Graham, "six months ago the Swedish scientist Peder Bjornsen brought many years of constant experimentation to a triumphant conclusion by succeeding in extending the range of human vision. He accomplished this feat with the aid of iodine, methylene blue and mescal, and although the manner in which these materials function is not yet fully understood, there is no doubt about their efficiency. A person treated with them, in the manner prescribed by Bjornsen, can perceive a much wider range of electro-magnetic frequencies than is possible with natural sight.

"How much wider?" inquired a voice.

"The extension is all in one direction," Graham answered. "It is far into the infra red. According to Bjornsen, the limit lies in the ultra-radio band."

"Seeing beyond heat?" insisted the questioner.

"Seeing heat, and beyond it," Graham assured.

He drowned out the resulting murmur of astonishment as he carried on, "How the effect is achieved is something for you scientists to puzzle over. What I am concerned with, what concerns this country, what concerns the entire world is an astounding fact that this discovery has literally dragged into the light." He paused, then gave it to them straight from the shoulder. "Gentlement, another and higher form of life is master of the earth!"

THERE WAS no burst of voices, raised in angry protest, no skeptical jeers, not even a buzz of conversation. They sat there, staring at him with rows of shocked, frightened eyes, their faces showing that his statement exceeded their most fantastic expectations.

"I assure you that it is the truth," declared Graham. "I have seen these creatures myself. I have seen them, pale but glowing balls of blueness floating through the sky. A pair of them skimmed swiftly, silently, high above me as I slunk along the lonely trail from Beach's isolated laboratory in the mountains between Silver City and Boise. One of them bobbed in the air over Boise Strat-Station shortly before my plane took off to bring me here. There were dozens over Washington when I arrived. There are dozens over the city at this very moment, some probably swaying above this building."

"What are they?" put in Senator Carmody.

"Nobody knows. There has not been sufficient time to study them. Bjornsen himself thought them alien invaders of fairly recent arrival. The late Professor Mayo agreed that they were of extra-terrestrial origin, but opined that they had conquered and occupied this planet many thousands of years ago. Professor Beach, or Dr. Beach as he prefers to be called, thinks that they are native to Earth, just as microbes are native. Beach says that the now-dead Hans Luther went further, and suggested that these things were true terrestrials, while we are descendants of animals imported in cosmic cattleboats."

"Cattle!—cattle!—cattle!" The word shuttled around the audience.

"How much is known about these creatures?" somebody demanded.

"Very little, I'm afraid. They have

not the slightest resemblance to human beings, and, from our point of view, they are so utterly and completely alien that I cannot see how it will ever be possible for us to find a common basis that will permit some sort of understanding. They look like luminescent spheres, about three feet in diameter, their surfaces alive, glowing, blue, but entirely devoid of observable features."

HIS LISTENERS' features bore a strange mixture of awe, horror and incredulity as he went on, saying, "It is known that these mysterious spheres have extra-sensory perception as a substitute for sight. That is why they have always been able to see us while we could not see them, for mental awareness is independent of electro-magnetic frequencies. It is also known that they can read human thoughts from within a near distance, an ability probably permitted by this same extra-sensory perception. Beach gave them the name of Vitons, and says that they are not fleshly, but composed of energy."

"Absurd!" ejaculated a scientist, finding at last something within the scope of his training. "Energy cannot hold so compact and balanced a form."

"What about fireballs?"

"Fireballs?" The critic subsided, looked doubtful. "I admit, you have me there! Science has not yet been able to explain those particular phenomena."

"Yet science agrees that fireballs are compact and temporarily balanced forms of energy. They may be dying Vitons," suggested Graham. "They may be these very creatures, falling in death, dispelling their energy in visible frequencies." Taking out his wallet, he extracted a couple of clippngs. *"World Telegram,* April 17th. Case of a fireball that bounced through an open window into a house, scorched a rug where it burst. Chicago *Daily News,* April 22nd. Case of a fireball that floated across a meadow, entered a house, tried to pass up a chimney, then exploded, wrecking the chimney."

Replacing the clippings, he said, "I borrowed those from Beach. He has a collection of clippings dating back a hundred and fifty years. Nearly two thousand of them deal with fireballs and parallel phenomena."

"How do you know that these things, these Vitons are our masters?" questioned Keithley, speaking for the first time.

"Bjornsen deduced it from observation, and his followers came to the same conclusion. The things behave as if they own the Earth—which they do! Little has been discovered, but that little means plenty. Beach is satisfied that not only are the Vitons composed of energy, but also that they live on energy, feed on it, *our* energy! They breed us, herd us, drive us, milk us, fattening on the currents generated by our emotions in exactly the same way that we fatten on juice involuntarily surrendered by cattle to whom we have given fodder containing stimulants for lactation."

"The devils!" exclaimed a voice.

"If you ponder this, gentlemen," Graham continued, "you will realize its awful implications. The nervous energy produced by the act of thinking, also as the reaction to emotion, has long been known to be electrical or quasi-electrical in nature, and it is this energy that nourishes our shadowy superiors. As we cultivate our food, so do they cultivate theirs; as we plow our fields, sow and reap, so do they plow, sow and reap. We are fleshly soil, furrowed with Viton-dictated circumstances, sown with controversial ideas, manured with rumors that are sprinkled with suspicion, all that we may raise fine, fat crops of emotional energy to be reaped with knives of trouble."

There came a knock at the door, its sudden sound making several start in their seats. A uniformed man entered,

whispered briefly to Keithley, then took his departure. Keithley stood up, his face pale, his voice vibrant. He looked at Graham, then at the audience, and spoke slowly, earnestly.

"Gentlemen, I regret to inform you that I have just been told that the *Olympian* has been involved in a collision twenty miles west of Pittsburgh." He swallowed hard, his beefy features strained. "Many people have been injured, and one killed. The casualty is Professor Beach."

AMID A BABBLE of comment from his horrified listeners, he sat down. For a full minute, the audience fidgeted, murmured, stared at each other, at the screen, at the feverish eyes of Graham.

"Another informed mind has been tossed into oblivion," commented Graham bitterly. "The nineteenth!" He spread dramatic arms. "We eat, but we do not seek wild potatoes. We grow them, and, in growing them, we improve them according to our own notions of what potatoes ought to be. Similarly, our emotional tubers are not enough to fill higher bellies; they must be grown, stimulated, bred according to the ideas of those who do the cultivating.

"That," he shouted, bunching a strong fist, and shaking it at his wide-eyed hearers, "is the reason why human beings, rational enough, ingenious enough, to amaze ourselves with our own cleverness, cannot conduct our affairs in a way that does justice to our brains and our fellows. That is the reason why, in this present day and age, we can build glories greater than history has ever held, yet cannot build peace, tranquillity. That is the reason why we advance in science, art, and all the graces except sociology, which has been hamstrung from the very beginning."

Expressively, he spread an imaginary sheet, and said, "If I was showing you a microphotograph of a saw edge, its peaks and valleys would be a perfect graph representing the waves of emotion that have upset the world with strange regularity. Emotion—the crop! Hysteria—the fruit! Rumors of war, actual wars, ferocious and bloody; religious revivals; labor troubles; major disasters; revolutions and more wars."

His voice loud, determined, he continued, "Despite the fact that the enormous majority of ordinary men yearn for peace and security above all else, this world of otherwise sane, sensible people cannot satisfy that yearning. *They are not allowed to satisfy it!* Peace, real peace is a time of famine to those higher than us in the scale of life. There must be emotion, nervous energy, brought into being, somehow, anyhow."

"It is atrocious!" swore Senator Carmody.

"When you see the world riddled with suspicion, rotten with conflicting ideas, staggering beneath the burden of preparations for war, you can be certain that harvest time is drawing near—a harvest for others."

He bent forward, his jaw jutting aggressively, his eyes burning into theirs. "Gentlemen, I shall give you Bjornsen's formula that you may test it for yourselves. I ask, I demand that the truth be given to the world before it becomes too late. Humanity shall never know peace, never build a heaven upon earth while its very soul bears this hideous burden, its very mind is corrupted from birth. Truth must be a weapon, else these creatures would never have gone to such drastic lengths to prevent it from becoming known. They fear the truth, therefore the world must be told the truth. The world *must* be told!"

He sat down, covered his face with his hands. There were things he could not tell them, things he did not want to tell them. Before morning, some of

them would die; they would die screaming the guilty knowledge that filled their minds, the fear that stuffed their leaping hearts. They would fight hopelessly, run uselessly, expire helplessly.

DIMLY, he heard Colonel Leamington addressing the audience, telling the scientists to go their separate ways with care and circumspection, to take with them mimeographed copies of the precious formula, to test it, and inform him of the results immediately they were obtained. Above all, they were to exercise mental self-control, keeping apart so that their minds could betray them only as individuals, and not as a group. Leamington, too, appreciated the danger. At least, he was taking no chances.

The governmental experts passed out one by one, each taking his slip of paper from Leamington. All gazed at the seated Graham, but none spoke. Their faces were grim.

When they had gone, Leamington said, "We've prepared sleeping quarters far below ground, Graham. We must take care of you until the facts are checked up, because it seems that you are now the only one with first-hand information.

"I don't think so."

"Eh?" Leamington's jaw dropped with surprise.

"I don't think so," repeated Graham tiredly. "Heaven alone knows how many scientists have heard about Bjornsen's discovery. Some, undoubtedly, dismissed it as utterly ridiculous, never bothered to test it for themselves, and thereby preserved their own lives. But there may be others who have confirmed Bjornsen's claims, and have been fortunate enough to escape detection. They will be worried, haunted men, driven half mad by their own knowledge, yet afraid to risk ridicule, or precipitate a holocaust by making their knowledge known."

"You think that general dissemination of the news will cause trouble?"

"Trouble is putting it mildly," Graham declared. "The news will be broadcast only if the Vitons fail in their positive attempts to prevent it. If they find it necessary, they will slaughter half of the human race to preserve the blissful ignorance of the other half."

"Supposing they can do it," qualified Leamington.

"That remains to be seen." Graham rubbed powerful hands together, felt dampness oozing from the pores. "Their numbers and strength is a matter for speculation. If they find me, and remove me, you must seek some other survivor. Bjornsen told his friends, some of whom passed the information along to their friends, and there's no telling just how far the news has spread. Dakin, for instance, got it from Webb, who got it from Beach, who got it from Bjornsen. Dakin got it third-hand but it killed him just the same. There may be others who, more by luck than anything else, have managed to keep alive."

"It is to be hoped so," Leamington said.

"Once the news does get out, we shall all be safe. The motive for removing us will then have ceased to exist." There was pleased anticipation in Graham's tones, the glee of one who looks forward to ridding himself of an intolerable burden.

"If the results of the scientists' check-up bear out your statements," interjected Senator Carmody, "I, personally, shall see that the president is informed without delay. You can depend upon action."

"Thanks!" responded Graham. He arose, went out with Leamington and Wohl. They conducted him to his temporary refuge still farther beneath the War Department Building.

"Say, Bill," spoke Wohl, "I collected reports from Europe that I never had a chance to tell you about. There have been autopsies on Sheridan, Bjornsen

and Luther, and the results were exactly the same as in the cases of Mayo and Webb."

"It all ties up," remarked Colonel Leamington. He patted Graham on the shoulder, performing the action with a touch of paternal pride. "Your story is one that is going to strain the credulity of an entire world, but I believe you implicitly."

They left him to the sleep he knew he would not get. He could not sleep with the crisis so near to hand. Mayo had gone, and he had seen him go. He had seen Dakin flee from a fate that was fast, determined, implacable, and he had seen Corbett come to a similar end. Tonight, Beach. To-morrow—who?

In the early hours of the morning the news broke over a startled planet, broke with breath-taking suddenness, and with a violence that transcended everything. The entire world howled with horror.

VII.

IT WAS three o'clock in the morning of June the ninth, 2015, and the never-mentioned but superbly efficient United States Department of Propaganda was working overtime. Its two floors in Home Affairs Building were dark, deserted, but half a mile away, hidden in a huge, sprawling basement consisting of a dozen great cellars, slaved the department's complete staff, augmented by eighty willing helpers.

One floor above them, held by an immense thickness of concrete and steel, rested the mammoth weights of several old-fashioned presses, clean, bright, oiled, kept for years in constant readiness against the time when there might be a breakdown in the television news-reproduction system. A thousand feet higher reared the beautifully slender pile that was the home of the semiofficial Washington *Post*.

Into the hands of the bustling two hundred, jacketless, perspiring, were being drawn the threads of communication of a whole world. Television, radio and cable systems, strat-plane couriers, even the signaling sections of the fighting forces were theirs to command.

For all the intense activity, there was no sign of it at ground-level. The Post Building stood apparently lifeless, its mounting rows of windows showing nothing but reflections of pale moonlight. A patrolling policeman stamped his lonely way along the sidewalk, his eyes on a distant illuminated clock. A cat ran daintily across his path, vanished into the shadows.

But far below, underneath the brooding monoliths, buried amid a million unsuspecting sleepers, the two hundred slaved in preparation for the dawn. Morse keys rattled brief, staccato messages, teletypers chattered furiously through chapters of information, telephones shrilled and emitted tinny words, while, in one corner, a powerful short-wave radio transmitter forced impulses through its sky-high antenna and out to faraway ears.

News flowed in, was dissected, correlated, filed. Bleeker has completed the test, reports he can see two spheres gliding over Delaware Avenue. O. K., tell Bleeker to forget it—*if he can!* Here's Williams on the phone, saying he's completed the test, and can see spheres. Tell Williams thanks, and to go bury himself fast. Tollerton on the wire, says test comes out positive, and he's watching a string of blue globes moving high across the Potomac. Tell him to take a sleep.

"That you, Tollerton? Thanks for the information. No, sorry, we're not permitted to tell you whether other reports confirm your own. Why? For your own sake, of course! Now drop the idea, and go bye-bye."

A mad hurly-burly, in which incoming calls squeezed their way between outgoing messages. Here, a man clings

frantically to a phone, makes his twentieth attempt to raise station WRTC in Colorado. He gives it up, makes a contact request to the Denver Police. Over there, the radio operator recites patiently into his microphone. "Calling battleship *Arizona,* calling battleship *Arizona.*"

IN THE MIDDLE of it all, exactly at the hour of four, two men arrived through the tunnel that, a decade before, had provided swift means of egress for thousands of still-damp newspapers being rushed to the railroad terminus.

The first man entered, respectfully held the door open for his companion. The second man was tall, heavily built, with iron-gray hair, light-gray eyes that looked calmly, steadily from a muscular, confident face.

While the second man stood appraising the scene, the other said, simply, "Gentlemen, the president!"

A momentary quietness while every man came to his feet, looked upon the face they knew so well. Then the president signed them to carry on, permitted himself to be conducted to an inclosed booth. Inside, he adjusted his glasses, arranged some typewritten sheets in his hand, faced a microphone.

The signal lamp flashed, the president spoke, his delivery assured, convincing, his voice impressive. Two blocks away, hidden in another basement, delicate machinery absorbed the chief executive's speech, prepared to reproduce it two thousand times.

Long after the president had departed, the machinery sped on, pouring forth compact coils of metallic tape which were snatched up, packed in air-tight containers, and rushed away.

The New York-San Francisco stratplane left at five o'clock, a dozen reproductions of the president's speech in its cargo. It dropped three of them en route, then disappeared forever.

The four-thirty special to London received the first score of copies, carried them safely across the Atlantic, delivered them at their destination. The pilot had been told that the sealed cans contained films. He thought that they were films, and anything—or things—that may have been interested in his thought were successfully deceived into thinking the same.

Three quarters of the reproductions were safely delivered by the time that zero hour arrived. The speech could easily have been made by the president in person, over a nation-wide radio hook-up. And the speech could just as easily have been defeated by death lurking at one microphone. Now there were fifteen hundred presidents, ready with fifteen hundred microphones so far scattered that some waited in American consulates and embassies in Europe, a few were ready on solitary islands in the Pacific, several were aboard warships far out at sea.

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK in the morning in the eastern States, at noon in Great Britain, and at equivalent times elsewhere, the news splashed over front pages of papers, blared from loud-speakers, was shouted from the housetops.

A muttering grew from the world, a low, dreadful muttering that gradually became a shrill, hysterical scream. The voice of humanity expressed its shock. In New York, a bawling mob filled Times Square to suffocation point, surging, shouting, shaking fists at sullen skies. In Central Park, a greater mob prayed. sang hymns, protested, wept.

Piccadilly, London, was messed with the blood of four suicides that morning. Trafalgar Square permitted no room for traffic, even its famous lions being concealed beneath a veritable flood of human figures. And while the lions crouched below smothering humanity, and surrounding white faces were turned to even whiter speakers, Nelson's Column broke at its base, leaned over to-

ward an opposing column of shrieks, fell, and killed half a hundred. Emotion welled to the heavens, bright, clear, thirst-quenching emotion!

The news was out, despite all attempts to prevent it, despite various obstacles to its broadcasting. Not all newspapers had acceded to official requests that their front pages be devoted to the authorized script. Some had asserted their journalistic independence by distorting the copy with which they had been provided, lending it humor or horror according to their individual whims. A few flatly refused to print such obvious balderdash. Others tried to comply, and failed.

The New York *Times* came out with a belated edition stating that its early morning issue had not appeared "because of sudden casualties among our staff." Ten had died in the *Times* office that morning.

In Elmira, the editor of the *Gazette* sat dead at his desk, the television-printed data from Washington still in his cold grasp. His assistant editor had tried to take the sheet, and had slumped beside him. A third lay sprawled near the door, a foolhardy reporter who had dropped even as his mind conceived the notion that it was up to him to fulfill the duty for which his superiors had given their lives.

Radio Station WTTZ blew itself to hell at the exact moment that its microphone came to life, and its operator opened his mouth to give the news that was to be followed by the presidential speech.

Later in the week, it was estimated that seventeen radio stations in the United States, and sixty-four in the entire world, had been mysteriously wrecked in time to prevent the broadcasting of revelations. The press, too, suffered heavily, newspaper offices collapsing at the critical moment, being disrupted by inexplicable explosions, or losing one by one the informed members of their staffs.

Yet the world was told, warned, so well had the department of propaganda prepared beforehand. Even invisibles could not be everywhere at once. The news was out, and a select few felt safe, but the rest of the world had the jitters.

BILL GRAHAM sat with Lieutenant Wohl and Professor Jurgens in the latter's apartment on Lincoln Parkway. They were looking over the evening editions of every newspaper they had been able to acquire.

"The reaction is pretty much as one might expect," declared Jurgens. "What a mixture! Look at this."

He handed over a copy of the Boston *Transcript*. The paper made no mention of powers invisible, but contented itself with a three-column editorial ferociously attacking the government.

"We are not concerned," swore the *Transcript's* editorial writer, "with the question of whether this morning's morbid scoop is true or untrue, but we are concerned with the means by which it was put across. When the government exercises powers that it has never been given by mandate of the people, and practically confiscates the leading pages of every newspapers in the country, we perceive the first step toward a dictatorial regime. We see a leaning toward methods that will never for one moment be tolerated in this free democracy, and that will meet with our uncompromising opposition so long as we retain a voice with which to speak."

"The problem that arises," said Graham seriously, "is that of whose views this editorial represents. We can assume that the person who wrote it did so with complete honesty, but are those opinions really his own, or are they notions that have been insinuated into his mind?"

"Ah, there lies the peril," agreed Jurgens.

"Since all our data points to the fact that the Vitons can sway opinions any way they want them, subtly guiding the thoughts that best suit their own purposes, it is well-night impossible to determine what views are natural, and what are implanted."

"It is very difficult," Jurgens conceded. "It gives them a tremendous advantage, for they can maintain their hold over humanity by keeping the world divided in spite of all attempts to unite it." He put a long, delicate finger on the article under discussion. "There is the first blow at intended unity, the arousing of suspicion that somewhere lurks a threat of dictatorship."

"Quite!" Graham scowled at the sheet, while Wohl watched him thoughtfully.

"The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* takes another stand," observed Jurgens. He held up the sheet, showing a two-inch streamer. "This publisher evidently prefers satire. He likes to refer to the Vitons as 'Graham's Ghouls.'"

"Damn!" said Graham annoyedly. He heard a chuckle from Wohl, glared him into silence.

"I don't want to appear melodramatic," continued Jurgens, "but would you be good enough to tell me whether any of your creatures are present at this moment?"

"There are none," Graham assured him. His wide, glistening eyes stared through the window. "I can see several floating over distant roofs, and there are two poised over the other end of the road, but there are none near us."

"Thanks!" responded Jurgens, his features relaxing. He passed a hand through thick, white hair, chuckled as he noticed that Wohl's face also expressed relief. "What I'm curious about is the problem of what's to be done next. The world now knows the worst—what is it going to do about the matter?"

"The world must not only know the

worst, but see it," Graham replied earnestly. "The government has practically coöpted the big chemical companies in its plan of campaign. The first step will be to place on the market cheap supplies of Bjornsen's formula, so that the general public may see the Vitons for themselves."

"Why?"

"Because we must have a united public opinion to back us in the coming fight, but more especially because we must gather as much information concerning the Vitons as it is possible to get. What we already know about them is very, very little. We must get data in quantities that can be supplied by

thousands, maybe millions of observers. At the earliest possible moment, we must counterbalance the Vitons' enormous advantage in having an ages-old understanding of human beings, and gain an equally good comprehension of them. It is futile to scheme, or to oppose, until we know exactly what we're up against."

"Perfectly sensible," conceded Jurgens. "I see little hope for humanity until it has rid itself of this burden. But you know what opposition means?"

"What?" Graham encouraged.

"Civil war!" His distinguished features grave, the psychologist wagged a finger to emphasize his words. "You will not tackle the Vitons unless you have first conquered half the world. Humanity will be divided against itself. The half that remains under Viton influence will have to be overcome by the other half. Mark my words, young man, the first and most difficult obstacle will be provided by your fellow beings."

"Perhaps you're right," admitted Graham uneasily.

Jurgens was right, dead right. In proof of which, the first blow fell early the following morning.

AN AZURE SKY, at one side splashed with pink by the rising sun, spewed two thousand streamers of flame from the invisibility of its upper reaches. The streamers curved downward, thickened, resolved themselves into mighty back-blasts of strange, yellow stratosphere planes.

Below, lay Seattle, a few early citizens in its broad streets, a few thin columns of smoke arising from newly stoked furnaces. Many amazed eyes turned to the sky, many sleeping heads tossed on their pillows as the aërial armada howled across Puget Sound, swooped low over Seattle's roofs.

With a swift rush that raised its howl to a shrill scream, the yellow horde rocketed across, the badge of a flaming sun showing on the under side of each wing as it plummeted through the air. Black, ominous objects shot downward from sleek, streamlined fuselages, buried themselves in the buildings beneath. The buildings disrupted in a mad, swirling mêlée of flame, fumes, bricks and splintered timbers.

For six hellish minutes, Seattle shuddered and shook to an uninterrupted series of tremendous explosions. Then, like wraiths from the void, the yellow two thousand vanished into the stratosphere whence they had come.

Four hours later, the invaders reappeared. Vancouver suffered this time. A dive, six minutes of inferno, then away. Their flames dissipated in the upper regions, while beneath lay shattered streets, ruined homes round which wandered dazed, cursing men, sobbing women, screaming children. Here and there, a voice shrieked and shrieked and shrieked. Here and there, a sharp report brought silence and peace to somebody urgently in need of both.

It was coincident with that evening's similar and equally successful attack upon San Francisco that the United States government officially discovered the aggressors. The markings on the attackers' machines should have been sufficient indication, but this evidence had seemed too unreasonable to credit.

Nevertheless, it was true. The enemy was the Yellow Empire, with whom the United States was supposed to be on friendly terms.

A despairing radio message from the Philippines confirmed the truth. Manila had fallen, yellow war vessels, air machines and troops were swarming through the whole archipelago. The Filipino army was in full flight, and the United States Far East fleet—caught on distant maneuvers—was being attacked even as it rushed to the rescue.

America leaped to arms, while its leaders met to consider this new problem so violently thrust upon them. So

savage and entirely unprovoked an assault was Viton-inspired, and no doubt about it. But how had they managed to corrupt and inflame the normally amiable Yellow Empire?

A fanatical yellow pilot, shot down while attempting a crazy solo raid on Denver, revealed the secret. The time was ripe for the yellow peoples to enter into their rightful heritage. Powers unseen were on their side, helping them, guiding them toward their divinely appointed destiny.

Have not our sages looked upon these little suns, and recognized them as the spirits of our glorious ancestors? Is not the Sun our emblem, and are we not the sons of the Sun, fated in death to become little suns? What is death but a mere transition from the army of abominable flesh to the celestial army of the spirit, where much esteem is to be gained in company with one's honorable fathers, and one's exalted fathers' fathers?

The path of the yellow peoples is chosen, a path sweetened by heavenly blossoms of the past, as well as the unworthy weeds of the present. Kill me, white men, that I may take my rightful place with ancestors who alone can lend grace to my filthy body!

Thus, the mystic rambling of the yellow pilot. The whole Orient was afire with this mad dream, cunningly conceived and expertly insinuated within their minds by powers that had mastered the Earth long before the era of Emperor Ming. The notion of "explaining" themselves as ancestral spirits did full credit to the infernal ingenuity of the Vitons.

WHILE the Western Hemisphere mobilized with frantic haste, and the Eastern pursued its holy war, the best brains of the Occidental world searched for some means by which to refute the insane idea placed in the yellow men's minds, and bring home to them the truth.

In vain! Had not the white men themselves discovered the little suns, and, therefore, could not dispute their existence? Onward, to victory!

The yellow hordes poured out of their formerly peaceful boundaries, their eyes flaming with inspiration, their souls dedicated to a divine mission. Los Angeles shriveled in a sudden holocaust that fell upon it from the clouds. The first lone enemy flier to reach Chicago wrecked a skyscraper, minced a thousand bodies with its concrete and steel before an avenging monoplane blew him apart in midair.

By August the twentieth, yellow troops were in complete possession of the whole of California and the southern half of Oregon. On the first of September, the swarm of yellow stratosphere and submarine transports temporarily ceased its steady flow across the Pacific. Contenting itself with what it had gained in one direction, the Yellow Empire turned its attention to the other.

Triumphant troops poured westward, through French Indo-China, Malaysia, Siam, their caterpillar fortresses rumbling through mountain passes, their mechanical moles gnawing broad paths through previously impassable jungles, their strat-planes darkening the sky.

Into India they swept, a monstrous conglomeration of men and machines. The ever-mystical and Viton-infested population received them with open arms. The enormous multitudes of Hind added themselves to the swarms of the Orient, thus making one quarter of the human race the poor dupes of an Elder People.

But not all of Hind bent the knee and bowed the head. The Indian army, a million men hand-picked from warrior tribes, fierce, disciplined soldiers, intensely proud of their military tradition, battled its way to the northern frontier, and won through to Persia. Proudly, its leader, Marshal Sir Junganadir Jamset Shah, added his warlike Sikhs,

Pathans and Gurkhas to the forces of the white world.

The brief breathing space permitted by pressure being transferred elsewhere enabled the American press to devote a little less attention to the war, and a little more to Bjornsen's experiments in the past, and news about Vitons' activities both past and present.

Inspired by the resurrection of Beach's collection of press clippings, several papers searched through their own morgues in effort to find cogent items that once had been ignored. There was a general hunt for bygone data, some conducting it in the hope of being able to find support for pet theories, others with the more serious intention of gaining knowledge about the Vitons.

THE *Herald-Tribune* opined that not all people could see the same range of electro-magnetic frequencies, some being endowed with wider sight than others. Wide-sighted people, said the *Herald-Tribune,* had often caught vague, unrecognizable glimpses of Vitons many times in the past, and undoubtedly it was such fleeting glimpses that had given birth to and maintained various legends of banshees, djinns, ghosts, and similar superstitions.

Only a year ago, the *Herald-Tribune* itself had reported queer, colored lights seen floating through the sky over Boston, Massachusetts. Reports of similar sights had been made at various times, and with astonishing frequency, as far back as they could trace.

For example: February, 1938—Colored lights seen sailing high over Douglas, Isle of Man. November, 1937—Fall of a tremendous ball of light frightens inhabitants of Donaghadee, Ireland, other, smaller balls of light being seen floating in the air at the same time. May, 1937—Disastrous end of German transatlantic airship *Hindenburg* attributed to St. Elmo's fire. July, 1937—Chatham, Massachusetts, station of the Radiomarine Corporation reported a message from the British freighter *Togimo,* relayed by the American vessel *Scanmail,* saying that mysterious colored lights had been sighted five hundred miles off Cap Race, Newfoundland.

New York *Times,* January 8, 1937—Scientists produce a new theory to account for the blue lights, and "similar electric phenomena" seen near Khartoum, Sedan, and Kano, Nigeria.

British Reynolds News, May 29, 1938—Nine men injured by a mysterious something that dropped from the sky. One of them, a Mr. J. Hurn, described it as "like a ball of fire." British *Daily Telegraph,* February 8, 1938—Glowing spheres reported to have been seen by many readers during an exceptional display of the Aurora Borealis, itself a rare sight in England. *Western Mail,* May, 1933—Balls of phosphorescence over Lake Bala, mid-Wales. Los Angeles *Examiner,* September 7, 1935—Something described as "a freak lightning bolt" fell in bright sunlight at Centerville, Maryland, hurled a man from a chair, set fire to a stable.

Liverpool *Echo* (Britain), July 14, 1938—Inquiry into "mystery explosion" at No. 3 Pit, Bold Colliery, St. Helens, Lancashire, revealed that witnesses saw "a big blue light." The cause of the explosion was not discovered, and an open verdict was returned.

Sydney *Herald* and Melbourne *Leader* lavishly reported glowing spheres, or fireballs, throughout the year 1905, particularly in the months of February and November. One such phenomenon, seen by Adelaide Observatory, moved so slowly that it was watched for four minutes before it vanished. Bulletin of the French Astronomical Sociey, October, 1905—Strange luminous phenomena in Calabria, Italy. Same phenomena reported in September, 1934, by *Il Popolo d'Italia.*

"The Cruise of the *Bacchante*"—his late majesty, King George V, then a

young prince, tells of a strange string of floating lights "as if of a phantom vessel all aglow," seen by twelve members of the *Bacchante's* crew at four o'clock in the morning of June 11, 1881.

Daily Express (Britain), February 15, 1923—Brilliant luminosities seen in Warwickshire, England. *Literary Digest,* November 17, 1925—Luminosities seen in North Carolina. *Field,* January 11, 1908—Luminous "things" in Norfolk, England. *Dagbladet,* January 17, 1936—Will-o'-the-wisps in southern Denmark. Peterborough *Advertiser* (Britain), March 27, 1909—Queer lights in the sky over Peterborough. Over following dates, the *Daily Mail* confirmed this report, and added others from places farther away.

British *Daily Mail,* December 24, 1912—An article by the Earl of Erne describing brilliant luminosities that had appeared "for seven or eight years" near Lough Erne, Ireland. *Berliner Tageblatt,* March 21, 1880—"Veritable horde" of floating luminosities seen at Kattenau, Germany. In the same century, glowing spheres were reported from dozens of places as far apart as French Senegal, the Florida Everglades, Carolina, Malaysia, Australia, Italy and England.

GETTING HOLD of a copy of Webb's jottings, the *Herald-Tribune* published them with the opinion that this scientist had been working along the right lines prior to his untimely death. In the light of recently acquired knowledge, who could say how many schizophrenics were really unbalanced, how many were the victims of Viton meddling, or how many were normal people possessing abnormal vision?

"Are Negroes as simple as we think?" demanded the *Herald-Tribune,* stealing the phrase from Webb. "Or can the Negro eye scan frequencies just beyond the reach of white men?"

Then followed more quotations resurrected from the past. The case of a goat that pursued nothingness across a field, then dropped dead. The case of a herd of cattle that suddenly went mad with fear, and raced around the meadow sweating their emotions into apparently empty air. Forty-five cases of dogs that howled, put their tails between their legs, and crept tremblingly away—from nothing! Cases of sudden hysteria in dogs and cattle, "too numerous to mention," but all of them proof—asserted the *Herald-Tribune*—that animal eyes, as well as Negro eyes, functioned differently from those of white people.

The public absorbed all this, wondered, feared. White-faced, agitated mobs raided the drugstores, snatched up supplies of Bjornsen's formula as fast as they became available. Thousands, millions treated themselves according to instructions saw, and had their last shreds of doubt torn away.

In Yugoslavia, a Professor Zinkerson, of Belgrade University, treated himself with idodine, methylene blue and mescal, but failed to see anything abnormal. He said as much in a bittingly sarcastic article published in the Italian *Domenica Del Corriere.* A German scientist replied suggesting that the good professor either take off his lead-glass spectacles or substitute ones with lenses made of fluorite. Nothing more was heard from the forgetful Yugoslavian.

Meanwhile, in the west of America, caterpillar fortresses rumbled heavily toward each other, clashed, blasted themselves into metal splinters. High-speed strat-planes, gun-spotting helicopters, beautifully streamlined hell-divers tore the clouds apart in the skies of California and Oregon.

Distance lent no protection to the great cities of America's Midwest, for the enemy's fifteen-hundred-mile rocket guns flung their fiery-tailed shells high over mighty prairies, across intervening mountains and into tightly packed haunts

of humanity. Above, the sky flamed with bursting antiaircraft shells while yellow machines rocked and dived through the screaming blooms. But the common people looked upon these things with eyes more understanding than of yore, looked and saw a menace infinitely more invincible, more revolting.

VIII.

THE Samaritan Hospital still stood untouched amid surrounding wreckage. New York had suffered enormously in the two months since the Yellow invasion had commenced, and, even now, great rocket shells from the enemy's far-away guns fell into the city at regular intervals. But by sheer good fortune, the hospital remained unharmed.

Graham got out of his gyrocar three hundred yards from the main entrance, gazed at the intervening mound of rubble that filled the street from side to side.

"Vitons!" warned Wohl, struggling from the car and casting an anxious eye toward the sullen sky.

Nodding silently, Graham noted that there were a great number of the weird spheres hanging in the air above the battered city. Every now and again a crimson flame spurted through the upper reaches, bent downward, speared the clouds, plunged toward its target. Then a giant rocket shell landed with a deafening crash, followed by deep rumbles of shattered masonry. A dozen of the waiting spheres swooped upon the still-smoking gash, eager to feed on the fear and agony that welled around it.

The fact that most human beings were now able to see them made not the slightest difference to these blue vampires. Aware or unaware, no man could prevent a hungry phantom from seating itself on his spine, inserting into his cringing body strange, thrilling threads of energy through which his nervous currents were greedily sucked.

Many had gone insane when selected by a prowling sphere; many more had flung themselves to death, or committed suicide by any means conveniently at hand. Others who still retained their sanity walked, crept or slunk through the alleys and the shadows, their minds in constant fear of sensing a sudden spinal shiver caused by the insinuation of thirsty tentacles.

That cold, eerie shudder running swiftly from the coccyx to the cervical vertebræ was one of the most common of human sensations long before Vitons were known or suspected; so common that often a man would shiver, and his companion jest about it:

"Somebody's walking over your grave!"

There was revulsion in Graham's muscular features as he clambered hastily over the mass of broken granite, slipping, sliding on mounds of small, loosely assembled lumps, his heavy boots becoming smothered with fine, white dust. He topped the crest, wary eyes turned upward, half ran, half jumped down the opposite side, Wohl following in a tiny avalanche of stone.

They hurried across the cracked and pitted sidewalk, passed through the entrance gates. As they turned up the curved gravel drive leading to the hospital's front door, Graham heard a sudden, choking gasp from his companion.

"By heavens, Bill, there's a couple of them after us!"

Turning swiftly, Graham saw two spheres, blue, glowing, ominous, sweeping toward him in a long, shallow dive. They were three hundred yards away, but approaching with rapidly increasing speed.

Wohl passed him with a sobbed, "Come on, Bill!" his legs moving as they had never moved before. Graham followed, his heart leaping within his ribs.

If one of those things got hold of him, read his mind, it would know him as a keyman of the opposition. The

vaqueros of the huge King-Kleber Ranch could not be expected to know every individual beast, and, for a similar reason, he had been fortunate enough to escape the attention of these superherdsmen. But now—

He picked up his feet and ran like hell, knowing as he went that his flight was futile, that the hospital provided no sanctuary, no protection against forces such as these, yet feeling impelled to run.

With Wohl one jump in the lead, and the now-bulleting menaces a bare twelve yards behind, they hit the front door, and went through it as if it did not exist. A startled nurse stared at them wide-eyed as they hammered headlong through the hall, then put a pale hand to her mouth and screamed.

Soundlessly, with horrid persistence, the pursuing spheres swept past the girl, shot around the farther corner, and into the passage taken by their prey.

GRAHAM glimpsed the luminosities as he skidded frantically around the next corner. They were seven yards behind and coming on fast. He dodged a white-coated interne, vaulted a long, low trestle being wheeled on doughnut tires from a ward, frightened a group of nurses with his mad pace.

The glossy parquet was treacherous. Wohl slipped in mid-flight, fought to retain balance, failed, went down with a thud that shook the walls. Unable to stop, Graham leaped him, slid along the glossy surface, crashed violently into a facing door. The door creaked, groaned, burst open.

His shoulder muscles taut, Graham turned to face the inevitable. Surprise filled his eyes; he bent down, helped Wohl to his feet, gestured toward the end of the passage.

"They came around the corner, hung there for a brief moment, went deeper in color, then departed as if the devil himself was after them."

Breathing heavily, Wohl said in a hoarse voice, "Well, I guess we're lucky!"

"But what made them beat it?" persisted Graham. "It has never been known for them to give up like that. What the deuce made them do it?"

"Don't ask me." Grinning with relief, Wohl dusted himself vigorously. "I'm no fount of wisdom."

"They often depart in a hurry," remarked a calm, even voice.

Swiveling on one heel, Graham saw her standing by the door with which he had collided. The light from the room behind her was a golden frame for her crisp, black curls. Her serene, level eyes looked steadily into his.

"Dr. Curtis!" he said in tones that brought a slightly self-conscious smile to her face. "Dr. Curtis," he repeated, this time somewhat mournfully.

Womanlike, she understood the implication behind his change of tone, smiled with obvious pleasure, and said, "Harmony."

"Do you mind?" he asked eagerly.

"If I did, I wouldn't have told you," she pointed out.

"It is a beautiful name," he declared with boyish enthusiasm. "Harmony." He rolled it around his mouth as if it was rare wine.

"Harmony," grunted Wohl, completely spoiling the effect. "Was your pappy a musician?"

"No." She laughed aloud, her tones pealing down the corridor, making a passing nurse smile in sympathy. Standing aside in the doorway, she said, "Please do come in."

Seating himself, Graham asked, "What's this you were telling me about the Vitons often departing in a hurry?"

"It is very mysterious," she confessed. "I cannot imagine any explanation for it. Immediately the staff became equipped to see these things, we found that the Vitons were regularly frequenting the hospital, always entering the

wards and feeding on pain-racked patients from whom, of course, we carefully kept this knowledge."

"I understand," approved Graham.

"For some reason, they didn't bother the staff." She looked questioningly at her listeners. "I don't know why they didn't."

"Because," Graham told her, "unemotional people are like weeds to them, especially in a place containing so much fine, ripe fruit. Your wards are orchards."

SHE SHUDDERED at the brutality of his explanation, and continued, saying: "At certain periods we have noticed that every luminescent sphere in the hospital has hurried away as fast as possible, not returning for some time. It happens two or three times every day. It has happened just now."

"And very probably it saved our lives."

"I am glad!"

"Now, Dr. . . . er . . . Harmony" —he wiped out Wohl's knowing grin with a defiant stare—"do you know whether each exodus coincided with some consistent feature in hospital routine such as the administering of certain medicines to patients, or the operating of the X-ray apparatus, or the opening of particular bottles of chemicals?"

She considered awhile, apparently oblivious to her questioner's intent gaze. Finally she got up, searched through a file, dialed her telephone, consulted somebody in another part of the building. There was satisfaction in her features as she ended the call.

"Really, it was most stupid of me, but I must admit that I didn't think of it until your questions put it into my mind."

"What is it?" Graham urged.

"The short-wave therapy apparatus."

"Hah!" He slapped his knee, bestowed a look of triumph on the interested Wohl. "The artificial-fever machine. Isn't it screened?"

"No, we've never been able to screen it really successfully. We've tried to do so, because it interfered with the reception of local television receivers, sending checkered patterns racing across their vision plates. But the apparatus is extremely powerful, defied all our efforts, and I understand that the complainants have had to screen their receivers."

"On what wave length does it operate?" pursued Graham.

"One and a quarter meters."

"Eureka!" He came to his feet, his face alight with the fire of battle. "A weapon at last!"

"What d'you mean, a weapon?" asked Wohl, quite unimpressed.

"The Vitons don't like it," Graham explained. "Goodness only knows how the emanations appear to their thoroughly alien senses. Perhaps they feel it as unbearable heat, or sense it as the Viton equivalent to an abominable smell. Whatever the effect may be, we have the satisfaction of knowing that they get away from it as fast as they can travel. Anything that can drive them away is a weapon."

"There's something in that," Wohl conceded.

"If it is a potential weapon," remarked Dr. Curtis seriously, "surely the Vitons would have destroyed it. They never hesitate to destroy where necessary."

"Except for the fact that nothing could be better calculated to draw despairing humanity's attention to the properties of therapy cabinets than to go around destroying them."

"I see." Her large, dark eyes were thoughtful. "Their cunning is indeed superb."

"I'll say it is!" Graham reached for the telephone. "I must give this information to Leamington without delay. He may be able to assemble the neces-

sary apparatus in time to give protection to tonight's meeting."

Leamington's tired, anxious features grew into the tiny visor, relaxed as he listened to Graham's hastily detailed information. Disconnecting, Bill Graham turned to Dr. Curtis.

"The meeting is a scientific one, to be held at nine o'clock this evening in the basement of National Guarantors Building, on Water Street. I'd like to take you along."

"I'll be ready at eight thirty," she promised.

PROFESSOR CHADWICK was already in the middle of his speech when Bill Graham, Harmony Curtis, and Art Wohl moved quietly down the center aisle, took their seats. The basement was full, the audience silent, attentive.

At one end of the front row, Colonel Leamington twisted around in his seat, attracted Graham's attention, jerked an indicative thumb toward a large cabinet standing guard by the only door. Graham nodded understandingly.

A rolled newspaper in one hand, the other left free for his frequent gestures, Professor Chadwick was saying, "For a couple of months the *Herald-Tribune* has been giving us data, and still hasn't printed half of what is available. The amount of material is so enormous that one cannot help but marvel at the manner in which the Vitons were able to operate with complete confidence in humanity's lack of suspicion. To them we must have seemed witless beyond words.

"The method of 'explaining' their own errors, mistakes, and omissions by insinuating superstitious notions to account for them, backing up those notions by the performing of so-called miracles when required, and the production of poltergeist and other spiritualistic phenomena when asked for, does credit to the hellish ingenuity of these creatures whom we have called Vitons."

"Hear, hear!" responded a few voices. "But, as the *Herald-Tribune* has indicated, our gullibility is less understandable when we consider that at various times Vitons were actually seen by people fortunate enough to have been born with sight far wider than the average person's. I have here data reporting things we now know to be Vitons frequenting the Fraser River district of British Columbia early in 1938, while a British United Press report dated July 21, 1938, says that the huge forest fires then ravaging the Pacific coast of North America were caused by something described as 'dry lightning,' admitted to be unique phenomena.

"In 1935, in the Madras Presidency of India, was reported an esoteric sect of floating-ball worshipers, who apparently could see the objects of their devotions, although they were invisible to nonbelievers.

"The Los Angeles *Examiner,* of mid-June, 1938, reports a case parallel to that of the late Professor Mayo. Headed: FAMOUS ASTRONOMER LEAPS TO DEATH, it stated that Dr. William Wallace Campbell, president emeritus of the University of California, had met his end by flinging himself from the window of his third-floor flat. His son ascribed his father's act to fear of going blind. I, personally, feel sure that any fear he may have had was connected with his sight, but not quite in the manner then believed."

Disregarding the murmurs of agreement that came from his audience, Professor Chadwick said, "Believe it or not, but one man's extra-sensory perception, or else his wide-sightedness, was so well developed that he was able to paint an excellent picture showing several Vitons floating over a nightmarish landscape, and, as if he somehow sensed their predatory character, he included a hawk in the scene. That picture is Mr. Paul Nash's 'Landscape of a Dream,' first exhibited in 1938, and now in the Tate Gallery, in England."

Turning his eyes toward Graham, the speaker declared, "All the evidence we have been able to gather shows that the Vitons are composed of energy in a form not only compact and balanced, but so peculiar that our spectroscopic tests are worthless. They are not made of matter in the sense that we accept matter. It seems to me the only possible weapon we can bring against them is some form of energy such as a radiation that will have a heterodyning effect, something that will interfere with the Vitons' natural vibrations. The discovery made only today by Mr. Graham, of the Intelligence Service, confirms my theory."

Raising his hand, and beckoning to Graham, he concluded, "I shall now ask Mr. Graham to give you the valuable information he has obtained, and hope that he will be able to assist us still further with some useful suggestions."

IN A STRONG, steady voice, Graham addressed his audience, recounted his experience of that afternoon.

"It is imperative," he told them, "that we should immediately undertake research work in short waves projected on the radio-beam system, and determine what particular frequencies—if any—are fatal to Vitons. In my opinion it is desirable that we set up a suitable laboratory in some faraway, unfrequented spot distant from the seat of war, for our evidence is that Vitons congregate where humanity swarms most thickly, and may rarely, if ever visit uninhabited regions."

"I agree. It is an excellent idea." Leamington stood up, his tall form towering above his seated neighbors. "We have found out that the Vitons' numerical strength is somewhere between one twentieth and one thirtieth that of the human race, and it is a safe bet that the great majority of them hang around fruitful sources of human and animal energy. A laboratory hidden in a desert, a locality sparse in nervous fodder, might remain unobserved and undisturbed for years."

There came a loud buzz of approval from his listeners as Leamington sat down. People felt that at last humanity was getting somewhere, doing something to rid itself once and for all of the burden of the centuries.

Already the speaker had in mind a suitable locality for the establishing of what he hoped would prove to be the first anti-Viton arsenal. The Secret Service chief bestowed a fatherly smile upon his protégé still standing on the platform. Instinctively, he knew that the plan would go through, and that Graham was destined to play a praiseworthy part, a part in keeping with the magnificent tradition of America's never seen but ever active service.

"It is of little avail," Graham went on, "to battle the Yellows without also attempting to subdue their strange overlords. To wipe out the luminosities is to remove the source of our enemies' delusions, and bring them back to their senses. Let us take immediate action by giving our solitary clue to the world."

"Why not organize our native scientists, and get them on the job?" inquired a voice.

"We shall do that, you may rest assured," Graham responded. "But as we know to our cost, a thousand widely separated experimenters are safer than a thousand in a bunch. Let the entire white world set to work, and nothing—visible or invisible—can prevent our ultimate triumph!"

They roared their agreement as he stared at the distant cabinet still standing guard over the only door. The memory of Beach was a pain within the mind that held other and equally tragic memories—the rag-doll appearance of Professor Mayo's broken body; the sheer abandon with which Dakin had plunged to his sickening end; the horrid concentration in the eyes of the man with an imaginary dog in his belly; the

great black banner which had been unfurled above a tortured city.

Not much use damping their spirits in this rare moment of optimism. All the same, it was as clear as daylight that short wave research could be a move in only one of two directions—the right one, or the wrong one. Wrongness meant slavery forever. And the first indication of rightness would be the prompt and heartless slaughter of experimenters within reach of success.

There was murder in prospect, murder of every valuable intellect in the front-line trenches of this eerie campaign. It was a dreadful certainty that Graham had not the heart to mention. As the audience fell silent, he left the platform. The silence was broken by a familiar sound.

A high-pitched scream passed directly overhead. Away it went, its note shrill enough to penetrate even to this deep basement. Then, while anxious listeners sat in strained attitudes, a far-away roar came in muffled tones to their ears, and the floor shuddered as if to a minor earthquake. Silence returned for a moment, only to be ended by the dull rumble of heavy vehicles rushing along the outer street, thundering toward the new area of wreckage, blood and tears.

SANGSTER was worried, and made no attempt to conceal the fact. He sat behind his desk in the office of the department of special finance, in Bank of Manhattan, watched Graham, Wohl and Leamington, but spoke to none of them in particular.

"It's twelve days since the international broadcast giving a line to everybody from hams to radio manufacturers," he argued. "Was there any interference with that general call? There was **not**! Did one radio station get picked up and thrown around? No! I say that if short-wave research was a menace to the Vitons, they'd have played hell to prevent it. They'd have listed the radio experts, and had a pogrom. They took no notice. So far as they were concerned, we might have been scheming to wipe them out by muttering a magic word. Ergo, we're on the wrong track!"

"Which may be exactly what they want us to think," said Graham easily.

"Eh?" Sangster's jaw dropped with suddenness that brought grins to the others' faces.

"Your views are proof that their disinterest ought to be our discouragement." Strolling to the window, Graham regarded the battered vista of New York. "I said 'ought.' I'm suspicious of their nonchalance. The damned things know more of human psychology than experts like Jurgens have ever learned."

"All right, all right!" Mopping his brow, Sangster ruffled some papers on his desk, extracted a sheet, held it up. "Here's a report from the Electra Radio Corporation. They say short waves stink. They've thrown at passing luminosities every frequency their plant can concoct, and the spheres merely ducked out as if they'd met a bad smell. Bob Treleaven, their leading expert, says he's beginning to believe that the cursed things really do sense certain frequencies as their equivalent to odors." He tapped the paper with an accusatory finger. "So where do we go from here?"

" 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' " quoted Graham.

"Very well. We'll wait." Tilting back in his chair, the bothered Sangster assumed the expression of one whose patience is everlasting. "I've tremendous faith in you, Bill, but it's my department's money that is being poured into much of this research. It'd sure relieve my mind to know what we're waiting for."

"For some experimenter to succeed in frizzling a Viton," Graham told him. His lean, leathery face became grim.

"And although I hate like hell to say it, I think we're waiting for a corpse."

"That's what has got me uneasy," Leamington's voice chipped in, his tone low, serious. "These infernal orbs are frequently peering into minds. Some day, they'll examine yours, Bill. They'll realize they've found the ace, and you'll be deader than a slab of granite when *we* find you."

"We've all got to take chances," said Graham imperturbably. "Look!"

The quartet stood behind the window, stared out, saw a broad arc of fire that had been born in the sky; a colossal bow wrought from the flames of hell. It swooped from west to east, fell in a swift curve, vanished. There came an awful crash that shook the heavens.

Four second later, the Liberty Building leaned over slowly, ever so slowly, lowering itself with the mighty reluctance of a stricken mammoth. It reached a crazy angle. seemed to pause, its millions of tons a terrible menace to the area it was about to devastate.

Then, as if a hand had reached from nothingness and administered the final, fateful push, the enormous pile fell faster, its once beautiful column splitting in three places. The noise of its landing was a bellow from the maw of original chaos.

Ground rumbled and rolled in long, trembling waves of plasmic agitation. A vast, swirling cloud of pulverized silicate crept sluggishly upward.

A veritable horde of spheres, blue, tense, eager, hungry, dropped from immense heights, streaked inward from all directions, their paths direct lines concentrated upon this latest fount of agony.

"One rocket shell!" breathed Leamington. "God, what a size it must have been!"

"Another Viton improvement," opined Graham bitterly. "Another advantage given to their Yellow dupes."

A TELEPHONE whirred with suddenness that plucked at their already taut nerves. Sangster answered it, pressed the amplifier button.

"Sangster," rattled the phone in sharp, metallic accents, "I've just been called by Padilla on the radio beam from Buenos Aires. He's got something; He says . . . he says . . . Sangster . . . *oh!*"

Alarmed by Sangster's wildly protruding eyes and ghastly complexion, Graham leaped to his side, looked at the hesitant instrument's visor. He was just in time to see a face sink away from the tiny screen. It was a vague face, made indistinct by a weird, glowing haze, but its shadowy features conveyed a message of ineffable terror before it shrank from sight.

"Bob Treleaven," whispered Sangster. "It was Bob." He stood like one stunned. "They got him!"

Taking no notice, Bill Graham hammered at the telephone, raised the operator. He danced with impatience while the exchange tried to get a response from the other end. None could be obtained, neither on the open line, nor on alternative lines.

"Give me Radio Beam Service," he snapped. "Government business—hurry!" He turned to the white-faced Sangster. "Where's Electra's place?"

"Bridgeport, Connecticut."

"Beam Service?" Graham held his lips near to the mouthpiece. "A recent call has been made from Buenos Aires to Bridgeport, Connecticut, probably relayed through Barranquilla. Trace it, and connect me with the caller." Still clinging to the phone, he beckoned to Wohl.

"Get the other phone, Art. Call Bridgeport's police headquarters, tell them to get out to the Electra plant, and keep whatever they find for us. Then beat it down and have the car ready. I'll be one jump behind you."

"Right!" With a grunt of eagerness, Wohl snatched up the other instrument, jabbered into it hurriedly. Then he was gone.

Graham's call got through, he talked for some time, his face growing more and more serious, his jaw muscles lumping while he listened to the faraway speaker. He finished, made a second call, a shorter one this time.

"Padilla is dead," he told his companions. "The relay operator at Barranquilla is also dead. He must have listened in. The knowledge he gained has cost him his life." He made for the door. "A thousand to one Treleaven is just as dead as the others."

"Well, you've got your corpse," commented Leamington, with complete lack of emotion.

His remark came too late, for Graham was already outside the door, and dashing down the passage toward the levitator shafts. There was something retributory in the investigator's headlong pace, and a hard gleam lay behind that other gleam filling his wide-sighted eyes.

Air sighed in the bowels of the building as Graham's disk fled down at reckless pace, bearing him toward street level and the waiting gyrocar. He reached bottom, sprang out, his nostrils distended like those of a wolf which has found the scent and is racing to the kill.

IX.

THE Electra Radio Corporation's small but well equipped laboratory was meticulous in its orderliness, nothing being out of place, nothing to mar its complete tidiness save the body flopped beneath the dangling telephone receiver.

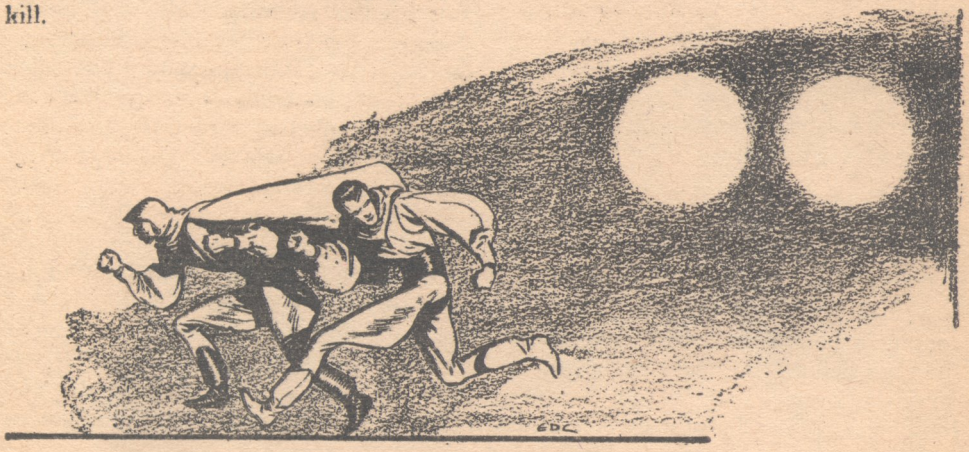
A burly police sergeant said, "It's exactly as we found it. All we've done is to make a stereoscopic record of the cadaver."

Bill Graham nodded approvingly, bent, turned the body over. He was not repelled by the look of horror which vicious, glowing death had stamped upon the corpse's features. With deft speed, he frisked the dead man, placed the contents of the pockets on an adjacent table, examined them with shrewd attention.

"Useless," he commented disgustedly. "They don't tell me a thing." He moved his gaze to a small, dapper man fidgeting miserably beside a police officer. "So you were Treleaven's assistant? What can you tell me?"

"Bob got a call from Padilla," babbled the small man, his frightened eyes flickering from his questioner to the object on the floor. His manicured fingers nervously petted a neatly trimmed mustache.

"We know that! Who's Padilla?"



"A valuable business connection, and a personal friend of Bob Treleaven's." He buttoned his jacket, unbuttoned it, then returned to the mustache, "He's the patentee of the thermostatic amplifier, a self-cooling radio tube which we manufacture under his license."

"Go ahead," Graham encouraged.

"Bob got this call, became very excited, said he'd spread the news around so's it couldn't be stopped. He didn't mention what the news was."

"And then?"

"He went into the lab to ring up somebody. Five minutes later a gang of luminosities whizzed into the plant. They've been hanging around for days. Everybody ran for dear life excepting three clerks on the top floor."

"Why didn't they run?" asked Graham.

"They haven't yet received eye treatment. They couldn't see what was happening."

"I understand."

"We came back after the luminosities had left, and we found Bob dead beneath the phone." Another jittery fumble at the mustache, and another frightened flickering between the questioner and the corpse.

"You say that luminosities have been hanging around for days," put in Wohl. "Did they ever grab an employee, and pry into his mind?"

"Four." The small man grew more nervous than ever. "They picked on four. They got one yesterday, and he went insane. They dropped on him outside the gates, and left him a gibbering idiot."

"Well, there wasn't any about when we arrived," remarked Wohl.

"Very likely they're satisfied that this blow has prevented the plant from becoming a possible source of danger for the time being." Graham could not restrain a smile as he noted how the jumpiness of the little man contrasted with the phlegmatic air of surrounding police officers. "They'll come back."

HE DISMISSED the witness and other waiting employees of the radio plant. With Wohl's help, he searched the laboratory for scratch pads, notes, or any seemingly insignificant piece of paper that might be around, his mind recalling the cryptic clues left behind by other and earlier martyrs.

Their search was in vain. One fact, and one only, was at their disposal—that Bob Treleaven was very, very dead.

"This is hell!" groaned Wohl despairingly. "Not a lead. Not one miserable little lead. We're sunk!"

"Use your imagination," Graham chided.

"Don't tell me you've picked up a line!" Wohl's honest eyes popped in susprise.

"I haven't." Bill Graham grabbed his hat. "In this crazy business we have to spin our own lines. Come on—let's get back."

It was as they flashed through Stamford that Wohl shifted his steady gaze from the road, glanced at his passenger, and said, "Spin me a line or two."

"We haven't enough data about Padilla," replied Graham. "We'll have to get more. Added to which, it seems that Treleaven had five undisturbed minutes at the phone before he was put out of the running. He was on to Sangster for less than half a minute, so unless it took him four and a half minutes to get his connection, I reckon that maybe he phoned somebody else first. We'll find out whether he did, and, if so, whom he called."

"Bill, you're a marvel!" declared Wohl with open envy.

Grinning sheepishly, Graham went on, "Lastly, there's an unknown number of ham stations operating between Buenos Aires, Barranquilla and Bridgeport. If any one of them was listening in, and caught Padilla's talk, we want him as

badly as do the Vitons. We've got to find him before it's too late.

"Hope," recited Wohl "springs eternal in the human breast." His eyes found the rear mirror, rising casually then becoming fixed in fearful fascination. "But not in mine!" he added in choked tones.

Slewing around in his seat, Graham peered through the car's rear window. "Vitons—after us!"

His sharp eyes turned to the front, the sides, taking in the terrain with photographic accuracy. "Step on it!" His thumb found and jabbed the emergency button just as Wohl shoved the accelerator to the limit. With the dynamo singing on its top note, the gyrocar leaped forward.

"They've got us!" gasped Wohl. He manhandled his machine around an acute bend, corrected three successive sideslips, straightened up. The road was a streaming ribbon beneath their madly whirling wheels. "We couldn't escape at twice the pace."

"The bridge!" Graham warned. He nodded toward the bridge flashing nearer at tremendous rate. "Mount the bank, dive into the river. It's a chance."

"A . . . lousy . . . chance!" breathed Wohl.

Offering no comment, Bill Graham looked again through the rear window, saw his ominously glowing pursuers a mere two hundred yards behind and gaining rapidly. There were ten of the things speeding through the air in single file, moving with that apparently effortless but bulletlike pace characteristic of their kind.

The bridge widened, shot still nearer; the ghostly horde picked up another fifty yards. Anxiously, Graham divided his attention between the scenes in front and rear.

"We'll barely do it," he murmured. "When we splash, fight out, swim downstream for as long as you can hold breath."

"But—" commenced Wohl, his eyes wide, his face strained as the oncoming bridge leaped at their front wheel.

"Now!" roared Graham. He didn't wait for Wohl to make up his mind; his powerful fingers clamped upon the wheel, twisted it with irresistible power.

With a scream of protest from the maltreated gyroscope, the slender car went up the bank like a shell from a gun. It vaulted the top a bare foot from the bridge's concrete coping, described a spectacular parabola through the air, and struck water with force that sent shocked drops flying road-high.

The machine went down, down amid a fountain of bubbles. It vanished, leaving on the troubled surface a thin film of oil over which ten baffled luminosities skimmed in temporary defeat.

IT WAS FORTUNATE that he had flung open his door the instant before they struck, thought Graham. Inward pressure of water might have kept him prisoner for valuable seconds. With a sinuous motion of his hard, wiry body, and a mighty kick of his feet, he was out of the car even as it settled lopsidedly upon the bed.

Making fast, powerful strokes, he sped downstream, his chest full of wind, his eyes straining to find a way through liquid murk. Wohl, he knew, was out—he had felt the thrust upon the car as the police lieutenant got clear. But he couldn't see Wohl, the muddiness of the river prevented that.

Bubbles trickled from his mouth as his lungs reached point of rebellion. He tried to increase the speed of his strokes, felt his heart palpitating wildly, knew that his eyes were starting from their sockets. A lithe swerve shot him upward, his mouth and nostrils broke surface, he drew in a great gasp of air. He went down again, swimming strongly.

Four times he came up like a trout

snatching at a floating fly, took in a deep, lung-expanding gulp, then slid back into the depths. Finally, he stroked to the shallows, his boots scraped pebbly bottom, his eyes arose cautiously above the surface.

The coruscant ten were soaring upward from a point on the bank concealed by the bridge. The hidden watcher followed their ascent with calculating eyes; followed until the luminosities were ten shining dots below the clouds. As the blue specters changed direction, drifting rapidly to the east, Graham scrambled from the water, stood dripping on the bank.

Silently and undisturbed the river flowed along. The lone man regarded its placid surface with perplexity that quickly changed to open anxiety. He turned, ran upstream, his mind eager yet fearing to see the other side of the bridge.

Wohl was there, his body visible through the concrete arch as the running man came nearer. Water squelched dismally in Graham's boots as he pounded along the shred of bank beneath the arch, and reached his companion's quiet form.

Pale transparency had replaced the healthy color of Wohl's face. There was ghastly abandon in the attitude of his body that sprawled with heels in rippling water.

Splayed fingers hastily combed back wet hair from Graham's forehead. He bent over a pair of limp legs, embraced them at the back of cold thighs, heaved himself upright, his muscles cracking as they raised the other's bulk.

Water poured from Wohl's gaping mouth, dribbled over Graham's boots. Graham shook with a jerky upward motion, watching resultant drops. He laid Wohl face downward, squatted astride him, placed wide, muscular hands over breathless ribs, began to press and relax with determined rhythm.

He was still working with an utterly weary but desperately regular rocking motion when the body twitched, and a watery rattle came from its throat. Half an hour later, he sat in the back of a hastily stopped gyrocar, his arms supporting Wohl's racked form.

"Got a hell of a crack on the head, Bill," wheezed Wohl. He coughed, gasped, let his head loll weakly on the other's shoulder. "Stunned me. Maybe it was the door. I sank, went up, sank again. I was breathing water."

"You'll be all right," Graham comforted.

"Goner . . . I was a goner. Thought to myself this was the end. Up and down, up and down, forever and ever and ever. I was up . . . fighting like a maniac . . . lungs full. Broke top . . . and a Viton grabbed me."

"What?" shouted Graham.

"Viton got me," repeated Wohl with complete lack of interest. "Felt his ghoulish fingers . . . inside my brain . . . feeling, searching, probing." He coughed again, hackingly. "All I remember."

"They must have lugged you to the bank," declared Graham excitedly. "If they've read your mind, they'll anticipate our next moves."

"Feeling around . . . in my brain!" murmured Wohl. He closed his eyes, breathed with harsh, bronchial sounds.

LEAMINGTON pursed his lips, said, "Why didn't they kill Wohl?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it was because he didn't know anything really dangerous to them." Bill Graham returned his superior's steady stare. "Neither do I, for that matter—so don't take it for granted that I'm liable to die on you every time I go out."

"You don't fool me," scoffed Leamington. "It's a marvel how your luck's held out so far."

Graham let it pass, said, "I'll sure miss Art for the next few days." He

sighed gently. "Did you get me that data on Padilla?"

"We tried." Leamington emitted a grunt of disgust. "Our man in Buenos Aires can discover nothing. The authorities have their hands full, and no time to bother with him."

"Why?"

"Buenos Aires was blown to tatters by a Yellow air fleet shortly after we cabled."

"Damn!" swore Graham. "There goes a possible lead." He chewed his bottom lip in vexation.

"That leaves us the ham stations to look up," remarked Leamington dismally. "We're on that job right now." Sliding open a drawer, he extracted a sheet of paper, handed it across. "This came in just before you arrived. It may mean something, or it may not. Does it convey anything to you?"

"United Press report," read Graham, rapidly scanning the lines of type. "Professor Fergus McAndrew, internationally known atom-splitter, mysteriously disappeared this morning from his home in Kirkintilloch, Scotland." He threw a sharp, surprised glance at the other, returned his attention to the sheet. "Vanished while in the middle of enjoying his breakfast, leaving his meal half eaten, his coffee warm. Mrs. Martha Leslie, his elderly housekeeper, swears that he has been kidnaped by luminosities."

"Well?" asked Leamington.

"Kidnaped—not killed! That is queer!" The investigator frowned as his mind concentrated on the problem. "It looks as if he couldn't have known too much, else he'd have been left dead over his meal rather than snatched."

"That's what gets me down," admitted Leamington irritably. For once in his disciplined life he permitted his feelings to get the better of him. He slammed a heavy hand on his desk, said loudly: "From the very beginning of this wacky affair we've been tangled in strings that all lead to people who are corpses, or people who aren't anything any longer. Every time we grab, we grab a vacuum. Every time we run, we trip over some cadaver. Where is it going to end; *when* is it going to end—if it ever does end?"

"It'll end when the last Viton ceases to be, or the last white man goes under," asserted Graham boldly. He flourished the United Press report. "This McAndrew, I reckon, must have a mind fairly representative of the world's best talent."

"So what?"

"They'll not merely probe his mind—they'll take his entire intellect to pieces and find how the wheels go round! My bet is that the Vitons have become uneasy, maybe scared, and have snatched him as a suitable subject for their super-surgery." Graham's eyes flamed with intensity that startled his listener. "They'll estimate his brain power, and from that they'll deduce just how likely we are to find whatever it is that they're frightened of us discovering."

"And then?" The question came in a sharp hiss.

"We suspect that Padilla found something, but we must allow for the possibility that he was only a guesser who got wiped out deliberately to mislead us." Graham stood up, his tall form towering above his chief's desk. He wagged an emphatic finger. "This kidnaping means two things."

"Those are what?"

"Firstly, that there definitely is a lethal weapon waiting to be discovered by us." He paused, then said carefully: "And secondly, if examination of McAndrew's mind satisfies the Vitons that we shall soon make this discovery, they're going to do something to meet the threat—and damn quick! Hell is going to pop!"

"As if it isn't popping already!" remarked Leamington.

Graham made no reply. He was

buried in thought, deep, anxious thought. One, now dead, had credited him with extra-sensory perception. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was second sight—for hell was already on the way.

DARKNESS; deep, dismal darkness such as can swathe only a city once lurid with light. Apart from firefly flashes of gyrocars hurtling with dimmed lamps through New York's ebon canyons, there was nothing but that heavy, ominous, all-pervading gloom.

Graham got out of his shapely speedster, and said, "What's the idea?"

"Sorry, mister," replied the young officer. "Your machine's wanted." He remained stubbornly silent while Graham revealed his identity, then he declared: "I can't help it, Mr. Graham. My orders are to commandeer every machine attempting to pass this point."

"All right." Reaching inside the speedster, Graham hauled out his heavy coat, writhed into it. "I'll walk."

"I'm really sorry," the officer assured. "There's serious trouble out west. We need machines." He turned to two of his olive-drab command. "Rush this one to the depot." Then, as the pair clambered in, he pressed the button of his red-lensed torch, signaled another approaching gyrocar to stop.

Graham paced rapidly along the road. There were tottering walls at his side, while on the other gaunt skeletons of what once had been business blocks stood in awful solitude.

An antiaircraft battery filled the square at the end. He passed it in silence, noting the aura of tension emanating from quiet, steel-helmeted figures surrounding the sleek, uplifted muzzles.

Beyond the square, precariously poised on a shattered roof, was a listening post, its quadruple trumpets angled toward the westward horizon. Although he could not see them in the blackness, Graham knew that somewhere between the post and the guns were more tensed, silent figures waiting by the Sperry computator—waiting for that faraway wail that meant the coming of high-flying death.

From the depths below the road came a strange sound: the sound of a mighty gnawing. That subterranean *scrunch, scrunch, scrunch* was audible all the way along the road, and accompanied the stealthy walker for a mile.

There, far down in the earth, great jaws of beryllium steel were eating, eating. Mechanical moles were chewing through the substrata, forming the arteries of a newer and safer city beyond reach of bombs.

"When all this is finished," mused Graham, "the subway will be the el!"

He turned left, saw a blotch of solid darkness in the more elusive dark. The dim form was on the other side of the road, hurrying nearer with swiftly clopping heels.

They were almost level, and about to pass, when from a swollen cloud there plunged a ball of cold, blue light. Its sudden, ferocious onslaught was irresistible. The vague figure sensed imminent peril, whirled around, gave vent to a blood-freezing shriek that ended in a gasp.

While Graham stood perspiring in the deeper shadows, his hard eyes registering the incredibly swift attack, the luminosity shot upward, carrying with it the quiet, unmoving body of its victim.

Another was snatched on the vacant lot two hundred yards farther along the road. Graham passed a deserted rooming house, saw hunter and hunted crossing the open area.

The prey had all the frantic motion of one fleeing from a product of fundamental hell. His feet hit earth in great, clumping strides, while queer, distorted words jerked from his fear-smitten larynx.

Iridescent blue formed a satanic nimbus behind his head. The blue swelled, engulfed both the runner and his final,

despairing scream. They soared skyward.

A third and a fourth were picked from Drexler Avenue. They saw the downward swoop of blue. One ran. The other fell on his knees, bent in dreadful obeisance, covered the nape of his neck with his hands. The runner bellowed hoarsely as he ran, his terror-filled tones a veritable pæan of the damned. The kneeler remained kneeling. They were taken simultaneously, sobbed together, went up together.

Moisture was lavish on Graham's forehead while he stole up the driveway, passed through the doors of the Samaritan Hospital. He wiped it off before seeing Harmony, decided he would say nothing of these tragedies.

SHE WAS as tranquil as ever, even her slight blush suggesting pleasure rather than confusion. Graham thought her black eyes as glorious as her blacker hair, but that neither compared with that atmosphere of supreme serenity with which she was always surrounded. Calmness was her outstanding characteristic, and it appealed to him more than anything ever had done.

"I had Professor Farmiloe around to tea," she announced.

"Bill," insisted Graham.

"Around to tea, Bill." She made the correction with a smile that soothed her hearer's troubled mind. "He's an old dear! Know him?"

"Not very well. Aged gent, with a white goatee, isn't he? Believe he's Fordham's expert on something or other, but I know him only by sight."

"He was my godfather." She mentioned the fact as if it explained everything. "He's some kind of a physicist." Her long, shapely fingers reposed across the back of Graham's hairy fist. "Bill, I think he's got an idea of some sort. It bothers me. Every time somebody gets an idea, he dies."

Pleasure filled Bill Graham's soul as the girl's eyes showed that her anxiety was not for the professor alone. She feared for him, too! For the first time, he felt that the menace to himself was worth it.

"What makes you think he's afflicted with a notion?"

"I was questioning him about the luminosities. I wanted to know why it is so difficult to find a weapon against them."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that we couldn't handle forces as familiarly as substances." Her fine eyes were unwavering as they appraised her listener. "He said we could throw energy in all sorts of forms at a Viton, and if nothing happened we couldn't discover just why nothing had happened. We can't even hold a Viton to find out whether it repels energy or absorbs it and re-radiates it. We can't even grab one to discover what it's made of."

"True," admitted Graham. "That's the hell of it!"

"Professor Farmiloe says it's his personal opinion that luminosities bend most forms of energy around them, absorbing only those that are their natural food." Revulsion suffused her features. "Such as emotional currents."

"And we can't reproduce those with any known apparatus," Graham commented. "If we could, we might stuff them until they burst."

HER SMILE returned, and she went on, "I happened to remark that I'd like to have a magic spoon, and stir them up like so many puddings." Her slender hand grasped an imaginary spoon, stirred in vigorous ellipses. "He seemed fascinated when I made this foolish demonstration. He waved his finger round and round, as if it was a new kind of game."

"Doesn't make sense to me," said Graham.

"Nor me, either. He looked slightly

dazed, said he'd better be going. Then he wandered out in that preoccupied manner of his. As he went, he remarked that he'd try to find me that spoon." She finished on an expectant note, her smoothly curved brows rising in query.

"Nutty," decided Graham. He made a stirring motion with his hand. "It's nutty—like everything else since this crazy affair started."

"It appears ridiculous to me," agreed Harmony Curtis. "I'd like you to go and see him, Bill. He may have something that's worth getting before it's too late."

"I'll go right away," he promised. Leaning forward, he grasped her cool hand, saying, "Harmony, some day there's going to be a new world, and—" He faltered, stopped, looked a little confused.

"Well?" she encouraged.

"Nothing," he lied. "I was just thinking that the new world'll be a great place"—with masculine cowardice, he gained the door before he added—"with you!"

Sneaking through the gates, and into the murky road that ran beneath a sky of jet, he knew that her smile was lingering with the memory of his words. But he couldn't think for long about her smile.

In the distance there was a downward spear of blue against the blackness, another, and another. There was a mutual soaring of ghastly globes a little later. They were too far off for him to see clearly, but he sensed that the phenomena were ascending burdened.

With his mind's eye, he saw stiff, unmoving figures rising in the grasp of repulsive captors, while below their helpless bodies ten thousand guns gaped at the lowering sky, a thousand trumpets awaited the advent of another enemy which, at least, was human.

He wondered how this sudden epidemic of snatchings would appear to an observer not yet treated with Bjornsen's sight-widening formula. Undoubtedly, this awful demonstration of superior powers justified the fearful superstitions of the past. Such things had happened before. History was full of sudden frenzies, levitations, vanishings, and ascensions to the blue mystery of the everlasting sky.

His thoughts turned to the old scientist who had hurried home with a strange idea, and he said to himself, "Bill Graham, I'll lay you a dollar to a cent that Farmiloe is either demented, departed, or dead."

Satisfied with this sporting offer, he turned into Drexler, sneaked cautiously through the deeper shadows his rubber-soled shoes moving without sound, his hard, glistening eyes wary of ambush in nighttime clouds. Down, down below his slinking feet things gnawed persistently at the hidden ores and secret rocks.

X.

PROFESSOR FARMILOE was dead beyond all possible doubt, and Graham knew it immediately he opened the door. Swiftly, the investigator crossed the gloom-filled room, ran his pencil torch over the windows, made certain that their light-bottling coverings permitted no vagrant gleam to pass outside. Satisfied, he found the wall switch, poured current through the center bulb.

A revealing blaze beat down upon the still figure of the scientist, sparkled mockingly in white hair framed by arms that bent limply upon the desk. Farmiloe looked as if he had fallen asleep, couching his weary head upon his arms. But his was not the sleep that is broken by the dawn—it was slumber that is dreamless and never-ending.

Gently, Graham lifted the bowed shoulders, inserted a hand, felt the cold chest. He studied the aged and kindly face, noting that it was devoid of that

terrorized expression which had distorted the features of other dead.

He had reached a pretty good age, Farmiloe. Maybe his death was natural. Maybe the luminosities hadn't been involved in this tragedy. If an autopsy showed death to be caused by heart failure, it would mean nothing, absolutely nothing.

Weirdly vibrant tentacles could absorb nervous currents with enough rapidity and completeness to paralyze the heart muscles. People—old people especially—could die of similar trouble having no connection with supernormal manifestations. Had Farmiloe merely reached the end of his natural span? Or had he died because his wise old brain harbored a thought that was a threat?

In mad haste, Graham raked through the room. It wasn't a laboratory, but more of a combined office and personal library. He found nothing; nothing to which he could tie a potent line. There was a touch of despair in his lean features when he gave up the search, made to go.

The body slid in its seat, flopped forward, its head striking the desk with a dull thud. Graham put his hands beneath cold armpits, lifted the pathetic weight toward a couch. Something fell to the floor, rolling metalically. Laying the body full length, Graham covered its face, composed its tired old hands. Then he looked for the thing that had fallen.

It was a pencil—he saw its silvery sheen by the base of the desk. He picked it up. Obviously, it must have dropped either from Farmiloe's nerveless fingers, or from his lap.

For the second time Graham went through the drawers of the desk, looking for scratch pads, notes, or any kind of hurried scribble that might mean something to an understanding mind. Transferring his attention to the top, he satisfied himself that a writing block was quite unmarked, looked through two scientific books, examining them leaf by leaf.

That left only the *Sun*. The late night final lay spread but unopened in the middle of the desk, positioned as if Farmiloe had been about to read it. His photographic eyes keening over the sheet, the Intelligence man breathed deeply when he found a penciled mark.

It was a thick, swiftly scrawled ring; a slashing circle such as a man might draw in a moment of frenzy—or in the very last moment of life.

"If they got him," mused Graham, "he did this after they got him. Death isn't coincident with stoppage of the heart; the brain does not lose consciousness until several seconds later."

His tongue ran along dry lips while he tried to decipher this frantically drawn message from the grave. If anything was wacky, it was this—for the ring encircled a bear!

Against an iceberg background, the animal was standing upright, its right forepaw extended in a persuasive gesture. The subject of its appeal was a large refrigerator beneath which appeared a few cajoling words:

"I stand for the world's best refrigerator—you'll find me on its door."

"Sleep," snapped Graham. "I'll have to get some sleep, else this'll put me among the knitters of invisible wool!"

Neatly tearing the advertisement from the page, he folded it, placed it in his wallet. Then he switched out the light, departed.

Entering a phone booth in the subway on the way home, he got through to police headquarters, gave rapid instructions between repeated yawns. Then he called Boro 8-19638, obtained no response, felt sleepily surprised that the intelligence department's office did not answer.

Later, he fell into bed, closed eyes red-rimmed with weariness. One mile away, a battery, Sperry computator, and

listening post stood unattended in the dark, their former operators gone. He knew nothing of this, but tossed uneasily in dreams that featured a deserted office surrounded by a sea of living, scintillating blue through which strode the gigantic figure of a bear.

THIS FELLOW had black eyes and hair stuck on a chalk-white face. He had black clothes, shoes, hat. He was a sartorial dirge.

He slid across the parquet in easy, pantherish strides, said, "You—" and fired directly at Graham.

The Intelligence man felt the bullet sections whip wickedly above his scalp as he dived downward. Hitting the floor, he rolled madly, hoping to reach the other's legs before he could fire again, but knowing that he'd never do it.

His back muscles quirked in anticipation of a split bullet's quadruple impact. There came a hard, distant blast, a weird gurgling, a thud.

A red-streaked face fell into his vision, a face in which eyes of coal glared even as their luster died away. Graham arched to his feet with the quick suppleness of an acrobat. He stared dumbly at his stricken attacker.

Leaping over the man in black, he sprinted to the stairs beside the bank of pneumatic levitators, bent over the awkwardly sprawled figure that still clung to a warm weapon.

The figure stirred weakly, moved with little, pitiful motions, exposed four blood-soaked holes in the front of its jacket. A hand dragged up, held out a plain ring for Graham's inspection.

"Don't worry about me, pal!" The figure's speech came in forced, bubbling gasps. "I got down this far . . . couldn't make it farther." Legs twitched spasmodically; the dying man let go his weapon, dropping it with a clatter. "I got the swine, anyway. I got him . . . saved you!"

The ring in his fingers, Graham's glance flashed between the man at his feet and the somberly dressed shape of his assailant. What was a wounded operative doing at the very entrance to the intelligence department's office? Why hadn't the office answered his call last night?

"Leave me. I'm done!" Feebly, the operative tried to push away Graham's hands as they tore open the gory jacket. "Get upstairs, then get out fast!" He choked up a bloody froth. "Town's . . . full of nuts! Get out, brother!"

"God!" Bill Graham straightened, knew that the man at his feet had gone. Snatching up the dropped weapon, he dashed toward the levitators.

A horrible queaziness permeated his stomach when he looked into Leamington's New York field office. The place was a shambles! He counted quickly—seven! Three lay near the window, their cold faces indelibly stamped with the mark of diabolical fate. Their guns were in their jackets, unused.

The other four were scattered around. These had drawn their weapons, and used them. One of the quartet was Colonel Leamington, his riddled frame retaining dignity even in death.

"The trio by the window were settled by Vitons," decided Graham, forcing aside his dazed horror, compelling himself calmly to weigh up the situation. "The rest killed each other."

Moving nearer the chief's desk, he studied positions, attitudes. Evidently, the pair by the door had opened up on Leamington and the other, but had not been quick enough. The result was a likely one; these modern segmentary missiles were blatantly murderous compared with old-fashioned, one-piece bullets.

"Looks like the luminosities got three, leaving Leamington and another unharmed." He frowned. "Three more turned up, perhaps because Leamington had summoned them. They turned up, and then came the fireworks. All five

got theirs, four flopped, one crawled out." His frown became deeper. "Now, why in hell should the fireworks have started?"

Swallowing hard, he collected the plain, iridium-lined rings from the dead men's fingers, dropped them in his pocket. Regardless of what had occurred, all these men were fellow operatives, trusted workers in Uncle Sam's most trusted service.

A BELL CHIMED softly in one corner. Graham crossed to the television receiver, opened the press compartment, took out the *Times'* screen-printed first edition. He scanned it carefully.

Yellow pressure increasing in the mid-West, yelled the *Times*. European situation serious. Thirty enemy stratplanes brought down in southern Kansas during war's biggest stratosphere dogfight.

Turning the page, he looked up local news. Understanding lightened his face as he read. People were running amok! All over New York, in all the white world's greatest cities, people were being kidnaped, then returned, and were being returned in mental condition much different from their former state.

Supersurgery above the clouds! His grip tightened upon his gun as the terrible significance burst through the haze created by this latest slaughter. This was the masterstroke! Ultimate victory was to be made infinitely more certain, and—in the meantime—yet more emotional honey was to be produced with the aid of helpless recruits from the very ranks of the whites!

What was it that poor devil downstairs had said? "Town's . . . full of nuts!" That was it! Leamington and one other had been snatched and returned. They had returned as mental slaves of their ghastly opponents. The office had become a trap into which the three by the window had stepped, perhaps together, perhaps one by one.

The next three had arrived together, realized their peril. With that unflinching devotion to duty typical of their kind they had blasted Leamington and his companion. Sentiment had no place in fast play of this ugly description. Unhesitatingly, the three had wiped out their own chief; wiped him out because he was no longer their chief, but a mind-warped instrument of the enemy.

The field office had been a trap, and possibly was still one. The thought stabbed through Graham's brain, sent him leaping to the window. He stared out, saw a clear, blue sky in which the

early-morning sun was shining brightly.

There might be a hundred, a thousand luminosities swaying around in that azure bowl, some actually drifting nearer. Even Bjornsen's wonderful formula couldn't enable one to pick out glowing blue from a background of glowing blue.

The knowledge that his anxious stare was accompanied by equally anxious thoughts, and that his broadcast psycho-waves might entice the temporarily absent trappers, made him race for the door. Best to get clear while there yet was time! He hit the levitators, went down with a rush.

Two men lounged inside the front door. Graham spotted them through the transparent wall of his shaft as his disk made a rubbery bounce at street level.

He reasoned quickly, "If those guys were normal they'd show some curiosity about those bodies lying within their sight. They aren't interested, and therefore aren't normal. They are dupes!"

Before his disk had ceased its cushioning motion he dropped it farther, his long, athletic form falling from sight of the waiting pair even as they sprang toward the shaft.

He was out of the perpendicular tube and across the basement ere hidden compressors ceased their sighing. He ducked beneath the main stairway, heard feet stamping at the top. Hefting his gun, he fled through a series of empty corridors, gained an exit at the building's farther end. Wearers of the ring were familiar with six such openings, all unknown to and unsuspected by the general public.

THE DESK sergeant shoved the phone across, amputated half a wiener, spoke around it. "That's nothing! Police Commissioner Lewthwaite got his around six o'clock. His bodyguard done it." Another bite. "What's it coming to when big guys get bumped by their bodyguards?"

"Yes, what?" agreed Graham. He rattled the phone angrily.

"All through the night!" mumbled the sergeant. He gulped, popped his eyes, yo-yoed his Adam's apple. "Dozens of them, hundreds! We've bopped them, beat them, burned them down—and still they come! Some of the nuts were our own boys, still in uniform. You never know who's next until he starts something."

"You can't trust your own brother!" Graham indorsed. He got his connection, shouted, "That you, Hetty? Hi!" He grinned sourly as he heard the answering "Hi!", then snapped, "I want Mr. Sangster, pronto!"

A deep, rich voice responded. Graham drew a long breath, recounted his experience of half an hour before, pouring out a rapid flow of words as he described the scene in the intelligence department's office.

"I can't get Washington," he concluded. "They say all the lines are down, and the beams out of action. For the time being, I'm reporting to you."

"This is terrible news, Graham," came Sangster's grave tones. "From where are you speaking?"

"Sorry, sir, I don't know," replied Graham determinedly.

"Meaning you suspect me? You think that I may be another of the mentally mutilated?" Sangster's voice was honest, uncomplaining, totally without surprise. His listener tried to discern his expression in the phone's tiny television screen, but the thing was out of order, displaying only vague whorls of light and shadow. "I cannot blame you," Sangster went on. "Some of their compulsory converts act like dumb gangsters, but others display the essence of cunning."

"All I want you to do is to get my reports to Washington first chance that occurs. At the same time, I'd like to

secure the names and addresses of any other Intelligence operatives who may be in this city. Leamington was the only one here who had this information, but Washington can supply it."

"I'll see what can be done," promised Sangster. His voice grew a little louder. "A couple of Leamington's queries were handled by this department."

"Discover anything?" asked Graham eagerly.

"A reply from Britain says that McAndrew's laboratory contained an experimental assembly that has been tested, and found unworkable. He was trying to devise a means of bombardment with neutrons. The British have now given him up for dead."

"That's a safe bet!"

"We've found," continued Sangster, "that no radio amateur eavesdropped on Padilla. Whatever he told Treleaven is fated to remain a complete mystery. Data on Padilla's life reveals nothing except that he was a financially successful radio experimenter."

"I've given up that lead already," Graham remarked.

"Why—have you found another?" Sangster's voice was suddenly pregnant with interest.

"I find 'em every morning," declared Graham glumly, "and they go rotten on me by night. What are the governmental experts doing?"

"Nothing! There are two groups assembled in lonely places suggested by Leamington. The very loneliness that is their protection is also their handicap. They plan things, make things, build up things—then find that there are no adjacent luminosities on which to test them."

"Gosh, I overlooked that!" admitted Graham.

"It's not your fault. None of us thought of it." Sangster was now lugubrious. "And if we transfer them to Viton pastures, they'll get wiped out." His fingers snapped. "Like that!"

"Probably you're right, sir," said Graham. "I'll report again directly I've turned up something worth reporting."

"Where are you going now?" The question came sharply.

"I'm deaf in this ear," Graham told him. "Sorry, Mr. Sangster, I can't understand you."

"All right." Disappointment tickled through the wires. "I guess you know best. Take care of yourself!" A loud click signaled that he had rung off.

"When in doubt," offered the desk sergeant darkly, "see who's making money out of it."

"Who?" Graham asked.

"Morticians!" He frowned at his listener's grin. "Well, ain't they?"

XI.

THE BRONZE plate said: *Freezer Fabricators of America, Inc.* Graham walked in, spent five minutes sparring with a stubborn executive before he got through to the golden name on the old oak door.

That name was Thurlow, and the owner was a living mummy. Thurlow looked as if he'd sweated himself dry in lifelong pursuit of percentages.

"We can't do it," said Thurlow, his voice rustling like ages-old papyrus. "We couldn't supply a refrigerator to the Sultan of Zanzibar even if he offered to balance its weight with jewels. Our plant has been engaged on government work since the war began, and we haven't turned out a solitary freezer."

"It doesn't matter." Graham dismissed the point without argument. "I want one for the university to pick to pieces. Give me a list of your customers."

"Nothing doing!" Thurlow's bony hand massaged his yellow pate. "That trick ring of yours doesn't mean a thing to me. I can't read its inscriptions

without a microscope. Why don't the authorities provide you with a microscope?" His cackle was funereal. *"Heh-heh-heh!"*

"Will you give me a list if I bring you written authority?"

"Well," Thurlow ceased his cackling, looked cunning, "if what you bring satisfies me, I'll give you a list. But what you bring had better be convincing. No slick competitor is going to gyp me out of a list just because trade's gone haywire!"

"You need not fear that." Graham stood up. "I'll get something in clear writing, or else I'll get the police to apply on my behalf." He stopped at the door, asked one more question. "How long have you been using that bear as a trade-mark?"

"Ever since we started," Thurlow answered. "Thirty years. In the public's mind, the standing bear is associated with a product unrivaled in its sphere, a product which—although I say it myself—is universally accepted as—"

"Thanks!" interrupted Graham, cutting short the eulogy. He went out.

There was a phone in the corner drugstore. Graham sized up the four customers and three assistants before turning his back to them, and entering the booth.

He was leery of everybody. That warning voice within his mind whispered that he was being searched for, that it had at last dawned upon the eerie foe that the source of opposition was not so much the world of science as a small group of aces—in which he was the ace of trumps!

Compensation had been gained for inherent inability to distinguish one human being from another, humans who were as alike as so many sheep. Other humans had been forcibly enrolled, and given the duty of segregating intransigent animals from the flock.

Short of a prowling luminosity picking on him at random, and reading his mind, he had been safe. Now he was threatened by proxies of his own kind.

Dialing his number, he thanked heaven that Wohl's dazed mind had not depicted himself, and the locality of his home. Wohl's helpless brain had surrendered knowledge of the field office, causing wolfish captors to leave him contemptuously upon the bank in their haste to reach the scene of slaughter.

Graham would never tell the burly police lieutenant that he, and he alone, had put the finger on Leamington and the others.

"This is Graham," he said, detecting the lift of a distant receiver.

"Listen, Graham," chipped in Sangster's voice, his tones urgent. "I connected with Washington shortly after you last phoned. We're linked through amateur transmitters. Washington wants you right away. You'd better get there fast!"

"What for, sir?"

"I don't know. All I've got is that you must see Keithley without delay. There's a captured Yellow strat-plane waiting for you in the main hangar at Battery Park. You'll run less risk of being picked on in that."

"I'll do it on the run!" Watching the shop through the booth's flexible glass panels, he put his lips nearer the mouthpiece, said hurriedly, "I called to ask you to get me a list of customers from Freezer Fabricators. I'd also like you to get Harriman, at the Smithsonian, ask him to reach any astronomers who're still active, and find out whether they can imagine any connection between the luminosities and the Great Bear."

"The Great Bear?" echoed Sangster surprisedly.

"Yes. There's a bear hanging around that means something or other. I'm pretty sure the astronomical slant is entirely wrong, but we can't afford to overlook a chance."

"Refrigerators, buyers, stars, and

bears!" gabbled Sangster. "God!" He was silent for a moment, then said, "I think maybe they've got at you, but I'll do as you request." Then he said "God!" again, and disconnected.

HE PACED the waiting room with hard, impatient strides. You wouldn't think there was a war on, the way they let you hang around in Washington.

Those couple of scientists, for instance. Heaven only knew whom they were waiting to see, but they'd been there when he arrived. Graham gave them another look over. Talk!—they'd talked and talked as if there wasn't any war in this man's country.

Arguing about Bjornsen's formula, they were. The little one reckoned that modification of eyesight was caused by molecules of methylene blue transported to the visual purple by iodine as a halogen in affinity.

The fat one thought otherwise. It was iodine that made the difference. Methylene blue was the catalyst causing fixation of an elusive rectifier. He agreed that mescal served only to stimulate the optic nerves, attuning them to the new vision, but the actual cause was iodine. Look at Webb's schizophrenics, for example. They had iodine, but not methylene blue. They were mutants with natural fixation, requiring no catalyst.

The little one started off again, his blissful disregard for other and more urgent matters threatening to bring Graham's impatience to the boil. The investigator was just asking himself what the hell it mattered how Bjornsen's formula functioned so long as it did function, when he heard his own name called.

Three men occupied the room into which he was ushered. He recognized them all: Tollerton, a local expert, Willetts C. Keithley, supreme head of the Intelligence Service, and finally a square-jawed, gray-eyed figure whose presence brought him stiffly to attention —the president!

"Mr. Graham," said the president, without preamble, "this morning we received a courier from Europe. He was the fifth. His four predecessors died on their way here. He brought bad news."

"Yes, sir," said Graham respectfully.

"We are barely holding our own in the mid-West," the president went on. He turned to a wall map, pointed to a thick, black line in which was a tipsy-vee covering most of Nebraska. "The public doesn't know of this. It is a Yellow salient. It has been driven into our lines during the last two days."

"Yes, sir," repeated Graham.

"We can make no greater sacrifices; we can hold no stronger foe." The president stepped nearer, his stern eyes looking into Graham's. "The courier says that Europe can hold out until six o'clock on Monday evening. After that, surrender, or collapse. Six o'clock, and no longer—not one minute longer."

"I understand, sir." The Intelligence man noted the wide-eyed gaze that Tollerton kept upon him, the fixed, keen stare with which Keithley was watching him.

"That means that we have eighty hours in which to find salvation." The president was grave, very grave. "I don't expect you to find it for us, Mr. Graham. I don't expect miracles of any man! But, knowing your record, I wanted to inform you of these things personally; to tell you that any suggestions you can make will be acted upon immediately; to tell you that any further authority you require may be had for the asking."

"THE PRESIDENT," interjected Keithley, "thinks that if anything can be done by one man, that man is you! You started all this, you've seen it through so far, and you're the likeliest person to finish it—if it can be finished."

"Where have you hidden the ex-

perts?" asked Graham bluntly.

"There's a band of twenty in Florida, and twenty-eight in the interior of Porto Rico," Keithley replied.

"Give them to me!" Graham's eyes were alight with the fire of battle. "Bring them back, and give them to me."

"You shall have them," declared the president. "Anything else, Mr. Graham?"

"Give me absolute authority to commandeer all laboratories, plants, and lines of communication that I see fit. Let my requirements for materials be given preference over all else."

"Granted." The president uttered the word with no hesitation.

"One more request." He made it to Keithley, explaining, "His duty will be to watch me. He'll watch me, and I'll watch him. Should either of us become a dupe, the other will remove him at once."

"That, too, is granted." Keithley handed over a slip of paper. "Sangster said you wanted addresses of fellow operatives in New York. There are ten on that list—six locals, and four out-of-towners. Two of the local men have not reported for several days. Their fate is not known."

"I'll look them up." Graham pocketed the slip.

"Eighty hours, remember," said the president. "Eighty hours between complete freedom and everlasting slavery." He put a paternal hand on the other's shoulder. "Do your best with the powers we're given you, and may Providence be your guide!"

"Eighty hours!" murmured Graham as he raced toward the plane hidden in the hangar. Two of those precious hours might be wasted waiting for a Yellow raid in the midst of which they could take off undetected.

Down the spine of the New World, a hundred million were facing three hundred million. Every hour, every minute thousands were dying, thousands more were being mutilated—while overhead were glowing quaffers of the ascending champagne of agony.

The end of the hellish banquet was drawing near. The last course was about to be served; served with blood-red hands. Then appetites replete with human currents would rest content to wait the further feasts to come. Eighty hours!

THE RUSH with which he entered took Graham halfway across the floor before he saw the figure in the chair. The center light was cold, but the whole room was aglow with the electric radiator's brilliant flare. Seeing by radiant heat had lost all novelty to those with the new sight.

"Art!" shouted Graham delightedly. "I was going to ask Stamford to throw you out."

"Well, I'm out," said Wohl succinctly. "I just couldn't stick that hospital any longer. The ward sister was sour sugar. She called me Wohly-Pohly. Ugh!" His broad face smiled reminiscently. "I yelled for my clothes, but they hadn't got them. So I walked out without them."

"Nude?"

"No—in these." His foot nudged a bundle on the floor. "The crime wave's awful when even police lieutenants snitch hospital blankets." He stood up, stretched his arms, revolved slowly, like a gown model. "How d'you like the suit?"

"Holy smoke, it's one of mine!" said Graham.

"Sure! I found it in your wardrobe. Bit saggy under the arms, and tight around the beam, but it'll do."

"Listen, Art." Graham shoved him back into his chair. "Time's short. I got back from Washington two hours ago, and I've been on the jump until now." He recounted the march of events since he'd left Wohl in hospital

at Stamford. "So I asked Keithley, and here it is." He handed over a plain, iridium-lined ring. "You've been kicked out of the police, and conscripted by the Intelligence, whether you like it or not. You're my opposite number."

"So be it!" Wohl's nonchalance failed to conceal his delight. "How the devil do the authorities supply rings always the correct size?"

"Forget it—we've bigger puzzles to solve." He handed Wohl a clipping "We're organizing fast. We've got until Monday evening, and it doesn't matter a damn whether we starve or die so long as we produce." He pointed to the clipping. "That's Farmiloe's dying scrawl. That's our only clue."

Staring long and hard at the bear posed before an iceberg, Wohl said, "You've had a frig picked to bits, and it tells nothing?"

"Not a thing. Cold might kill luminosities by slowing up their vibrations, but how're we going to apply it? There's no such thing as a beam of pure cold." Graham glanced at his watch. "Does that scrawl suggest anything to you?"

"Br-r-r!" replied Wohl, hugging himself.

"Don't act the fool, Art! There's no time for horsing around."

"I always feel the cold," Wohl apologized. He scowled at the taunting advertisement. "All it tells me is that you've an astonishing aptitude for digging up the screwiest leads."

"Don't I know it!" Graham's voice was an annoyed growl. He transfixed the clipping with an angry finger. "A bear! We've got something we think is a clue, and it's a long, mercenary, flea-bitten bear!"

"Yes." Wohl joined in heartily. "A gangling, cockeyed, stinking bear! A lousy polar bear!"

"If only I'd met Farmiloe on his way—" Graham stopped in mid-sentence, a thoroughly startled look sprang into his features. In a voice hushed with sheer surprise, he said, "Hey, you called it a polar bear!"

"Sure I did! It's not a coyote, is it?"

"A polar bear!" yelled Graham, changing tone with suddenness that brought Wohl to his feet. "Polarization! That's it—polarization!" He stirred his finger vigorously in the air. "Circular or elliptical polarization. Hell!—why didn't I see it before?"

"Eh?" said Wohl, his mouth agape.

"Polarization, a million dollars to a doughnut!" Graham shouted. He grabbed two hats, slammed one on the startled Wohl's head, where it stuck rakishly. "Out! We're getting out hell-for-leather! We're telling the world before it's too late! Out!"

They fled through the door, hammered along the sidewalk. Blue dots were glowing high in the sky, but none swung low.

"Down here!" breathed Graham. He ducked into a concrete maw whose throat led to the newer and lower city. Together, they went full tilt down the ultra rapid escalators, hit the levitator banks at first level, descended another four hundred feet.

THEY WERE inhaling heavily as they jumped from their disks, found themselves at the junction of six recently made tunnels. Dull rumbles and raucous grinding noises of steadily boring mammoths still spouted from the two newest holes.

Hydrants, telephone booths, public televisors, and even a small cigar store already stood in this subterranean area dug only within the last few weeks. Engineers, overseers, surveyors, and laborers were scurrying about laden with tools, materials, instruments. and portable lamps. Occasionally, a small electric trolley, heavily laden, whirred from one tunnel and into another.

"Vitons rarely come down here," said

Graham. "We ought to be able to phone in safety. Take the booth next to mine, Art. Phone every scientific plant, depot, and individual you can find in the directory. Tell them the secret is polarization of some sort, probably elliptical. Don't let them argue with you. Tell them to spread it around. Then ring off."

"Right!" Wohl stepped in.

"How long had you been waiting when I arrived?"

"Fifteen minutes." Snatching the directory, Wohl ran a thick finger down a column. "I'd finished dressing only a couple of minutes when you came."

Taking the adjoining booth, Graham dialed, got his number, said quickly: "Polarization, Harriman. Maybe it's elliptical. Toss it around fast so the whole world gets to know." He disconnected, giving Harriman no chance to comment.

Seven more calls he made, repeating his information in short, staccato sentences. Then he rang Stamford Center Hospital, asked what time Wohl had left. The reply made him sigh with relief. The former police officer could not have been snatched and perverted —his time was fully explained.

Graham had not really suspected his burly friend of being a dupe, particularly since Wohl had shown himself willing to help spread the very information the enemy was desperately trying to suppress. But Graham remembered Sangster's glum statement that "others display the very essence of cunning." In addition, there was that persistent feeling of being the object of widespread search.

He shrugged, dialed again, rattled through his information, and heard the other say: "Your buddy Wohl's on the other line right now. He's handing us the same stuff."

"It doesn't matter so long as you've got it," snapped Graham. "Pass it along!"

Half an hour later, he left his booth, opened Wohl's door. "Chuck it, Art. I reckon we've thrown it too far to be stopped."

"I'd got down to the letter P," sighed Wohl. "A guy named Penny was the next." His sigh was deeper, more regretful. "I wanted to ask him if he could spare a dime."

"Never mind the wit." Graham's face was anxious as he glanced at his watch. "Time's flying quicker than zip, and I've got to meet those—"

A far-away roar interrupted him. Ground trembled and shuddered in quick, tormented pulsations. Things plunged down the transparent levitator shafts, crashed at bottom. Fine powder trickled from the roof.

Shouting, bawling men raced from the tunnels, made a wildly gesticulating crowd that packed the junction. There was a drumming noise overhead, and more powder streamed down. The drumming ceased; the crowd milled and yelled.

Somebody drove his way through the crowd, entered a phone booth, emerged after a minute. He silenced the mob by sheer superiority of lung power, and gained a hearing. His stentorian tones reverberated around the junction, fled in dismal wails along the many tunnels.

"The exit's blocked! There's a wire still through, and those on the surface say there's a thousand tons choking the shaft. Dupes did it!" The crowd howled, flourished fists. "It's all right, boys," roared the speaker. "The cops got 'em! They were dropped on the run." His authoritative eyes roamed over the mass of greasy faces. "Get back to No. 4—we'll bust through there."

Muttering among themselves, scowling as they went, the workers poured into a tunnel. Before the last one had been swallowed by its gloomy arch, distant thumps and rumbles burst forth with doubled fury.

Graham caught the speaker, identified

himself, asked, "How long?"

"It'll be quicker through No. 4 tunnel," replied the other. "There's ninety feet of solid rock between us and another gang working to meet us. We're joining systems through this shaft, and I guess it'll take us about three hours."

"Three hours!" Graham looked at his watch and groaned.

Ten of his precious eighty had already drifted away, leaving behind nothing but a shrewd guess yet to be confirmed. Three more were to be wasted in waiting—waiting for release from depths which, at least, were safer than the perilous surface.

IT WAS a great stroke of luck to find that the adjoining system existed on West Fourteenth, for it was in the basement of the Martin that Graham had arranged to meet the governmental experts along with several others.

Sixty-four of them were anxiously awaiting him in this subterranean hideout immediately below the spot where Professor Mayo's crushed body had started the whole series of ghastly events. It was fitting, Graham thought, that the stain of this tragedy should mark a later sanctuary.

"You've been tipped about polarization?" he asked. They nodded. One stood up, intending to offer an opinion. Graham waved him down. "No discussion at the moment, gentlemen."

His eagle eyes studied them individually as he went on: "We've outwitted our adversaries twice. We've done it with this tip of Farmiloe's, and we did it when we broadcast news of the enemy's existence. On both occasions, we succeeded by taking advantage of our antagonists' only weakness—that they simply can't be everywhere at once. We're going to use the same tactics again."

"How?" put in a voice.

"I'm not saying! There may be some among you who are not to be trusted." His lean, muscular features maintained their grimness. Uneasily, his listeners shifted in their seats, each casting wary, sidelong glances at his neighbors. "You're going to be divided into eight parties of eight apiece. No party is going to know the location of the other seven. Those who don't know, can't tell!"

More fidgeting, more mutual suspicion. Wohl grinned to himself as he stood at Graham's side. He was enjoying the situation. If among this crowd were a dozen enforced converts of the Vitons, helpless but cunning spies in the human camp, their identity was completely unknown. Any man might be sitting between a pair of dreadful proxies.

"I'm taking a group of eight, giving instructions in private, and sending them on their way before I deal with the next lot," informed Graham. He selected Kennedy Veitch, leading ray expert. "You're in charge of the first group, Mr. Veitch. Please select your seven."

Leading them to another room, he told them hurriedly: "You're going to the Acme plant in Philadelphia. When you get there, you're not merely to carry on with experimentation designed to blot out a few luminosities, for that means—if you're successful—you'll be promptly eliminated by other, nearby globes, and we'll be left wondering why in hell you died. We're sick of wanting to know why guys have died!"

"I don't see how prompt retaliation can be prevented," opined Veitch, his face pale, but his lips firm.

"It can't—just yet." Graham minced no words, didn't care whether he sounded brutal or not. "You men will be blasted to blazes, perhaps. But we're going to know exactly what you were up to at the moment you went."

"Ah!" breathed Veitch. His group crowded around him, wide-eyed, but saying nothing.

"You'll have microphones in your lab,

and they'll be linked with every available telephone line. You'll be on the police teletype system, with a police operator in attendance. There will be fine-definition scanners tied to far-away television receivers. Adjacent buildings will hold observers who'll watch your laboratory continually."

"I see," said Veitch slowly.

"Every single thing you're about to do you're to describe in full detail before you try it. You'll send it through the mikes and over the teletype. The scanners will then watch you do it. Distant observers will watch results. If you suffer, we'll know exactly why you suffered."

Veitch made no remark, and Graham went on: "If you succeed in smearing a luminosity, the technical details of how you accomplished it will have passed through half a dozen telephone exchanges and scores of precinct stations. We'll rush out that equipment in quantities, and nothing in heaven, earth, or hell will stop us!" He studied them steadily. "On your way—and best of luck!"

He turned to Wohl. "Ask Laurie to choose seven, and bring them in here."

"I didn't like the little runt, the one staring over Veitch's shoulder," remarked Wohl, pausing by the door. "His eyes had hoodlum's heebies."

"And what may those be?"

"A fixed, animal glare. Go see the police art gallery—you'll find hundreds with the heebies!" Wohl looked expectantly at his listener. "Deranged killers always have it."

"They do," agreed Graham thoughtfully. "I've noted it in photographs of old-time gangsters, Dillinger, Nelson, the Barrows, and others. Who knows that they weren't sorry instruments of unseen drinkers, thirsting for horror?" He frowned. "Veitch won't be out of the building yet. Go catch him, Art, and put him wise." He stood up. "I'll call Laurie myself."

His frown was still serious, worried when he got the next group of experts, conducted them to the room.

XII.

THE Faraday Electrical Equipment Co.'s laboratory claimed to be the biggest on the American continent; its size suggested the building of airships rather than the evolving of more efficient television scanners, tubes, and screens.

A battery of enormous Diesel-electrics occupied one end of the hangarlike shed. Mighty transformers reared alongside them; the switchboard looked large enough to be in the chief distributing station of a great city.

Tall, complex tubes, of every conceivable type, were ranged along one wall, some half finished, some completed but not yet tested. Queer frames formed of bars and rods—experimental models of various directional antenna—were propped against the opposite wall.

A veritable litter of scanners, photosensitive cells, partly assembled screens, and unsuccessful attempts at flickerless stereoscopic presentation, lay scattered over tables the size of small rooms.

The Faraday Co. thought nothing of pouring a million dollars a year into research. It had paid them. When the war commenced, who'd been about to market four-color television de luxe? Faraday's!

Duncan Laurie admiringly weighed up the equipment at the disposal of his little band, and said to Graham: "Plane oughtn't be overlooked. It should be tried in case Farmiloe was slightly off the mark."

"It's being considered," Graham assured him. "We are letting no chances slide, no matter how remote they may seem. All the work is properly coordinated. Your gang's to concentrate on hyperbolic polarization."

"All right." Laurie pulled thoughtfully at one ear. "These luminosities

seem to reflect over a wave band running from about three million Angstrom units up to four or five. They're damnably difficult to observe scientifically; we can't line an instrument on one long enough to analyze its output. But it's obvious that they're energy in compact and balanced form, and are inertialess."

"Are fish inertialess?" asked Graham.

"Fish?" Laurie was frankly puzzled.

Graham pointed to an overhead skylight. "Up there is the atmospheric ocean. It's full of blue, shining fish swimming around by some means impossible to us creatures crawling on the bottom."

"But energy—"

"Ordinary light's a form of energy, and has weight," Graham went on. He heard the rattle of the police teletype as he talked. "Being made of forces, I think these Vitons have a sort of substance, though they're not matter as matter is generally understood. They have weight, even though it's negligible. They have inertia, and have to expend energy to overcome it." He smiled at Laurie. "Only my own opinions, mind you!"

"Possibly you're right," acknowledged Laurie.

"Now," continued Graham, "reports we've collected since discovering the effect of short-wave therapy cabinets show that the luminosities are susceptible to a range stretching from two centimeters to two meters. They don't die. They just skedaddle as if stung."

"My guess is that those impulses hamper the whirl of their surface electrons," Laurie opined. "But they don't penetrate."

"Penetration's what we're out to achieve. We've chopped at Viton timber, and have been struck in the eye by splinters. With luck, we're going to bore into them by means of polarization." Graham made the statement with optimistic confidence. "You've got fifty hours. Start at two centimeters, and work up."

"We'll do it!" swore Laurie. He gave sharp orders to his band. The tiny group—dwarfed by the hugeness of the place—bustled into activity.

TO ONE SIDE, the teletype flashed its information as Laurie carefully recited his intentions. Silent but supersensitive microphones also picked up his voice, carried it away. Scanners fixed to the steel roof trusses took in the scene from above.

With Wohl at his side, Graham hurried toward the door, and as he reached it, the scanners picked up and transmitted a hideous incident that plunged dramatically onto the screens of far-away receivers.

All the lights went out simultaneously, and a blaze of blue swelled through an open hopper in the north wall. Elusive gleams of blue flashed from jumbled apparatus, flickered and shifted as the apparition arched forward and swept toward the floor.

A human face, fearfully distorted, made leprous by the ghastly illumination, sweated directly in the luminosity's path. Hysterical gabbling poured from the face's twitching lips, gabbling that ended in a loud, hoarse sigh.

Helpless feet dragged on the floor immediately beneath the glowing invader, scuffled around, rapped on table legs. The orb bobbed up and down, a limp form dangling beneath it. Glass toppled from an adjacent table, hit the floor, and bounced in horrible imitation of the bobbing globe.

Red flame lanced vividly from the laboratory's west side, and dull, purplish spots appeared momentarily on the invader's scintillating surface. More flame; the sharp, hard crack of the heavy weapon being magnified to deafening proportions.

The luminosity dropped its burden

like somebody dropping an old sack. It shot westward, making a meteoric curve into an opposing spear of fire. A voice screamed a terrified obscenity, choked, and was silent.

Swiftness of departure was breath-taking. Blue whizzed to the hopper, shone within the open frame, and then was outside. It shrank toward the cloud-wrapped sky.

Feet stumbled, voices murmured in the semidarkness of a place receiving poor illumination from outside. Graham swung wide the door, permitting entry of the gloomy afternoon's dull light.

Away in the farther corner, somebody put a pencil beam upon a fuse box, bent over it, working with fingers that trembled uncontrollably.

Power suddenly poured through a multitude of bulbs. Laurie ran down the center aisle, knelt beside an eye-rolling, arm-jerking form. He sensed Graham at his side, looked up at the investigator, his eyes wide in a face like marble.

"He's batty," declared Graham. The prone man gibbered horribly, clutched Laurie's hand, moped and mowed. "He gave away nothing. He went nuts as it got him."

"God, this is terrible!" breathed Laurie.

"We'll get him away." Leaving the pair, Graham shouldered through the thin ring of fearful onlookers, joined Wohl at the west side.

"Dead as the dodo," announced Wohl, without emotion.

Graham bent over the body of the teletype operator, extracted the huge Police Positive from limp fingers. He placed the weapon on a table, found a small mirror, directed light into staring eyes. It might have been only his imagination, but he thought he saw that subtle something which is life fade gradually from those fixed optics.

After searching the police operator's form, he straightened up, and said: "Not a mark! His heart was stopped!"

A siren screamed along the road outside, died away with a dismal wail at the open door. Four police officers entered, accompanied by one man in plain clothes. Quietly, without comment, they took out the uniformed corpse, came back for the fallen scientist. He was mouthing noiselessly as they bore him away.

Three got into the car, drove off. The fourth took his seat at the teletype. The man in plain clothes went up to Laurie:

"I'm Ferguson, the relief."

Laurie stood like one stupefied, his gaze wandering over his pale companions. Wearily, he tugged at one ear while his face asked his unspoken question.

"Organization," explained Graham. His gesture was a comprehensive sweep indicating the scanners and microphones. "Already your losses are made good. Get started—we've got to move quicker than death!"

DASHING OUT, Graham clambered into a police gyrocar, Wohl taking the wheel. He said, "Bet my own speedster's a wreck somewhere out West."

"Maybe." Wohl tooled her out, purred her along. "Where to?"

"Yonkers. There's an underground lab out there. Steve Koenig's in charge." Noting Wohl's curiosity, he added: "There are only two groups in New York. I'm not revealing where others are, not even to you."

"Meaning I might be grabbed and tapped for information?" Wohl glanced at the sky, pulled a face. "Where do we stand if the victim is *you?* Or do we then sit?"

"We still stand! There are other groups besides those I claimed. I haven't handled them because I want to know nothing about them. Somebody in Washington has placed them. Moreover, we don't know where Euro-

pean experts are located, and they know nothing of ours."

"This," decided Wohl, "is certainly one time when it's folly to be wise!"

"I'll say!" Graham's hard, lean face was thoughtful. "Things have been arranged in such a way that the same applies to me as to everyone else—what I don't know, I can't tell."

They swung right, the dynamo whirling powerfully. In a smooth rush, they swept around a huge crater in the road. Above the enormous hole was a wide gap in the shattered skyway, a gap from the ragged concrete ends of which stubby lengths of rusting girders stuck like rotting teeth.

"Some shell." Wohl let his long, streamlined machine plummet in top. He slowed at an intersection, turned left.

They bulleted along, passed Bank of Manhattan, Graham remarking casually, "Seems years since I worked from that office." He was suddenly silent, then added in a quiet voice, "Pull up at this corner, Art."

The gyrocar swung into the curb, stopped. Graham twisted around in his seat, stared at the pile of masonry a block behind. Opening the door, he writhed out.

"What's up?" Wohl fiddled with his wheel, glanced impatiently at his friend.

"The twenty-fourth floor," muttered Graham. "Yes, it was the twenty-fourth!" His eyes glittered. "Something blue and shining flashed from the windows on that level as we passed beneath. I caught it with the tail of my eye. The six middle windows in that row belong to Sangster's dump."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I think it was a luminosity!" The investigator's face was like cold granite. "Stick around, Art—I'm going to phone."

WITHOUT WAITING for Wohl's reply, he raced into the nearest building, found a phone. This instrument's visor was working all right, for a girl's face bloomed on its tiny screen as his call got through.

He stared anxiously at those familiar features, desperately trying to discern details beyond the scope of the distant scanner.

"Hi, Hetty!" he said.

"Hi!" She smiled mechanically.

"Mr. Sangster there?"

"No. He's been out all afternoon. I expect him back before five thirty." Her voice was dull, lifeless, but her smile grew more insistent, more inviting. "Won't you come along and wait for him, Mr. Graham?"

"Sorry, I can't. I—"

"We haven't seen you for such a long time," she pleaded. "I'm so lonely, so afraid. Come and chat with me awhile."

"Hetty, I can hardly spare the time." He stared fascinatedly at the screen, noting the tiniest movement of her lips, the slightest flicker of her eyes.

"From where are you speaking?" Again that dull, phonographic voice.

He felt his temper rising, and, evading her question, said slowly: "I'll come round, Hetty. Expect me about five."

"That's fine!" Her smile widened, but her eyes held no collaboratory expression. "Be sure to make it."

Disconnecting, he gazed at the screen from which her features had faded. Then he hurried out to the waiting gyrocar.

"They've got Hetty," he told Wohl. "The place is a trap."

"Like the field office was," remarked Wohl. He paled slightly.

"Ten to one my own home's also a trap—both Sangster and Hetty know it well." He felt furious, but the bitterness in his expression died away, to be replaced with steely determination. His fists clenched into hard bunches. "They're creeping nearer and nearer. Art, I'm fed up! I'm going to smack

'em right in the pan—and to hell with 'em!"

"I'm with you, Bill." Lowering his window, Wohl spat halfway across the street, raised the window again. "To the limit. How're we going to smite them?"

"It depends." Climbing into the machine, Graham sat and pondered, his wary eyes watching through the transparent roof for any wandering orbs that might drift within telepathic range. "If the trap is toothed with Vitons, I'm merely talking big, because there's nothing I can do. But if they've left the dirty work to a surrounding bunch of dupes, I'm going in. I'm going to go in, and sock 'em hard, and walk out with Hetty."

"Never mind the 'I' stuff—*we!*" said Wohl.

"I found a fellow operative when I got back from Washington," Graham went on, "and sent him looking for the other nine. If he's dug them up, they'll be waiting at Center Station. We'll pick them up, and see if we can snitch the bait without grabbing the tribulation. Bang her along, Art—we've got half an hour."

HE LOOKED OVER the eight of them, noting their clean, square-jawed features, and knowing that the missing couple would never be found. Every one of these young huskies was well aware that their number should have been ten, and every one did not care a damn if their number was soon to be lessened again. These were men of the Intelligence Service, men trained to compensate for the loss of two by doing the work of ten.

"You know what you're to do?" he asked. They nodded. Graham jerked a thumb upward, reminding them of the observers twenty floors above, peering across the street, and into Sangster's office.

"The boys say there are no luminosities in the office, so it looks like we've got to deal with dupes. I'm going in, and you fellows can help me get out."

Again they nodded. None could see any reason why Graham should be so keen to risk his life, but it was enough for them that he intended to do just that. They were prepared to play their part.

"All right, fellows—I'm on my way!"

With a grin for the apprehensive Wohl, Graham hastened out, crossed the road, entered Bank of Manhattan. Five men lounged in the foyer. Disregarding them, he walked boldly to the pneumatic levitators, ascended to twenty-fourth.

No loungers were in sight on this floor, but he felt that glistening, crazy eyes were watching him as he thrust open the door of the department of special finance.

He said, "'Lo, Hetty!" and closed the door behind him. His keen eyes surveyed the room, noted the closed door of Sangster's private sanctum, the closed door of a large cupboard nearby. Sangster himself was not in evidence. Maybe the girl had told the truth about him.

Seating himself on the corner of her desk, he swung a nonchalant leg and remarked, "I've been busy, Hetty. As busy as the very devil. We're nearly finding an anti-Viton weapon at last."

"In short waves?" she asked. Her eyes looked into his, and hair erected on the back of his neck when he saw the emptiness of her formerly lively pupils.

"Sure!" He stared hard at her mechanical features. It was hellish to think that this was no longer the vivacious girl he once had known, that this familiar form had become a fleshly robot. "We're searching between two centimeters and two meters. We've divided the band between various groups of experimenters."

"How interesting," she commented in

a voice totally devoid of tone. Her pale, blue-veined hands fumbled in her lap. "Who are the experimenters, and which lines are they trying?"

Triumph mounted within him as she put the question. It was as he'd expected—this poor, warped brain was working along a single track, mechanically following the course upon which it had been set. There was cunning here, but no cleverness.

A twofold duty had been imposed upon her: to bait the trap, and to obtain essential information before giving the death signal. Obviously, the fearful operation to which her protesting mind had been subjected had not endowed her with telepathic powers—if luminosities could so endow their victims. At any rate, she was quite unaware of his suspicion.

HARD PUT to it to conceal his eagerness he said, "There are a number of groups, Hetty. I know the location of them all, every one of them." It was a lie, and deliberately he made it in boastful tones. "You've only got to suggest a wave length, and I can say who's going to try it, and where."

"Five centimeters," she responded, speaking the words as if they were engraved upon her soul. Her hands slid forward, reached under her desk.

"That's all I wanted to know," snapped Graham. He was on his feet, and around the desk before she could move.

He put out his hands to grab her, saw Sangster's door whip open, and a menacing figure charge toward him. He flung himself forward, and down; his automatic was in his hand as he hit the floor. The maniacal invader paused, aimed, and the sound of his shot was terrific in the confined space.

Things catapulted over Graham's back. The cupboard door swung wide, he fired at its nearby gap, blasted two ragged holes in woodwork, knew that the other pair of bullet sections had gone inside.

A gasping figure bowed low in the opening, bent farther, toppled full length, its gory torso a sudden barrier in the path of the first attacker.

Hetty lugged out a drawer, snatched something from it. She leaned over her desk toward Graham, her empty eyes lined along the sights of a tiny, old-fashioned revolver. The desk erupted beneath her when Graham heaved it over from his side.

Feet were hammering in the passage. Graham swayed upward with the grace and speed of a striking cobra, fired simultaneously with his first opponent. Pain lanced through his left arm, but his assailant went down like a poled ox.

The main door burst inward, revealed two Intelligence men, weapons in hand. Hard, explosive noises twanged from outside. One man choked, spat, choked again, leaned weakly against the wall, slid down.

"Full of them!" swore the other. "The place is crammed with them." He sent a snap shot down the passage, then held his fire, and was joined by four of his fellows.

"Quick!" urged Graham. "I want this girl out."

Whirling around to snatch Hetty, he caught a glimpse of distant blue through the open window. "Vitons!" The glowing dots were nearing swiftly.

More feet thundered along the passage. His companions opened fire as he sprang toward the door. Thumps, groans, and mad, aphetic mouthings sounded in the corridor; next, a swarm of staring dupes were in the room.

A colorless face in which blank eyes goggled ghoulishly came close to Graham's own. He hit it with every ounce he possessed. The face vanished, another replaced it, and he promptly smacked it to the floor.

The mad mêlée swept him out of the uproarious office, along the passage to the levitator shafts. A weight descended crushingly on his shoulder, a thousand hands seemed to be reaching for him at once.

He saw Sheehan, an operative, shove the muzzle of his gun into a slobbering mouth, and let her blow. He saw the awful mess that toppled at his stamping feet. Then the entire cosmos became an inferno of raging fire, and he went down helplessly.

XIII.

EASING the bandage round his head, Graham gazed at the pile of Bank of Manhattan just across the road, then turned to the others.

"How the devil did we manage to get out of there? What happened?"

"Me and my pair had five on our hands in the foyer," explained Wohl. He fondled a damaged knee, winced. "We heard the shenanigans upstairs come echoing down the levitator shafts

as the other six went to your aid. A minute later, two of them came down like bats out of hell, bringing you with them. You'd been conked, and I'll say you looked lousy!" He favored the knee again, murmured an oath. "They said they'd got out one jump ahead of visiting luminosities."

"And Hetty?"

"There!" Wohl's face was expressionless as he pointed to a pathetic bundle discernible on the distant sidewalk. "She went Mayo's way."

"What, flung herself out?" Wohl's answering nod plunged him into thought.

So the duty of that poor, warped mind had really been threefold—she was to end herself with her usefulness!

He was moody while he stared at the tragic bundle. In a little while, they'd pick up Hetty, and send her to decent repose. Meanwhile, it was lucky that they'd got out fast, for once again they were unidentifiable among New York's slinking, wary millions.

Short of sheer chance, or the aid of a dupe, they were as difficult to pick out as individual bees in a mighty swarm. There was perfect parallelism in an imaginary revolt of the bees. The same elusiveness would protect from superior mankind the few intellectual insects who were seeking a means of replacing formic acid with Black Widow venom. If it came to that, they were bees—bees whose honey was not for others!

He said to Wohl, "*Two* brought me down?" His steady gaze shifted to the four standing near, and two of them fidgeted uneasily. "What of the other four—were they killed?"

"A couple of them were." One of the fidgeting pair swallowed hard, went on, "Bathurst and Craig stuck behind."

"Why?"

"There were no dupes left, but the luminosities were entering. Bathurst and Craig hung back, and—" His voice trailed off.

"Decoyed them, knowing there could be no escape?" asked Graham. The other nodded assent.

Two had stayed behind to attract the still invincible but overeager foe; to run and shriek and shriek and die—or become dupes. They had raced higher in the building, knowing that they would never reach the top, but knowing that by the time their frantic minds were seized and picked the others would be safely merged in the mass of humanity.

It was a sacrifice made for him. There was no comment Graham could make that would not sound fatuous, and he knew that none was asked, or expected. Two Intelligence operatives had performed their duty as they deemed it—and that was that!

RUBBING HIS throbbing left arm, he felt the thin bandage beneath the sleeve. A mere flesh wound.

"You two," he said, selecting a pair, "beat it out to Yonkers, and tell Steve Koenig to concentrate on five centimeters. Get to him as soon as you can, taking different routes." He turned to the remaining couple. "Marconi's have moved their plant to the industrial caverns at Queens end of the underground city. Rush along and tell Deacon we believe five centimeter installations will be required."

"Yes, Mr. Graham," answered one.

"Tell him he's faithfully to follow these instructions immediately he receives news of any experimenters' success: he's to protect his own plant with his first production, then he's to protect the station from which he draws his power. After that, he can supply to official requisitions. But remember, he must supply no transmitters until he's covered his own plant and the power station, understand?"

"Sure, Mr. Graham!" They dashed out hard on the heels of the first pair.

Grimness was in the set of his jaw when he turned to Wohl, remarking, "If

we find a way to turn out suitable weapons, we're not going to have them destroyed at their source."

"That's logical," Wohl agreed. He cocked a questioning eye. "You've got something, Bill?"

"Yes—I found the detail for which Hetty's mind had been directed to seek. Undoubtedly, the luminosities intended to suck her knowledge as she acquired it." He ripped a dangling pocketflap from his tattered jacket, scowled at it, flung it away. "If possible, she was to discover the location of any experimenters working on five centimeters. Had she been able to depict them in an identifiable way, they'd have been smeared around."

"Gosh!" Wohl's expression was a frank mixture of glee and admiration. "And that's what you dived in to get? The Vitons might just as well have told us themselves!"

"They did," was Graham's succinct reply. "They informed us by proxy." He frowned, looked at his watch. "We've to carry on from this point, getting results within a few precious hours. Polarization's the trouble—we're dealing with short radio waves, not ordinary light."

"Never mind," Wohl comforted. "So far, we've done fine. Every cloud has a silver lining."

"We'll have to see that silver damn quick, else it'll come too—" He stopped, rubbed his pulsing arm, stared at the other. "Silver might do it. The problem's been one of refraction versus reflection, but silver might do it. There's a chance that we'd get spiral impulses if the beam could be bounced off a silver plate—especially if we use a Berkstrom magnetic-field impeller to cut down absorption."

"You bet!" Wohl's grin was apologetic. "It ought to work. I get the idea so clearly I could see it with my ears in a dungeon next month."

"The odd chance in a thousand," murmured Graham, ignoring his friend's humor. "If Laurie hasn't thought up something better, it'd be worth trying." He ceased to nurse his injuries, became suddenly dynamic. "Jump to it, Art—we're going back to Laurie."

A HUNDRED skilled craftsmen toiled and sweated inside the huge Faraday shed. They had been commandeered from various local radio and scientific instrument works, and every man knew his stuff so well that Laurie and his little band could concentrate unhampered on their own special jobs.

Valuable hours of nonstop work were represented by the compact but complicated apparatus which glistened and shone in the center of the littered floor. Long, slender tubes sparkled in the assembly's heart; cylindrical screening covers projected from the turntable framework beneath which were a dozen rubber-tired wheels. At one side, a black box spewed a thick cable that snaked across the floor toward the power plant.

Here, a worker bent over a true-surfaced metal disk, plated it by wire-process metallization. While his electric arc sputtered its shower of molten drops, another worker at his side plated another disk with powdered silver bypassed into an exoacetylene flame and blown onto the preheated surface. Any method would do so long as there was somebody capable of doing it, and doing it properly.

Another worker was burnishing a heavily plated disk on a confiscated buffing machine. Behind him, one of Laurie's experts was completing assembly of a trellis antenna. Two more scientists fussed around a great, horizontal shaft; one fitting front and rear sights to its upper surface, the other making last minute adjustments to the complex impeller.

Two hours to go!

Graham came up to Laurie, waved a

paper in his hand. "News from Philly, received by ham radio. Veitch's nearly completed apparatus was blown to pieces this morning."

"Ah!" Laurie's bushy brows drew together in a frown. "If he was on the right track, then we're on the wrong one."

"Not necessarily. Veitch had a dupe in his crowd. We warned him, and he said he'd kid the fellow along. He didn't want to remove him in case he was promptly replaced by another. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't."

"The dupe did it?"

"Yes," answered Graham. "Killing himself in the blast. A couple of others are wounded." He looked meditative. "I'd have phoned Veitch before now if it hadn't been that all his lines were strictly reserved for outgoing traffic. He ought to have been ready first, since he had stuff transported from Florida, and it needed only reassembling."

"Hm-m-m! Any other news?"

"Only that Sangster's been located. I was worried about him. They found him in an underground hospital. He was in William Street when that big section of skyway collapsed. He'll recover."

LEAVING LAURIE, he visited the open space outside the shed. Here, in the middle of the cleared area, was a ring of copper earths, all ready to connect with the multiple condensers of the transmitter's intricate grounding system.

A parade of tiny blue dots wended its eerie way far to the east, somewhere over Long Island. Graham's eyes gleamed as he watched them, then he returned his gaze to the earths, wondered whether even this efficient system would absorb the terrific shock imposed upon it by a vengeful enemy. He doubted it.

Behind the transmitter's intended site was a pit, its six-inch lining of sprayed-on, quick-drying cement diving into the depths like a gigantic pipe. There was a slide-pole down its middle.

One man was going to operate the transmitter. If he could do it, that man was going to save himself from the holocaust that success would surely bring by plunging down the shaft, and into the ebon depths.

Returning, he asked Laurie, "How long?"

"Fifteen minutes." Laurie mopped his damp and anxious brow. "We'll be ready in fifteen minutes. If it works, we'll have parts ready for ten more assemblies." He waved a hand to indicate the bustling crowd. "And providing we don't get slaughtered, we'll fling them together in a couple of hours."

"No you won't." Graham's contradiction was stern. "You're going to rush those spares away right now. This place is liable to be tossed moonward, and the spares had better be at a safe distance during the showdown." Finding a microphone, he chattered into it rapidly.

Three minutes later, a line of lorries swung before the doors, each picking up its load, then lumbering heavily away. Workers departed in silent groups, leaving behind a shop cleared of all but the apparatus shining in the center of the floor. A quartet of scientists hurried to complete various connections.

"I don't fancy," said Graham, in slow, deliberate tones, "handling a trick circuit jumping the power line to the impeller switch." The concentrated venom with which he spoke appalled his hearers.

The man he had addressed, a wizened, monkeyish individual, dropped a thin cable, felt casually in his pocket as if seeking a pair of pliers.

Graham shot him where he poised, the powerful, point-blank blast fairly flinging the fellow backward. While Laurie and the rest stood pale-faced, gasping, Art Wohl stepped unconcern-

edly to the body, felt in the pocket, held up a small, egg-shaped object.

"Holy smoke, a bomb! He'd have shredded us along with the apparatus!"

"Never mind. Take it away, Art, and dump it somewhere safe." Graham transferred his attention to Laurie. "Check the circuit over, Duncan. See if the output's O. K., and then we'll run it out, and tie it to those earths."

HE HAD an argument with Wohl ten minutes later. Graham was sitting high up in the assembly, the power, impeller, elevator, and turntable controls within easy reach. A dull, cloudy sky was heavy overhead. Sirens wailed dismally in the distance.

"Beat it, Art," he ordered. "There are Vitons over there." He pointed to a string of glowing balls drifting from the north. "And there's a Yellow raid due. I can't sit here and debate with you. Follow Laurie and the others—I'll give you one minute to get clear."

"But—" began Wohl protestingly.

"Scram!" roared Graham in a frantic voice.

He watched Wohl slouch miserably away, gave him exactly one minute's grace. Before him as he waited, the shaft projected like the barrel of a monster gun. The approaching luminosities were now only a mile distant.

Wide-sighted eyes searched the angry sky as he mused through Wohl's minute. The origin of the Vitons would never be known. Their existence was as much a mystery as that of pneumacocci, poodles, or any other form of life. But it was his pet theory that they were native to Earth, and it was also his hunch that they were about to be wiped off Earth forever.

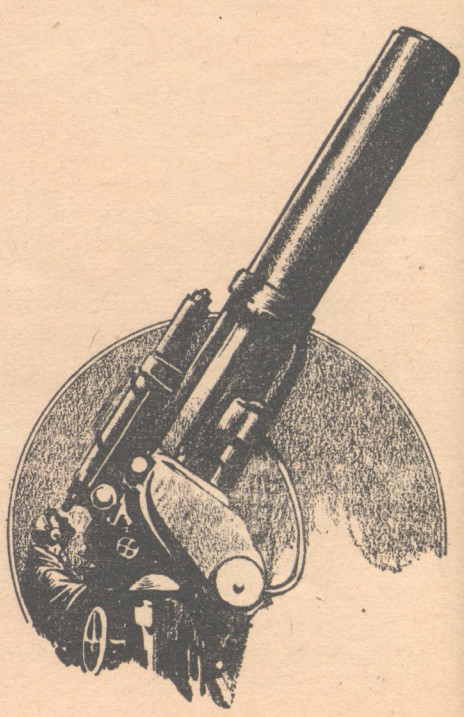
The minute was up. He swung the great barrel, lined it on the advancing orbs. The whole assembly spun smoothly on its turntable frame. He heard power being made by the snoring generators in the nearby shed, and noted that the time was ninety minutes from Europe's fateful deadline. Snapping a switch, he let power pour through.

A few seconds' pause while lighted tubes warmed up. Over there, in strategic posts ten or twelve floors high, distant observers stared through field glasses that trembled in excited hands.

The five-centimeter beam fountained upward and into the shaft, struck the angled reflector, fled outward, its strength maintained and its rebound sharpened by the impeller. The axis of its whirling impulses was parallel with the sights lined upon the unwary Vitons.

This frequency lay beyond even the artificial sight, and the beam could not be seen. But its effect was startlingly visible. The leading luminosity of a string of ten turned deeper in color, almost instantaneously switched to a brilliant orange, then popped into nothingness.

Its nine followers wavered undecidedly, and another raced through the



dark blue-orange-obliteration cycle before the rest scattered. They shot into the clouds.

Somebody was bellowing like a mad bull as Graham elevated the tube, and caught a third in full flight. Somebody howled an idiotic remark about it being more sporting to get 'em on the wing.

With the tail of his eye, he saw an enormous gout of yellow-white flame vomit from the general area of Broadway, and he knew that the air raid announced by sirens had commenced. His lips closed firmly, the strange bellowing ceased, and he realized that he had been bawling himself hoarse.

Some sixth sense—probably his extra-sensory perception—made him whirl his tube around. He spun dizzily in his seat behind the impeller casing, caught a line of spheres bulleting from the south.

He started yelling again as the leader changed color, and the following orbs crashed headlong into their stricken fellow.

"One for Mayo! One for Webb! One for Beach, you dirty, stinking, parasitic gobs of Heaven-knows-what! Another for Farmiloe, and the whole damn lot of you for Bjornsen!"

HE CEASED his insane howls, watched the results of the aërial collision. For the space of a single heartbeat, the wildly swirling conglomeration of energy maintained spherical form in the astounded sky. Then it exploded with a terrible, tearing roar.

Displaced air almost tore Graham from his precarious seat, while the entire apparatus wrenched at its fastenings, and groaned. Fierce rays struck him like vicious sunburn, but he ignored them completely.

He couldn't keep quiet, he wouldn't keep quiet. This was the end of the trail, this was his lone half hour, and, above all, *this was retribution.* He whooped like a charging Sioux when he deftly erected his deadly shaft, blasted two scintillating menaces dropping upon him from directly above.

Now it was clear how they'd set off those tanks at Silver City. A dozen of them, or twenty, or perhaps fifty, had committed suicide. They had plunged into the tanks, merging as they struck, and that merging destroyed their natural balance.

That silver nitrate had received a hammer blow from a great clot of raving energy mighty enough to cause molecular disruption. And that great black finger pointing from Silver City had been a monstrous column of maddened atoms, seeking new unions as they splashed upward.

Whirling again, he threw a free sample of hell at a swooping sextet, saw them dispel their energy in visible frequencies, and cease to be. These things could afford to be nonchalant about stuff coming at them along Lissajous' complicated path, for such could be pushed away. But not hyperbolic; *that* corkscrewed into their very guts!

There was a mighty horde of luminosities collecting on the extreme limit of the north horizon. He tried to reach them, found he was unable to discern any result, concluded that they might be beyond range. More man-made volcanoes belched in the east, fast streaks of color pierced the sky, ended in crimson blooms between which tiny, winged specks rocked and dived.

He thought of America's grounded air fleet, ten thousand machines that dare not ascend so long as there were luminosities to take control of pilots' minds, and set one against the other. That was going to be altered pretty soon. Fast, efficient machines were going to darken the sky, while below them people spoke the sweetest word of any man's war—"Ours!"

So far, he'd wiped out only the reckless or unwary, but now they knew their danger. A mass attack was about to

be made, an attack in which the luminosities would demonstrate once and for all the fullness of their united power. They'd bullet toward him in battalions, in numbers far greater than he could slaughter. The end was near, but it had been a great run.

Searching the sky, he saw more Yellow strat-planes zooming eastward. Brilliant flashes shimmered beneath them. He wondered whether the fanatical pilots had witnessed the fate of their supposed ancestral spirits, concluded that they had not.

The news ought to have got around by now. It would be all over the New World, and probably Europe had full details. Europe could hold on, knowing that victory was only a matter of time rather than doubt. Maybe one of the other groups had also succeeded. Anyway, it didn't matter—this success was the white world's triumph.

He ceased pondering when the faraway horde soared upward. They were a blue myriad, a veritable army whose numbers filled the northern sky with a panorama of glowing horror. The speed of their advance was almost incredible.

A patch in the enemy's center darkened, went orange, puffed out even as Graham prepared himself for the onslaught. It had him puzzled for a moment, then he remembered—Yonkers.

"Good old Steve!" he roared. "He's done it! Give 'em hell, Steve!"

Shooting power along, he sprayed the rapidly swelling horde. Blue switched to blinding brilliancy, was mixed. An untouched section detached, fell headlong upon Yonkers, some changing color as they fell.

The rest shot vengefully toward Graham. He knew what was going to happen, sensed it from the way in which they drew closer together as they sped along. Up to the last moment he let them have it, canceling them wholesale with furious words and lethal impulses. Then, as they plummeted suicidally, he reached the pit in four frantic leaps, slid down.

Ghastly, glowing blue undulated and wavered in the shaft as he dropped at breath-taking speed. The whole sky had become a bowl of glossy azure. Then, abruptly, it flamed with the fires of fundamental hell. A brain-searing roar as of the cosmos being ripped to tatters smashed into his eardrums. The slide pole danced like a juggler's wand.

Helplessly, he was flicked off the pole, fell into shaking depths. Earth, stones, lumps of concrete poured after him in deathly rain. Something bigger and blacker than the rest fell ponderously through general blackness, struck dully on yielding flesh.

Graham emitted a long, faint sigh. His mind was a boat of funereal ebony, sailing upon a sooty sea beneath a starless sky.

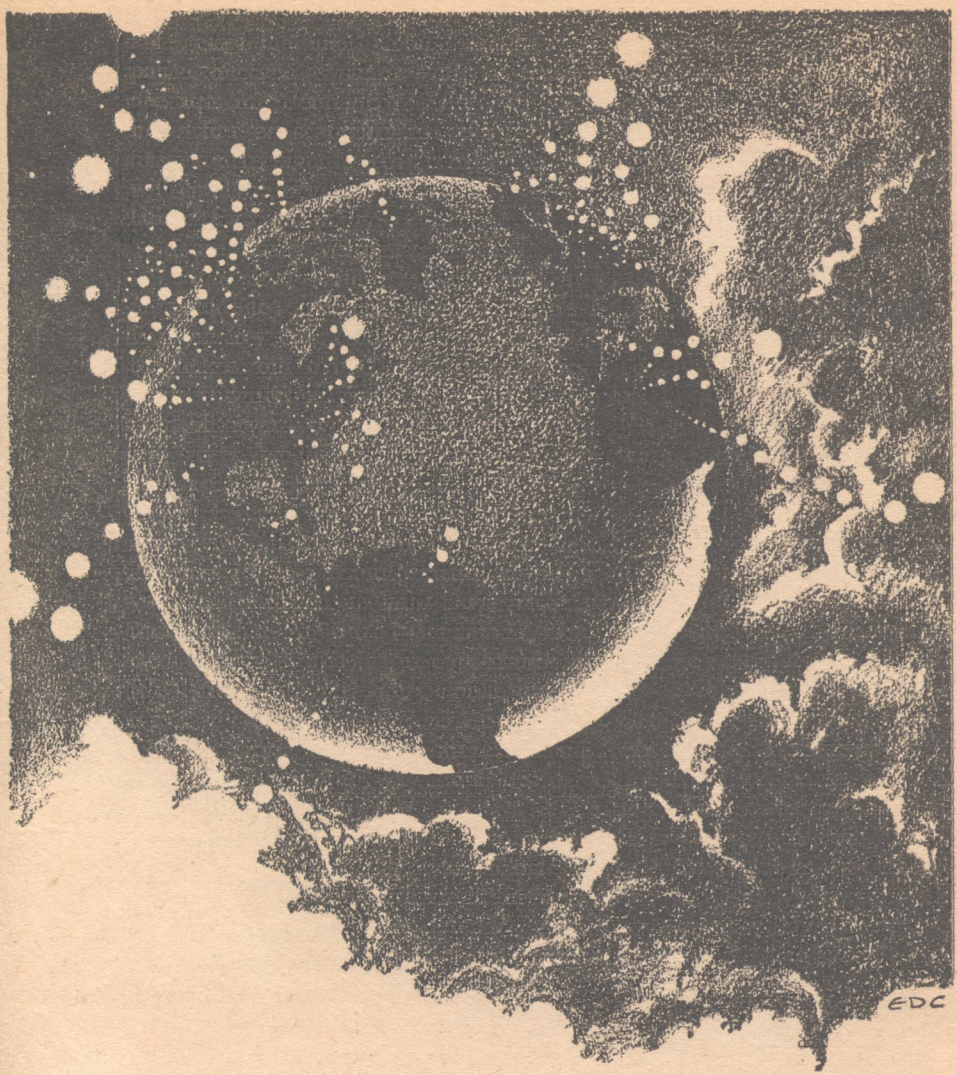
IT WAS very comfortable in bed. So very comfortable, thought Graham, that the illusion was well worth preserving. He turned his head, felt sharp pain lance through it, opened his eyes.

Yes, he really was in bed. Well, what d'you know about that? Amazedly, he surveyed a white sheet, studied a picture on the opposite wall. Then he heard a chair creak, looked toward the source of the sound, discovered Wohl's broad-shouldered figure.

"Good evening, Rip van Winkle," greeted Wohl, with unctuous politeness. He indicated a clock and a calendar. "It's ten in the evening of Thursday. For three days you've been deaf, dumb, dopy, and doubled up."

"Is that so?" Graham's snort was a little less fiery than of yore. Struggling upward, he propped himself on one elbow, ignored his throbbing cranium. "Get me my rags, Art—we're going places."

"Nothing doing." Wohl's broad hand pressed him gently backward. "This is one time when I give the orders, and



you take 'em." He made the declaration with friendly relish, and went on: "Those luminosities devastated an area a mile wide, killed many observers. It took us twelve hours to locate your funk hole, and dig up the lump of cat meat that was you. So lie down and be at peace, while Uncle Art tells you some bedtime stories."

Producing a newspaper, he opened it, gave a brief résumé of the day's events, reading in a voice that fairly gloated.

"Mayor Sullivan says city now adequately protected. Electra's hundred makes new high for one day's transmitter output. Two more enemy stratflights land at Battery Park and surrender." He glanced at his listener, and remarked: "That's merely local stuff. An awful lot has happened while you were snoring blissfully on."

"Humph!" Graham felt peeved. "What about Koenig?"

"He lost two operators when Yonkers took it on the chin. The rest are all right." Wohl reversed his paper. "Listen to this," he invited. " 'Nebraska line straightened, and big push commenc-

ing. Rebellion in Yellow ranks as first transmitters reach front and destroy overhead luminosities. Pacifist Yellows seize Chungking University, start manufacture of anti-Viton beams. Europe pressing eastward rapidly. Washington considering Yellow offer of armistice and aid in wiping out luminosities.'" He leaned toward Graham, his face alight. "The war's as good as over, thanks to you."

"Nuts," said Graham sourly. "Get me those clothes, Art."

Wohl came to his feet, started in mock horror. "You look real bad, Bill. By heavens, you look awful! I guess you need a doctor." He moved toward the door.

"Don't play the fool," shouted Graham. He sat up hurriedly, winced, felt tenderly at his head, his left arm, his ribs. "Fetch me those clothes before I get out and paste you one. I'm beating it from here."

"You don't know what's good for you," reproved Wohl from the doorway. "You're in the Samaritan, you know!"

"Ah!" Graham promptly lay flat. Grinning broadly, he produced a hollow groan. "I feel terrible, Art. Maybe I'm dying. Go fetch me a doctor."

"I said you wanted one, didn't I?" Wohl's knowing leer split his face in half as he dashed out.

She came in presently, and it pleased Graham immensely to notice that her usual tranquillity was replaced by the vaguest touch of shyness.

Taking her cool hand, he told her: "I'm glad you're safe. This place was so much frequented by luminosities that I was afraid they'd get you sometime."

"We got protection the moment you were brought in," she informed.

"Eh?" Surprise filled his features. "I gave strict instructions that the first assemblies were for the plants who'd made them. Hospitals came last."

"You were overruled."

"Who by?" he asked indignantly.

"The president." She smiled at his astonishment. "You've done fine, Bill, really fine."

"You helped," he asserted. "You tipped me about Beach, and therapy cabinets, and Farmiloe. We'll still have been chasing shadows but for you." He glanced at her, went on: "When we've settled with the Yellows, and wiped out the last emotion-sucking orb, there'll be only the dupes to sort out. That'll be an easy job—they can't dodge around in a world more rational than it has ever been for centuries."

She made no reply, but gazed through the window at a serene evening sky. Stars shone brightly in a velvet bowl no longer marred by balls of glowing ghastliness.

Following her gaze, he said: "See, Harmony, the stars! Maybe there are people up there, people of flesh and blood, friendly people who'd have visited us long ago but for a Viton ban. Hans Luther believed they'd been told to keep off the grass."

"It is possible," she conceded. The brightness of her smile was mostly in her eyes.

"If that is true," Bill Graham persisted, "we've not only been fodder in our own garden, but Earth's green fields have been forbidden acres to the rest of the cosmos, fenced by the sinister barrier of the Vitons' powers." He sat up with unexpected vigor, his voice suddenly strong, confident. "Well, from now on we're going to do our own permitting and forbidding!" Then he looked masterfully at her hair, her face, her lips. "All except you."

"Me?" she said, startled.

"Yes," he declared with the air of one prepared to brook no opposition. "I'm going to kiss you, and you're not to forbid me."

She didn't, either.

THE END.

WHO WANTS POWER?

BY MONA FARNSWORTH

WHO WANTS POWER?

At least Cuthbert didn't want the power he couldn't get rid of.

THE hot Egyptian sun beat down out of a metal-blue sky—but under it Cuthbert shivered as with a chill. He clamped his teeth to keep them from chattering and he leaned weakly against the heap of rocks and sand that had been thrown up from the excavation. For the first time in his life he thanked God that he was small, and completely inconspicuous.

From the depths of the excavation he saw the men coming up, and he recognized the bundle they carried; the folds upon folds of dirt-brown mummy wrappings, loose as he had left them when he'd laid them back.

Cuthbert closed his eyes. He didn't want to look at it—didn't want to think about it. He was still dazed, shaken, from the shock, and he hadn't yet dared touch the thin, elaborately jeweled case that he could feel heavy in his pocket. If the power packed in that case still functioned after these four thousand years— Cuthbert shivered.

And a voice said: "Your report about this mummy, Cuthbert? Your findings?"

Something seemed to jump in the pit of Cuthbert's stomach. The feeling ran down into his wrists and ankles. He took a deep breath, pulling it by sheer force of will deep into his lungs. The action steadied him and his mind cleared a little above the mist of fear that fogged it. He realized suddenly that there was, under the circumstances, only one thing he could do. He pulled himself erect so that he was no longer leaning, weak-kneed, against the heap of rock. He turned and looked up at the towering bulk of Dr. Jedediah Gill.

Dr. Gill was head of the expedition. He was a good foot taller than Cuthbert and his red spade beard seemed to lend a fierce glare to his blue eyes. Cuthbert had always stood a good deal in awe of him—but at this moment Cuthbert stood in awe of nothing, save the jeweled case in his pocket and the terror that gripped him. So he looked Dr. Gill straight in the eye and said flatly:

"There's nothing in the least unusual to report, sir, about the mummy. His name was Ta Rankanem and he lived from the year 2864 BC to the year 2832—"

"Only thirty-two years old when he died? A young man. And you have no idea—"

"Why he should have died so young?" said Cuthbert hastily. "No, sir. None. And now, if you please, sir, I'd like to know—" But Dr. Gill wouldn't leave the subject.

"Doesn't it strike you as curious, Cuthbert," he persisted, "that a man, buried as elaborately as this one, should have with him no record, no information as to the sort of life he lived, his occupation, his family, his—"

"No record was found, Dr. Gill," said Cuthbert firmly. "No record of any kind." And at the risk of appearing rude he turned away. He felt he couldn't stand much more of this close questioning. His nerves were ragged, and if, driven, he said one thing too much— But Dr. Gill called him back.

"LOOK HERE, Cuthbert," he said, "I don't wish to . . . er . . . doubt your word. Nothing like that. Not in the least. But—I mean to say, rather, that there is something about this affair that strikes me as curious in the extreme. I will confess that I had hoped a great deal from this . . . er . . . tomb. It was hidden so carefully and with such an obvious desire for secrecy.

Even after we discovered the tomb it was another labor to find where the sarcophagus lay. You remember at one time we decided the tomb must have been robbed and that—"

"Yes, sir," said Cuthbert, and wished heartily that it had been robbed. Except that, if this thing he had discovered had fallen, perhaps, into other hands— He shuddered and dragged his mind back.

The doctor was saying: "As far as direct records are concerned, Cuthbert, it is in no way necessary for you, with your gifts, to limit yourself to them. That is why . . . er . . . as you well know, you were included in this . . . er . . . expedition."

"Yes, sir," said Cuthbert. He tried to edge away. He could see where this line of reasoning would end and he—

"Of course," said Dr. Gill, "there are people who feel strongly that you should never have come with us. They feel that you are not qualified to work with a group of men so highly trained and experienced as the other members of this expedition—"

"Yes, sir. I realize—I mean, I am quite appreciative of the honor—" Cuthbert tried hastily to get off one of his little short, quick bows. "If you will excuse me now, there are some matters—" But Dr. Gill went on smoothly:

"There are even those people, my dear Cuthbert, who have gone so far as to suggest that the reports you send in to us regarding the personal experiences, the individual reactions, so to speak, which these mummies have experienced during life are, in fact, the purest figment of your imagination."

"Oh, no, sir!" Cuthbert's mind whipped around. He forgot the jeweled case weighing down his pocket. He forgot the fear that was a crawling chill. He forgot everything except the one fact that his professional standing had been questioned. He moved over till he was close to the doctor, his pale eyes looking up earnestly into the blazing depths of that red beard.

"You know that isn't true, sir!" His voice shook with emotion. "You know—I have proven it over and over again—that, without the shadow of a doubt, I can tell you all about any mummy that was ever dug up. There is something about it— I mean, I can't explain it, but there it is. Call it a kind of clairvoyance or . . . or a sort of archæological mind reading or . . . oh, call it anything you like. But I can do it. Why, I've proved it so many times! Look at that one we dug up last month. I told you his name was Tokanses. I told you he had been nothing but a water carrier, and that he had been mummified and buried so magnificently because he had saved the life of a boy baby belonging to the eldest daughter of the ruling Pharaoh. And when we found the records—"

"They were just as you said," the doctor nodded. "And it is experiences such as that which have caused us to have faith in you, Cuthbert."

"Exactly," said Cuthbert in triumph. "And what I did with that mummy I can do with any mummy. Why, there isn't a mummy that's ever been buried that—"

"So?" said Dr. Gill. He moved a little on the balls of his feet, and his eyes, looking down at Cuthbert through the tangle of red hair, were suddenly icy-sharp. "And that would bring us, wouldn't it, to the matter of our latest find, Ta Rankanem, you said his name was, I believe—about whom you tell me you have learned nothing. Now how is it, Cuthbert—"

CUTHBERT felt his eyes stretch wide and staring. Small cold particles congealed along his spine and it seemed as if something slimy crawled across his shoulder blades. Fool! Dr. Gill had laid a neat trap and he, Cuthbert, had walked straight into it. What could

he do now? What could he say? If he persisted in his story that there was no report to make about the mummy, Dr. Gill might lose faith in him completely, and he, Cuthbert, might lose his job as consequence. But if he told Dr. Gill the truth— Cuthbert took a breath and plunged desperately.

"I— You are too keen for me, doctor," he stammered. "I . . . I must admit that I had hoped to keep the . . . the findings concerning this mummy to myself for a little while. They are . . . er . . . most remarkable. But . . . I mean, in fact, that they are so remarkable that I feel I must investigate a bit further before I make a definite report. So I beg you—" He edged closer and his voice sank to a whisper. "Would it be possible for you to . . . to lend me your support in this matter? If you could just give me a few hours—say, until tomorrow morning—then I— Could it be done, sir?"

Dr. Gill said nothing. He rocked his huge frame gently back and forth on the balls of his feet, and his red beard moved a little as if the lips behind it were being chewed. He made no effort to hide his thoughts, and Cuthbert could read the doubt and suspicion right there, flat in his blue eyes.

"I'm sorry, sir—" he began, but the doctor cut in.

"Sorry," he snapped. "This is nothing to be sorry about. If you have a report to make, make it. If you haven't, don't ask for an extra twelve hours in which to concoct one! You know quite well where to find me when you want me." And he was gone, striding off through the sand and the heat before Cuthbert could move.

CUTHBERT didn't want to move. He wanted to be alone somewhere where he could think. But, after he had wandered off till he was completely hidden by the crouching sand dunes, he found thinking difficult. Badgered by the shock, and his ragged nerves, his mind simply refused to function. And the talk with Gill had made everything just that much worse. In addition to all the rest of it, now his job, his reputation and even his honesty were being called into question. And what could he do about it?

Cuthbert wriggled into a more comfortable position on the hot sand. He must try to think this thing through. Now suppose, for the sake of argument, that he was to tell the truth. Suppose he was to go to Dr. Gill and say: "Look here, doctor, I can tell you all about that mummy we dug up today. I know all about him. Some things, I know, you'll find out when you unwrap him and some you won't. You'll find out, for example, that he was killed by being torn to pieces. The mob did that, and they did it because—

"No," Cuthbert said out loud. "No! I can't do it. That's all. I can't. Why, Gill would either think I was a damn fool or else he'd insist upon proof. And the only proof I could offer would be—" He felt that same cold chill crawling over him again. But this time he tried to get the best of it. He took the jeweled case right out of his pocket and stared at the thing. Nothing happened. And Cuthbert felt an instantaneous wave of relief wash over him. Maybe he was being a crazy fool about this thing. Maybe there was nothing in it, after all.

He examined the case more closely, turning and twisting it in his hands. It was gold, thin, and while it was obviously a case and apparently empty, it was finished on all sides so that no clasp, no opening, no crack of any kind was visible. So, thought Cuthbert, even in four thousand years, whatever had been packed into it shouldn't have leaked out.

But maybe, in spite of that, it had leaked out. He shook it a little. The jewels winked in the sunlight, but nothing else happened. Cuthbert grinned.

He relaxed for the first time in hours. He certainly had been a fool, working himself into a temperature over this thing. And there was nothing to it, after all.

The best thing he could do would be to go right back to Dr. Gill and say: "Look here, doctor, those early Egyptians were sure a superstitious lot. Why, they actually killed this Ta Rankanem because they thought he possessed some crazy power that could pull gravity from any person or object; you know, so that the victim would fly right up into nowhere. For instance, they believed he could just wave this case like this and right away everything in sight would float off. Even"—Cuthbert grinned and waved his hand toward the horizon—"even the pyramids and the sphinx would—"

He stopped. Something gripped his chest, squeezing it. He stared. It wasn't happening. It couldn't happen. It was the refraction of light across the desert at this time of day. It was his imagination. It was— But it wasn't. And Cuthbert knew it wasn't. It was no trick of vision. It was fact. The pyramids and the sphinx were rising. Already there was a clear strip of sky between their bases and the gray sand below.

"Oh, my God!" Cuthbert ran forward. He stumbled. He gained his balance, waved the glittering case and yelled:

"Stop! For Heaven's sake—" He wavered, stared, sank slowly down. He was cold and shaking—but it was the weakness of relief. The pyramids were coming down.

Cuthbert sat still and closed his eyes. Gradually his panic ebbed and his thoughts came clear. It was true, then. All he had received, in wave upon wave of intuitive understanding, from the mummy of Ta Rankanem was true. This jeweled case which he still held in his hand—this power—

"Good God!" whispered Cuthbert. "It could tear the earth apart. It could— Why, nothing's safe. It might even send me— Uh-h-h-h!" The breath pulled out of his lungs. Panic snapped at him. The pit of his stomach heaved and shifted.

HE STARED down. The desert, the sand upon which he had been sitting, was falling slowly away from him. He was rising, drifting, rocking a little from side to side—like a boat, loosed from its anchor and just beginning to feel the swell of the tide. In a minute, he got much higher, and if a breeze caught him—

"Get me down!" He waved the shining case, gripping it in straining, white-tipped fingers. Great guns! If he should drop the thing—if he should be unable to get himself back— "Down!" he yelled. "Get me down. I want to go— Ugh!" The desert swooped up toward him. He crashed into it, his breath gone, his body bruised—but he was safe. For a moment he crouched, huddled, against the side of a dune. He wanted to burrow into it; to feel its warm, hard security all around him. He wanted to lie flat down and grip the earth tight in his curling fingers, never to let it go—never—never—

"You're a fool, Cuthbert," he said out loud to himself. "A blubbering fool. You're letting this thing get you. You're losing your head. Now pull yourself together and—" And what? What should he do? What could he do? He looked at the dazzling case still clutched in his hand. He made, suddenly, a swift gesture to throw it away. But instantly he caught himself. Throw it away—and not know what became of it? Throw it away and run the risk of having it fall into other hands? Perhaps have someone find it who was malicious or vindictive—or even merely mischievous. Suppose a man given to practical joking found it

and by some accident of thought discovered its power. Cuthbert shuddered and hastily stuffed the thing into his own pocket.

So now what? He worked himself down till he felt he was packed securely into the sand. "And a lot of good that would do," he thought bitterly, "if this thing really started to pull the gravity out of— No! No! I don't want— I mean, I'm not suggesting—" But there the danger was. As long as he had this case on his person, if he thought of anything—maybe if he so much as looked at anything—

Cuthbert closed his eyes; made his mind a blank. But it wouldn't remain a blank. Thoughts emerged, announced themselves and began moving before he seemed able to do much about it. And if he should, accidentally, think of the wrong thing— Suppose, for instance, he were to imagine the world flying—

"No! No!" gasped Cuthbert. Good grief! Had that been his imagination or had the earth, for just that second, really lost its balance? Cuthbert wasn't sure and he didn't dare think about it.

But something had to be done—he couldn't stay here huddled in the sand indefinitely. The sun was nearly down. It was getting along toward dinner time. Cuthbert hadn't eaten since breakfast and he was hungry. He pulled himself up. If he kept his hands out of his pockets so he wouldn't be apt to touch that case, and if he really determined to think of something far removed from—well, far removed *from*—then he'd be all right.

He started off plodding through the sand. He rounded a rolling dune and there was the excavation, looking deserted and lonely in the last long rays of the setting sun. Dr. Gill and his men had gone long since; the workmen had folded up and departed—and the only sign of life remaining was the ancient rattletrap Ford that Cuthbert drove out in the morning and drove back again to Cairo at night.

He climbed into it gratefully. The feel of it brought comfort. It was so commonplace, so prosaic. It made the experiences of the last two hours seem so fantastic as to be utterly impossible. And perhaps it all had been utterly impossible. Who was Cuthbert to say? He sat at the wheel and turned the thought over in his mind. How could he be sure the things that had seemed to happen had really happened? How could he be sure it hadn't all been a dream? That would be quite possible. He had been admittedly tired; he had been very upset over the bawling out Dr. Gill had given him, and he had been nervously ragged over the shock of what he had supposed he'd learned from the mummy. So what more natural than that he should fall asleep and dream—

He grinned slowly. He'd bet a nickel that was the explanation of the whole thing. He fished the case again from his pocket. The sun had set now and the quick darkness of the desert had dropped like a soft curtain. But by the silver light of the stars and the glow of the rising moon Cuthbert could make out the glinting jewels.

AND HE FOUND, surprisingly, that he was a little sorry the thing hadn't the power that he'd dreamed it had. He began to realize, suddenly, that if it had been real he might have made a good deal of intelligent use of it. He might have studied it, experimented—cautiously, of course—and in the end—Why, look, he could have cornered the world's flying industry, for instance. Because who would pay exorbitant prices for airplanes when all that had to be done was to get Cuthbert to wave his jeweled case and anything from one man to a warehouse of supplies could be made to fly independently. Of course, he would have had to discover some way of controlling it; guiding whatever went

up so it would reach a destination and not just drift off. But that probably would have proved reasonably simple, and think how it would have transformed industry.

And not only industry—it could have been harnessed for private use as well. Suppose, at this moment, that the dreamed-of power was real, Cuthbert would be able to turn this old rattletrap Ford into an airplane so that, loosed from the pull of gravity, it would float off—

But heck, he'd better get back to dinner. He was getting so gosh-darned hungry— He shoved down the starter; shoved down the gas; shoved down the clutch. Something whirred. It kept on whirring, but nothing else happened. There was no pull, no feel of grip from the wheels. Darn the thing! Could he have run out of gas? Cuthbert leaned over to see the gauge—and the car rocked gently and turned half over.

"Ugh!" Cuthbert grabbed hold of the door frame—and turned to ice. Far below him spread the tumbled floor of the desert and above him the stars winked jeeringly. Cuthbert pulled in his head and shoulders; he moved carefully till his weight had again balanced the sailing car. Then he sat still. He was cold and shaking. Perspiration that felt like trickling ice water was running down his spine. But he gripped his hands, one against the other, and tried to make himself think.

The thing had been no dream. It was real. The power was his. But why— Then he saw the answer. He had only taken the pull of gravity from the car. He, his own body, still was subject to the law. So, as he shifted his body, it rocked the anchorless car. And if— Then, if he was still gravitized, all he had to do was jump over the side of the car and let it sail away alone.

Cuthbert peered down, the car lurched, and he dodged back again. A good thousand feet to fall. Spots danced before his eyes and the top of his head felt as if it was spinning.

But he pulled himself together. Wasn't this the chance he'd wanted? Now if he could just find a way to control this thing— He pulled at the steering wheel; he experimented with the gears; he moved, throwing his weight cautiously till the car leaned—but nothing altered its course because it had no course. It was drifting. It was subject to no laws, so it would continue to drift. On—and on—and on—

"Forever!" yelled Cuthbert. "This thing's going on forever! It'll never stop. It'll never land anywhere. And with me in it— Oh, get me down! Get me back! I want to go down! Down! Down!"

He landed with a terrific crash. The car smashed to matchwood. But Cuthbert, miraculously unhurt, crawled out of the wreckage without even looking at it. He crawled out and he kept on crawling. He felt safer where he could feel the earth with his knees and the palms of his hands. Safer! He'd never feel safe again. Anywhere he went in the world— He shuddered. He lay down flat on the sand, clutching at it helplessly. A great passion for the earth swept over him. He knew he loved it more than mortal man had ever loved anything before. Just the earth. Just the feeling of solid security that poured through him from its touch.

"Dear God," he whispered, "don't let me lose it again. Just let me keep my feet close on the ground—" But praying wouldn't help. Cuthbert knew it wouldn't. He rose slowly to his feet—and relief washed over him. A tree, a curving palm tree—the one thing in the world—

"Even if I think of its going up," Cuthbert whispered, "it can't go. Its roots will hold it no matter what I think!" He ran toward it, leaned against it. It felt even better than the earth. He found himself patting it, fondling

it, leaning with one arm firmly around it.

"You're going crazy," he told himself. And while he'd meant it for a joke it didn't sound like a joke when it came out in words. Because he might easily go crazy. He knew it now. He could feel the horrible pressure of it beating at his head.

HE WAS ravenously hungry. And he was cold. The night had turned more than chill. But there was nothing Cuthbert could do about it. He didn't dare leave his tree. He didn't dare—

From the darkness a voice said: "Cuthbert! For Heaven's sake, man, you've had us all— Are you *hanging* on that tree? What—"

"Dr. Gill!" Cuthbert tried to reach him, but he couldn't without losing his hold on the tree. "Yes," he said, "yes, I'm hanging on here. It's . . . it's the only thing I can trust not to fly up in the air. I mean— That is to say, anything else that I think of just goes up, but the roots hold down the tree—"

"Of course, of course, Cuthbert. I understand it all. Now if you'll just come along with me, we can take a quiet little walk back together. I know this sun was beastly hot—"

"It's not the sun," said Cuthbert. "And I don't blame you an atom for thinking I'm crazy. But I'm not. I'm—"

"Of course you're not," said Dr. Gill, soothingly. "Absurd to suggest such a thing, Cuthbert. But if you'll just come along—"

"I can't, I tell you!" Cuthbert wished he could scream at him: "If I leave this tree I'll— No, no, I didn't mean that! But I've tried to explain that the roots of this tree—"

"Yes, just so," said the doctor. "The roots hold you down. Of course, Cuthbert. But I can hold you down, too. If you'll just take my arm—"

"I won't take your arm," said Cuthbert. "If my car can go sailing off, what do you think would happen— Why, suppose on the way back I accidentally thought of you being suddenly deprived of gravitation and going up— Great guns!" For the doctor was rising, drifting, floating up gently like a released balloon.

"Come back!" yelled Cuthbert. "I didn't mean— Oh, gosh, come— Are you hurt?" For the doctor had fallen with a bone-breaking crash. But he sat up, and Cuthbert, forgetting his own danger, left his tree and went to help him up.

"I," gasped Dr. Gill, "I— Is that what you're talking about? Is that—"

"Yes," said Cuthbert. "I hope you'll listen to me now—though, believe me, I had no intention to . . . er . . . demonstrate—"

"Begin at the beginning," said the doctor. He adjusted his pince-nez. "Shall we . . . possibly it would be wiser if we . . . er . . . returned to your tree. Now tell me—"

"It's the mummy," Cuthbert explained. "You asked for my report and this—"

"No!" said Dr. Gill.

"Yes," said Cuthbert. "I told you his name was Ta Rankanem—but I didn't tell you that if you unwrap him you will find that he is not whole—though after his death they may have sewed him together again. At all events he was killed by the mob who tore him to pieces, the way dogs will—"

"But why?"

"He discovered this power—somehow. I don't know how. But he had it. And he practiced on the Island of Atlantis, which—"

"But legend tells us that Atlantis sank."

"Legend is wrong. It didn't sink. It rose and floated away. Just as, a few moments ago, you—"

"Stop!" yelled the doctor. He clutched at the tree. But he was safe. Cuthbert had stopped in time. But the

incident left them both pale. Dr. Gill was the first to pull himself together. "About this tomb—" he said.

"The Egyptians made it so magnificent to placate the possibly angry spirit of Ta Rankanem. After they had killed him they grew terrified. They were not sure his power had died with him. They couldn't be sure—and they didn't dare take any chances. So they gave him an elaborate burial—but they hid his body so that no one would ever find it."

"We found it," said Dr. Gill—and suddenly there was a new firmness in his voice. "This is nonsense," he told Cuthbert, "sheer nonsense, for two grown men to hang onto this tree like this. Come along. If that case you speak of can do these things— Come along. I have an idea." He strode away from the tree and pulled Cuthbert along with him. They went back to the car which the doctor had driven out in his search for Cuthbert.

But they didn't get far. As they reached the outskirts of Cairo they found it impossible to go forward. Crowds of people jammed the streets, milling from side to side; making any kind of progress was out of the question.

"WHAT IN thunder—" grumbled the doctor. He climbed down from the car and Cuthbert followed him. They began shouldering their way through the mob. But the going was slow. Until suddenly, over the heads of the multitude, Dr. Gill yelled, "Hi, Jameson!"

Cyril Jameson turned his blond English head.

"Hi!" he said, and somehow reached them. "Have you heard?" he said. "The pyramids rose up a good two hundred feet in the air this afternoon. Everybody's scared to death. They've all turned out—"

"Oh, my lord!" said Cuthbert. His tone made Jameson whirl.

"You . . . you know something! Come on, let's get out of here. I'll get you through." And he did. The crowd, apparently awed by his British army uniform, opened up a path for them and eventually they reached the terrace of Shepherd's Hotel.

"Whiskey and soda," said Jameson. "We need it. Never saw such a mob in my life. And terrified. I think if they knew what—or who—had made those pyramids—"

"Cuthbert," said Dr. Gill, "did you—"

Cuthbert nodded. He couldn't speak. His throat was closed. His mouth was lined with cotton. And all he could think of was Ta Rankanem—a mob, just like this mob, had torn him to shreds.

"What do you mean, Gill?" Cyril Jameson snapped. "What did Cuthbert do? I mean to say, how could anybody do anything? After all, the pyramids—"

"I know," said Dr. Gill. "I didn't believe it either until . . . well, I'll tell you." He told him, and Cuthbert watched the expression on Jameson's face flow from complete incredulity to tolerance, to belief—and suddenly to flaming enthusiasm.

"Why, man!" He pounded the table; he pounded Cuthbert's knee. "Do you realize what you've got there? Do you realize—"

"I realize it," said Dr. Gill. "That's what I brought him back here to talk about. Our hardest work here is over. It'll all be done for us from now on. Why, all we've got to do in the morning is to go out and pick out the spot we want to work and Cuthbert will lift the desert up in just the area—"

"No," said Cuthbert. But nobody heard him, because Jameson was talking him down.

"The desert!" He leaned forward; his voice sank to a whisper. "My dear man, after tonight there won't *be* any desert! Do you realize that for years the British have dreamed of opening canals that would let in the Mediterranean and irrigate all this? And do

you realize that now all we have to do is to get Cuthbert to wave this case of his and—"

"No!" yelled Cuthbert. But Dr. Gill drowned him out.

"Do away with the desert!" The doctor struggled to his feet. "Are you insane, man? Do away with the desert—and all the treasures that lie buried beneath it? Do you realize that if you let in the sea even to irrigate—"

"*If* we let in the sea! We *will* let in the sea. All we have to do in the morning is to get Cuthbert to remove those mountains—"

"I BEG your pardon," said a new voice, "Dr. Gill—"

"Oh, good Lord! I mean, I beg your pardon, Mr. Henderson. Cuthbert, of course you remember Mr. Henderson. The gentleman who is furnishing the funds for our expedition. Or rather, I should say, Mr. Henderson, you perhaps will remember Cuthbert—"

"Yes, yes. To be sure. I remember everyone." Henderson waved a large hand and moved a large head of white hair. "But what is this you are discussing? Is it the raising of the pyramids? I just arrived this afternoon and I have heard nothing since I came but the way the pyramids rose—"

"Exactly," said Dr. Gill. "Cuthbert did it. And I was just telling him—as I am sure you will agree—that it will prove a great boon in our work here. It will, of course, save you tremendous sums, Mr. Henderson, if you no longer have to pay the laborers for excavating, since Cuthbert, with one wave of his hand—"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Henderson, "but is there any way you can explain this so I can understand it? I mean to say—"

So Dr. Gill explained it. But when he had finished, Mr. Henderson roared: "Use a power like this for the purposes of archæological research? My dear doctor, are you insane? Such a waste. Such foolishness. Ah, don't misunderstand me. Archæology is all very well as a pastime, as a hobby. I admit I gain great pleasure dabbling in it with you, furnishing the money for your expeditions and so on—but to waste a power like this— No, sir. I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't—"

"Just what I was saying," cried Jameson. "I feel that great things can be done with this. I was just telling Gill that for years the British have dreamed of irrigating the Sahara and now, overnight, it can be done. We will just have Cuthbert move—"

"Irrigate the Sahara! Nonsense!" Henderson banged the table with a leonine fist. "I can show you how to make a thousand times more money than you'd ever make that way. Look here, we'll get Cuthbert to move a block of mountains and plains straight out of the center of Africa. We'll build a canal right through the middle of the continent. Think what the steamship companies will pay to save all that time and mileage. Think of the—"

"No!" yelled Cuthbert. But Dr. Gill yelled louder.

"Listen to me!" He was beside himself. His beard jabbed in fury. His eyes blazed. "Gentlemen! You cannot do this! I beg of you! You are planning to destroy records of ancient civilizations which cannot ever be—"

"Ancient civilizations!" roared Henderson. "What the hell does anybody care about ancient civilizations when we can make millions in this one? I tell you this canal—"

"No," cried Jameson, "not the canal. It's the Sahara—"

"Not the Sahara!" pleaded Dr. Gill. "I beg you not—"

"Gentlemen!" Cuthbert rose and pounded on the table till they had to listen to him. "All this talk is more than useless. I'm not going to do a thing with this power I have discovered

so accidentally. I can't do anything with it. I don't dare to. I . . . I don't understand it. I can't control it. I . . . I tell you I've put in a terrible afternoon and evening living in momentary terror of sending either myself or . . . or perhaps half the world up— No, no! I can't think it. I can't even hint it. But I tell you I won't—"

"Nonsense, young man." Henderson waved a hand. "Sheer nonsense. A most cowardly attitude, it seems to me, if you will pardon my frankness. Why, all you have to do—"

"I'll take the responsibility," said Jameson. "You come out with me in the morning—"

"No," said Cuthbert. "You gentlemen have no least notion what you are suggesting. You don't realize—you don't understand—"

"Show them the case," said Gill. Cuthbert fished it from his pocket.

"You see?" he said. "All I have to do is wave this thing and . . . and anything I think of—"

"Try it on this hotel and all the people," said Jameson. "It strikes me— Great Cæsar's ghost!"

"Get us down!" roared Henderson. "The whole thing— Thank God!" For the hotel, the terrace, and the grounds were settling gently back. "So that's— Good God!" He sank back. The color flowed up into his face.

"You see?" said Cuthbert. "We, none of us, can tell how it is controlled. Now this time I held the case and Jameson here said—"

"Never mind what I said," Jameson cut in. "And we don't need to bother, either, about not controlling the thing. We can learn that. We can experiment—"

"No!" said Cuthbert. And this time he made it final. He got up and left them.

BUT BEING alone brought him no peace. He paced up and down his room, trying to think, trying to find some way— But he was faced with the original dilemma. He dared not throw the case away—and he dared not keep it. And now he knew, once and for all, he dared give it to no one. Why, if any one of those men downstairs ever got hold of it—if anyone ever got hold of it— Cuthbert shuddered and continued his pacing.

But finally, exhausted, he was forced to lie down. However, he took the precaution to put the jeweled case well out of his reach so that, in his sleep, he wouldn't be able to touch it and possibly, at the same time, dream that he, or somebody else, was going— No, no, he was making no suggestion. But he had to have some sleep. He dropped wearily on the bed.

Hours later he woke with a start. For a dazed instant he lay listening. Some sound must have waked him— but what? Then he heard it again. A nervous breath; the soft rustle of clothing. Someone was in the room! He moved quickly, reaching across the bed to the light switch. He snapped it on.

"Dr. Gill!"

"Don't move," said Dr. Gill. "I've got this revolver in my hand and I . . . I assure you I won't hesitate to use it."

But Cuthbert wasn't staring at the revolver. He said:

"You . . . you've stolen the case, Dr. Gill—"

"Stolen!" said the doctor. "Bosh! It's mine as much as yours. In fact, it's more—"

"If you're going into technicalities," said Cuthbert, "it probably belongs to Mr. Henderson."

"Exactly." Dr. Gill glared furiously. "That is exactly what he said after you left. And he told me that in the morning he was going to claim it and demand that you—"

"No!" said Cuthbert.

"Yes," said Dr. Gill. "And that is why I came to get it myself. I'm not

going to allow it to fall into the ruthless hands of those money-making, canal-building jackasses. I'm not going to allow them to—"

"But you," Cuthbert said, "you want to remove part of the desert. How can you be sure—"

"I shall experiment cautiously. I shall begin by sending only a few square feet—"

"Stop!" yelled Cuthbert. "You're holding that case. You're—" He stopped. An idea exploded. He said: "You remember how the hotel started up when I held the case and Jameson said—"

"Never mind what Jameson said! Have you gone crazy?"

"No. But I can do the same thing now with your revolver. It's going out the window! It's going—"

"Ouch!" said the doctor. The leaping revolver had almost taken his fingers along with it.

"Now we're on equal ground," said Cuthbert. He swung his legs out of bed and started across the room. "Give me back the case," he said, "or I'll—"

"Give you—" The doctor remembered it, stared at it, clutched tight in his own fist—and the next instant he had whirled, running for the French door that opened onto the balcony. "You'll never get this case back," he gasped. "You'll never—"

"Oh, won't I?" Cuthbert was after him. Across the room and out the door.

But when he reached the balcony it was empty. Dr. Gill had scrambled to the next and was preparing to reach the one beyond. Cuthbert sprang after him. Being a good fifty pounds lighter, he caught up with him and leaped, landing on the big man's back. Gill staggered, caught himself.

"You fool!" he gasped. "You—" But Cuthbert was beyond all reason.

"Give me that!" he yelled. "Give it to me! Don't you know that if either one of us thinks the wrong thing that we'll both go—" He caught his words. He choked. He'd almost done it. "Give me that case." He was beside himself with terror. He beat at the doctor with his rolled fists.

"Get off my back! Get off—"

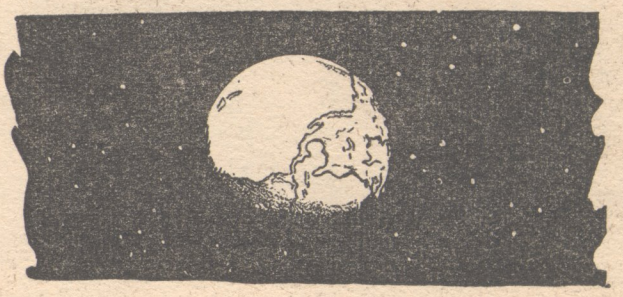
"Give it to me!" Cuthbert reached for it. The doctor tore it from his grasp, raised it high. "Don't!" screamed Cuthbert. "If you're not careful the case itself will go up—" He stopped. He stared. He slid down from the doctor's shoulders.

"You damn fool," choked the doctor. "Look . . . look what you've done!"

Cuthbert was looking. The case, at that moment, was nothing more than a tiny glittering speck sailing up, gently, into the empty realms of space.

"You—" began the doctor furiously. But coherent words failed him. He took to generous and colorful cursing.

But Cuthbert didn't curse. His whole mind was concentrated upon the glad fact that the case—and the power—was gone, beyond argument and beyond men.



DARK VISION

BY FRANK BELKNAP LONG

DARK VISION

The gift of reading minds—and madness, for every human mind is vile beyond endurance!

IT WAS a simple misstep that changed the world about him. He was not a man who could be easily betrayed into carelessness. He was careful, cautious; he looked before he leaped; and for twenty-seven years he had avoided physical catastrophe.

Yet now he was falling sheerly. Falling horribly between pylons of flame, his arms flailing emptiness, his long legs jerking.

Donald Horn was no electrician. He did not understand how a high-voltage transmission line could produce waves of such high frequency that they could only be measured across an inductance by spark gap. It was not until he landed on a high-tension oil switch near the base of Donivan's tremendous generator that he awoke to a realization of peril.

He lay stunned and gasping while all about him flared stupendous surges of energy. Under less hazardous circumstances the simple beauty of the display would have made his pulses race. But now his pulses were racing in sheer terror. He lay groaning and staring, his fingers clutching metal, his face corpse-white in the blinding glare.

It was to his credit that he could keep his head. He lay rigid and unmoving until they rescued him. How they got him down he never knew. The descent was a nightmare filled with voices. He was aware of strong hands supporting him, faces grimly intent on the job in hand. The job of getting him safely out of that blazing inferno. The hands were competent; the faces convulsed with misgivings.

The hands won. They got him down safely. They—John Donivan and his two young assistants, Fred Anders and William Marston. Gently they supported him beneath a vast and intricate maze of line conductors, whispering reassurances as they guided him to a chair beneath the magnetic field surrounding the conductors, and the electrostatic field issuing from the conductors.

He was sagging; limp. He could not support himself. Donivan hovered before the chair, staring down at him grimly while young Anders went searching for a half-filled whiskey flask in the cluttered tool shed which defaced the northeast corner of the power plant.

Horn felt better as soon as the whiskey warmed him. He smiled, wanly. "A narrow squeak," he said.

Donivan was furiously angry. He said: "You dammed fool! I warned you to be careful. How can you write about the generator when you studied electricity in a kindergarten? Or did you study it at all?"

Horn reddened. "I'm a feature writer on a newspaper, not an encyclopedia," he retorted. "My best friend happens to operate the most powerful electric generator in the United States. And I happen to need copy. There are safer ways of acquiring knowledge, but I was doing nicely until I missed my footing."

"You didn't have to climb all over the high-voltage circuits," rasped Donivan. "You need a nursemaid."

Ordinarily Donivan was a mild-mannered, genial little man. But now his eyes were blazing points of fury. "You very nearly blasted yourself into that fourth-dimension you're always ranting about," he said.

Horn stared up at him aghast. And suddenly as he stared all the blood ebbed from his face, leaving it ashen.

DONIVAN seemed to be changing before his eyes. The change was subtle, but sinister. Horn couldn't pin it down to any one feature. He was certain that the man before him did not undergo any profound physical change. The bony structures of his face, for instance, remained unaltered. But there was a subtle difference in the alignment of his features, a shift of expression such as he had never seen on any human face before.

And then suddenly the veils of sense seemed to dissolve about him and he recoiled in his chair with a cry of revulsion. He seemed to be gazing with a kind of super-sight into the innermost recesses of Donivan's brain. He was aware of depths within depths of light.

Or was it a negation of light? It seemed at once radiant and opaque, like the luminous darkness at the core of suns. But it wasn't that alien and mysterious radiance that caused him to cry out. What chiefly revolted him was the red and murderous rage that beat down upon him in tangible waves.

He could feel that terrible rage. He could feel it flowing out of Donivan's skull and scorching him with its primal blight. Donivan wanted to murder him. For a terrible instant, he was in mortal danger.

Then the veils of sense seemed to settle back in place. He became objectively aware of Donivan's head hovering above him, the face an obscure blur, the skull still enveloped in that alien and paradoxical light.

Slowly as he stared the malign hatred seemed to ebb from Donivan's features. The light dwindled and disappeared. The face which stared down at him now was the familiar face of his friend. Anger still shone in Donivan's gaze, but his expression was no longer sinister and strange.

Unsteadily Horn stood up. He said: "I owe you a debt of gratitude, John."

He scarcely recognized his own voice. It was like a whisper from the tomb. He was not sure that he was grateful to his friend. But he had to get out into the sunlight again, away from the unspeakable menace of the man. Even though Donivan looked completely normal now, he could still sense something murderous in him, and—yes, obscene. Something that was very primitive and loathsome.

It was even worse when he emerged from the power plant into the sunlight. The miasmal taint of Donivan seemed to follow him, poisoning the very air he breathed.

He dove into a subway kiosk to escape from it. A train was pulling up as he passed through the turnstile and elbowed his way across a crowded platform between normal people like himself. Yet were they normal? Even as he elbowed his way to the edge of the platform a wave of revulsion surged up in him.

It seemed to him that the people about him were all thinking abnormally. He could sense their thoughts beating in upon him. Thoughts of anger, greed and hate, thoughts of primal malice, of passion that was as unregenerate as a basilisk, as coldly merciless as the dark night of space.

Thoughts of murderous egotism and revenge, and little, vagrant thoughts repulsive in their childishness, pettiness and spite. The little thoughts were perhaps the worst. Little irrelevant vagaries that insulted the dignity of man.

The train roared into the station, dissipating the horror for an instant. The people behind him pushed him violently forward into the train as soon as the doors slid open, disrupting the hideous tensions which were beating in upon him from all sides.

But inside the lighted train it was worse still. The horror came rushing back and with it the strange, mysterious trembling of the veils of sense which he had experienced in the power plant.

Unsteadily he seated himself, leaning his head forward into his hands, closing his eyes. A queer, strangling fear rose in his mind and seemed to beat back and forth across the surface of his consciousness, like waves in a tub, growing with each traverse. Fear—this strangeness, this rippling of some forbidden veil—madness. This was madness creeping on him, madness growing in him from some stability-rending injury he had received at that plant, in that fall.

Madness—these people about him could not be hating so, could not be evilly lusting and murdering in their thoughts—

FRANTICALLY, he raised his head, to stare about him at the rocking subway car, at familiar bright-colored posters and familiar rocketing signal lights roaring past beyond the windows. He concentrated desperately on the posters above—

His eyes dropped to those of a slim, plain, dark-haired girl across the car, locked with them for an instant—and with a half-sob of shock Horn turned away. He was normal enough to be no prude—but the pure animal flamed in the mind that spoke abruptly from behind those rather stupid dark eyes that had met his. It was obscene in its stark, primitive directness; it was—

Madness— Desperately he drove his eyes to bright, meaningless posters; despairingly he felt them swivel under some terrible magnetism he could not control. In half relief, he saw before him, diagonally down the car, a white-haired woman in neat, well-made clothes, a few paper-wrapped packages in her lap, a half-dreaming expression on her tired, pleasant face. It was a kindly, elderly face—

It dissolved abruptly as the wise gray eyes met his to burn sudden horror into his brain. "George," something whispered and howled to him, "is a fool, but he's my fool. That secretary is a menace, and I do not like her. She eats chocolates all the time. Arsenic would make her writhe. Shoot . . . it would spoil her looks, and George wouldn't feel so sorry for her. Acid would do that. Now what kind of acid is it they use? Just ask for acid? . . ." A picture came, a picture of a face boiling and dissolving hideously into flowing, blackening ruin, and a feeling of lifting, satisfaction at the sight. Then abruptly it was a cruel caricature of a nude woman sloughing away under searing acid—

He was looking toward the face of a placid, half-dreaming little old lady who had shifted her eyes as the train slowed, checking on her destination. Horn sat paralyzed as he watched the pleasant-face, gently smiling fiend in female form gather her little packages and walk toward the exit.

A man was before his eyes suddenly, a man of thirty-five or so, dressed in an expensive, well-tailored business suit, a well-filled brief case in hand. His idly roaming eyes locked with Horn's, and desperately Horn tried to look away before the clean-lined, intelligent face dissolved into some yet further horror—

"I wonder," something whispered in an oddly calm, mildly curious way, "who drew up dad's will. And how he's leaving that estate of his. Must be nearly forty thousand. I'd like to see that will. He's always fussing with those guns of his, since he retired. Load a shotgun shell with dynamite instead of powder. It would probably blow his head off, and I'd be able to check on the will." For the instant of the revelation, a queer emotion of detached and unintense curiosity accompanied it; a feeling that blowing off his father's head was the natural and logical way of discovering the contents of the will in which he was mildly interested, a strange indifference to the money that might result—

The contact broke, weakened for an instant as the man's eye wavered toward a girl thrusting her way through the

now-crowded car, then strengthened again queerly—and revoltingly, for an instant, till that queer indifference gained sway over Horn's own reactions to the completely and utterly animal pictured thoughts that sickened him.

Somehow, Donald Horn found himself walking a street, his mind a roiling tumult of fantastic horrors. Vaguely, he remembered fighting his way off the train and out of the station, up to the clean air again, down the quietest street he could find, where eyes did not drill into his, washing a reeking tide of foul thoughts into his brain. For an instant, the hulking, red-headed man in work-stained clothes boiled up in memory, the man who had stood in line behind a tired-looking old man getting change and had, quite casually broadcast his determination to wring that scrawny neck between his own calloused paws and take the overstuffed billfold.

The thing was clear—too clear now. It was not his own madness—yet—but the acquisition of telepathy in effective form, the amplification of that extra-sensory perception science was just discovering.

They wanted that! They were looking for it! God! They wanted it perhaps, to see what stinking cesspools the minds of men were? To find for themselves the sweet-faced fiends who tried to remember which acid it was they needed?

To find that trusted executives decided, simply, that patricide was the simplest, quickest way to read a will?

He stumbled on dazedly, while a gray mist floated out of the air with the setting of the sun, a damp chill grew and warped the city in cotton folds so that street lights became golden luminosities glowing in the muffling white. Presently some clarity of mind returned, and a lessening of the horror of human kind. Old thought habits reasserted themselves, and a terrible longing for companionship, for someone to explain this to, returned.

HE WAS trembling uncontrollably when he appeared at the door of Gloria Moore's apartment. Almost reluctantly she admitted him, closing the door softly behind her. She was wearing a blue silk evening dress which revealed the lovely roundness of her white throat and shoulders, and the supple grace of her slender young body.

She stood for an instant straight and unmoving just inside the doorway, staring in amazement at his white face and disheveled clothes.

"Why didn't you phone, Donald?" she said. "I was just going out. I have a dinner engagement, you know."

Suddenly she paled. He was looking at her in the strangest way. The way he was looking at her was—yes, frightening. She had never feared him before, but now she was really afraid.

Her apprehension increased when he embraced her. "Darling," he murmured, "I'm in serious trouble. I must talk to you."

His fingers caressed her cheeks, her hair. The coldness of his flesh appalled her, but she managed to murmur: "Yes, dear, if you wish."

She took his hand and led him down a long, dark hall into the lighted living room of the apartment. He did not sit down. He crossed to the center of the room and stood facing her, his lips quivering. Suddenly he began to talk.

Gloria Moore was Horn's fiancée. He had never doubted her loyalty; he had never doubted that she was as sweet and gracious as she looked. But now a terrible doubt assailed him.

A subtle, hideous change was creeping into her features. As the mysterious light deepened about her, her expression became alien and strange. For an instant he could distinguish in the depths of the light the tumbled, dark glory of her hair, her lunate-shaped mouth and

her glowing dark eyes. Then her hidden thoughts merged with his consciousness and he saw only her skull waveringly outlined in the alien radiance.

Beating in upon him were thoughts of fierce resentment, horror and betrayal. She was wordlessly accusing him of the blackest crimes. She was accusing him of burdening her with revelations she did not care to share. She disbelieved him anyway—thought him quite mad. She had always secretly despised him, but now she hated and feared him.

She was thinking: "His mind has become warped. Why should he bring his troubles to me? I was a fool to become engaged to him. He is not as wealthy as Jim Prentiss."

Suddenly she turned and moved away from him, breaking the spell for an instant. The light seemed to diminish about her as she moved away across the room. She stopped before a desk by the window, and stood staring intently down at a long, slender object which glittered in the pale light of a green-shaded reading lamp. The light illumed the little dark coils at the nape of her neck, the patrician straightness of her shoulders.

Idly she picked up the paper knife from the desk and returned to where he was standing. Slowly the mysterious radiance deepened about her head again, obscuring her features.

A shiver of cold horror ran through Horn. Her thoughts were becoming malign now. Malign and venomous. "I will stab him. He is troubling, disturbing me. I hate him."

She was swaying slowly backward and forward when Horn tore his gaze from her face. He had reached the breaking point; he could endure no more. With a choking sob he turned from her and stumbled despairingly from the apartment.

UTTER TERROR engulfed him when he emerged into the street. All his life seemed to draw to an agonizing mental focus in his head. He became aware of his brain as a pulsing, throbbing center of anguish and unutterable torment, an inflamed hub that drew the impulses of his nerves to a tight, curling bedlam in his skull.

So vicious, so savagely, primitively deadly were the thoughts that flowed in upon him that his sanity tottered and he had a momentary impulse to run shrieking through the night.

As he staggered down dimly lit streets in blind and intolerable anguish, the life of the city took on a ghastly nightmare quality in his sight. He brushed against people who seemed perfectly normal outwardly, but whose minds were cesspools of maggoty hate and carnality and revolting spite.

He saw a horse-drawn brewery truck rumbling by, the man in the driver's seat lashing the great, piebald beasts in his charge.

Outwardly the driver was applying his whip to the flanks of animals. But subjectively he was torturing human beings, conjuring up in his savage mind symbols of human superiority which filled him with insensate rage and hate.

All that was gracious and beautiful groaned beneath the lash in his primitive, warped mind. Flowing out from him were thoughts so unspeakably revolting that they beat in an anvil chorus of torment on Horn's inflamed brain.

He saw a man and a girl walking arm in arm down the street. The girl dropped her purse and the man stopped to pick it up. His expression as he straightened was guileless, deferential, but his thoughts were barbed with rancor.

"She is always dropping things," he was thinking, his head aureoled in the obscuring light. "Apparently she was born clumsy. Every time we go out she drops her purse or her handkerchief, and I have to grovel."

Suddenly malignancy darkened his

thoughts. "I should never have married her. Marriage is a deception. She appeals to me physically, but I hate her constant nagging. Her laugh is silly. If she falls under some car, she won't drop things or laugh."

Suddenly Horn writhed as though a live coal had descended on his brain. The man walking with the girl seemed about to push her with brutal violence into the gutter!

The girl was fragile, radiant, lovely. How horrible that she should be wed to that murderous savage! Horn had an agonizing vision of innocence corroded, betrayed. But even as he clenched his fists, he became aware of her thoughts merging with his own.

He turned away, disillusioned, revolted, and went reeling blindly through the night. Again that terrifying sense that he was going mad.

He saw a man collide with a fire hydrant and go reeling out into the street. The man's thoughts were ghastly in their self-directed hate.

"You saw that impediment, but you did not avoid it. You wanted to injure yourself. You wanted to injure yourself seriously, because life is horrible and an agony, and there is no sense in it at all.

"Death is sweet and if I could destroy myself utterly I would find peace. I would find peace in the darkness of the grave. If only I could die and be wrapped in darkness and forgetfulness. To cease to struggle, to cease to breathe! Before I was born I knew such peace. I did not will to be born.

"Next time I will really injure myself. I shall kill myself. A revolver . . . a high building. I would die instantly if I leaped from the Empire State Building. Are there guards on the observation roof? If I climbed the rail swiftly they could not stop me.

"The long fall through space, the utter shattering of my body would bring release. I would be crushed, mangled, but there would be peace."

Suddenly Horn did an incredible thing. He stopped walking abruptly and screamed. Screamed in anguish. Once as a child he had known such anguish.

In a dream of childhood he had been called suddenly by his mother into a circle of radiant people, men and women with heavenly faces and godlike mien. In the center of that circle he had stood entranced, staring in childlike wonder and joy at the sweet countenances of women who seemed endowed with more than womanly grace, at men who were kindly and beneficent and paternal.

Then, with terrifying suddenness, the men and women about him had turned into reptiles and ferocious beasts. They had closed in upon him with feral snarls and venomous hissings. Horrible—horrible had been that dream.

He seemed now to be standing in that circle again, fangs menacing his flesh. Swiftly he began to walk again, malign torment swelling in his brain.

ANNE CARLYLE gasped when he appeared at the Golden Falcon, so excessive was his pallor, so unsteady his gait. He approached her table waveringly between the staring guests, his eyes tortured, dark pools in his white face.

Anne Carlyle was a strange, enigmatic girl. Her friends thought her gay and superficial, her enemies mercenary, coldly calculating. Her behavior was that of a very sophisticated young lady. A dancer in the Golden Falcon, she was shrewdly aware that the patrons of the night club preferred to be entertained by women of experience.

And when a girl has a widowed mother to support— Anne Carlyle had never told Horn about her mother.

He crossed unsteadily to her table and sat down beside her. His hand went out and clasped her fingers. She did

not recoil from him when he said: "Anne, I'm in trouble."

"What is it, dear?"

In halting syllables Horn told her. He told her about the ghastly mishap that had occurred in the power plant. He spoke of his hideous gift of supersight. He did not see the light because he kept his eyes averted. But suddenly he could feel her thoughts flowing out to him, merging with his consciousness. The thoughts of Anne Carlyle flowing into his brain.

They were wondrously sweet and consoling thoughts. It was incredible, but there did not seem to be any maliciousness in Anne Carlyle at all.

He was aware of depraved and hateful thoughts beating in upon him from all sides. But the strongest influx was not malicious at all. Close to him, protecting him from all the greed and envy and merciless hate in the minds of the Golden Falcon's patrons was a wavering barrier of compassion and light.

Somehow he could distinguish between the inflowing waves, could sense the close and vibrant goodness of Anne Carlyle. It was almost unalloyed. Little childish spite impulses surged through it, but they were so trivial, so trivial compared to her simple goodness.

The spite impulses were not directed against him at all. They were directed against Anne's rivals in the night club. Even as she consoled him she was thinking: "He needs me desperately. I must remain by his side. It will probably mean that that wretched Wilson girl will steal my act. If I leave the club tonight she will stop at nothing to discredit me. She has been waiting for a chance to step into my shoes. But nothing matters but Don's peace and safety. I have always loved him."

Suddenly she was speaking to him. "Whatever it is, dear, we will fight it together. Shock may drive us out of ourselves for a time. But Dale Croyce will know how to dispel this."

He said: "Dale Croyce. Dale Croyce. Yes, Dale might know."

"Then let us go to him tonight."

DALE CROYCE wasn't in his study when they arrived at his home. He was sitting in his library smoking. A colored manservant met them at the door and escorted them into the psychologist's presence.

When Croyce saw them he laid down the book he was reading, and stood up. He seemed surprised to see them together. He said: "Donald and Anne. How nice."

Then he perceived how pale Horn was and his manner changed. He perceived at once that they had not dropped in for a snack at midnight.

Dale Croyce was an experimental psychologist. He experimented with mice and dogs because their minds were simpler, almost simple enough that the higher mind of the man might understand their workings. He knew more about human psychology than any other man in America—which was very little. A middle-aged, blue-eyed man below medium height, he had learned the hardest lesson that any man may learn: he never would know much that was important about his specialty. All who study any subject well find out that. Therefore, he listened attentively when Horn talked.

He did not interrupt, nor ask questions. He simply listened, sharp discernment in his gaze. To him, Horn's desperate words began to have meaning; an understanding of the hell into which the man had been thrown came slowly.

When he spoke his voice was somewhat awed, somewhat saddened, but completely reassuring in its certainty of knowledge. "I think I can guess what happened in the power plant," he sighed. "It could not be done by intent, but by that trillionth chance that any improbability may happen, it happened to you. You were electrocuted, a terrific

surge of current burning through your nerves. But electricity can cure as well as kill; the electric needle can start a dead heart. Somehow it . . . welded your nerves, reduced the resistance that makes normal man incapable of receiving thought, though we know thought is an electrical phenomenon. Which should have killed you, but—by the trillionth chance—did not.

"Now you are super-telepathic, capable of receiving thought. But so sensitive that you receive not only the surface, conscious thoughts of men, but the deeper, subconscious thoughts and urges.

"You would not experience such horror and revulsion if you could merely tap the conscious patterns. The conscious mind of man is a thin, pale stream, guarded by a censor, and in well-disciplined minds the dark and horrible currents of the subconscious seldom flow to the surface as verbal or visual concepts.

"The censor stands guard, repressing them as they arrive, denying them conscious expression. The censor is the civilized part of your mind, your heritage from a few thousand years of civilization. You were taught as a child to repress your subconscious impulses, to feel horror and shame when they welled up into the conscious stream.

"In every man's subconscious mind are hideous essences for each human desire and emotion. In some minds the dark essences slumber deeply, and do not so constantly assail the censor. Some people are less primitive than others. Possibly you can only tap the subconscious when it becomes turbulent and surges up close to the conscious stream. Just before it flows in little malign eddies past the censor. You say that some minds seem less hideous to you than others. The primitive impulses may well be less turbulent in such minds."

Horn nodded and gazed at Anne Carlyle, sudden wonder in his gaze.

"THE subconscious mind is really frightful," resumed Croyce. "It is utterly direct, utterly without pretense or the indirection called tact. It is a cesspool of such horrible, vagrant and lightly held thoughts that any man given the power you have to apprehend them would go mad in half a day.

"If you know modern psychology you will know what I mean. The most powerful and disorderly impulses are those of sex, but hunger, hate, fear, acquisitiveness, rage play scarcely less vital rôles. Freud believes that there is a universal death impulse which causes some men to hate life so bitterly that they seek to destroy themselves or inflict pain on others.

"Even when these impulses do not flow into the conscious stream as well-defined concepts, they influence behavior in the form of subconscious reactions. A perfectly normal man, for instance, may be mildly curious as to what his father's will is, just how he proposes to distribute his capital after his death. That mild curiosity has a subconscious reaction which is a wish that the old man would die or be killed so that the will might be read. That, you see, is the simple, logical—though brutal—way.

"Or a man slips and falls down. Psychologists say that that may very well be because the man wants to commit suicide, and the little slip that bruises his elbow is an emotional letting off of the morbid desire in his subconscious. People will toy with sharp instruments, knives, forks, razor blades with no conscious intention of inflicting wounds on anyone—but with a subconscious reaction which whispers: 'You don't like him. He annoys. Kill him and end the annoyance.'"

Horn nodded, thinking of his curious misstep in the power plant, of the man who had stumbled over a hydrant, and of the paper knife which Gloria Moore had toyed with idly.

"Ironically enough, you do not appear

to be able to tap your own subconscious stream. It is not strange that you cannot do so. A television recorder could not transform energies pervading the receiving mechanism itself. They would not flow in through the proper channels.

"Naturally, then, the world of people around you seems populated with a different—and utterly loathsome—breed." The psychologist shrugged. "They aren't. They're normal—and harmless. The censor does its duty. But you'll be mad tomorrow if you are consciously made aware of thoughts no more horrible than those you are yourself thinking!"

"I will." Horn groaned. "I dare not look at you too closely, lest your face dissolve away to another of those gateways to hell. What can I do? What can you do for me?"

"Probably kill you," Croyce exploded, with a gusty sigh. "The medicine for this does not exist—for it has never before been known to happen."

Horn groaned. "Croyce—what of those madmen who have delusions of persecution? Do you suppose—"

Croyce started. "That is something no one ever suggested, so far as I know. If a man had your power in lesser degree—so he was not aware he had it—all minds would seem to mean death to him.

"But there is something that I can try. A derivative of curare."

"Arrow poison?" Horn looked up in sudden fear, and for an instant, met Croyce's eyes. Hastily he looked away even as the flesh of Croyce's face dissolved to a grinning skull, and pulsing light seemed to glow about his head.

"It works," Croyce explained, "by making the nerves have high resistance. The nerve-messages to move the heart and lungs cannot pass through. I've been experimenting with a derivative that affects the brain rather than those nerves. That is what you seem to need—less sensitivity of nerve. Come."

Wearily, desperately, he followed Dale Croyce back to his little laboratory, stood stiff and tense as the scientist prepared the glittering needle, and injected with minute caution a tiny drop of colorless liquid into his arm. White fire raced up his nerves, exploded in stinging light within his skull—

WHEN HE AWOKE Anne Carlyle was sitting beside him. He was reclining on a sofa in Croyce's library and she was holding his hand and smiling down at him.

Her face was wondrously radiant. For what seemed centuries he stared at her in silence, stared fearfully. But her face did not recede or vanish. No mysterious light arose to obscure its lovely contours. His first feeling was a vast relief that the power, the vision, was gone. Then, as he looked into her wide, anxiously questioning eyes, a greater satisfaction came, that he could look into those eyes and see them.

A little unsteadily he sat up. He said: "Anne, Anne, it is gone. The horror is gone now."

The anxious questioning gave way to relief and something yet more satisfying.

TROUBLE WITH WATER

BY H. L. GOLD

TROUBLE WITH WATER

Beer for breakfast—when the Little Folk are peeved!

GREENBERG did not deserve his surroundings. He was the first fisherman of the season, which guaranteed him a fine catch; he sat in a dry boat—one without a single leak—far out on a lake that was ruffled only enough to agitate his artificial fly. The sun was warm, the air was cool; he sat comfortably on a cushion; he had brought a hearty lunch; and two bottles of beer hung over the stern in the cold water.

Any other man would have been soaked with joy to be fishing on such a splendid day. Normally, Greenberg himself would have been ecstatic, but instead of relaxing and waiting for a nibble, he was plagued by worries.

This short, slightly gross, definitely bald, eminently respectable businessman lived a gypsy life. During the summer he lived in a hotel with kitchen privileges in Rockaway; winters he lived in a hotel with kitchen privileges in Florida; and in both places he operated concessions. For years now, rain had fallen on schedule every week end, and there had been storms and floods on Decoration Day, July 4th and Labor Day. He did not love his life, but it was a way of making a living.

He closed his eyes and groaned. If he had only had a son instead of his Rosie! Then things would have been mighty different—

For one thing, a son could run the hot dog and hamburger griddle, Esther could draw beer, and he would make soft drinks. There would be small difference in the profits, Greenberg admitted to himself; but at least those profits could be put aside for old age, instead of toward a dowry for his miserably ugly, dumpy, pitifully eager Rosie.

"All right—so what do I care if she don't get married?" he had cried to his wife a thousand times. "I'll support her. Other men can set up boys in candy stores with soda fountains that have only two spigots. Why should I have to give a boy a regular International Casino?"

"May your tongue rot in your head, you no-good piker!" she would scream. "It ain't right for a girl to be an old maid. If we have to die in the poorhouse, I'll get my poor Rosie a husband. Every penny we don't need for living goes to her dowry!"

Greenberg did not hate his daughter, nor did he blame her for his misfortunes; yet, because of her, he was fishing with a broken rod that he had to tape together.

That morning his wife opened her eyes and saw him packing his equipment. She instantly came awake. "Go ahead!" she shrilled—speaking in a conversational tone was not one of her accomplishments—"Go fishing, you loafer! Leave me here alone. I can connect the beer pipes and the gas for soda water. I can buy ice cream, frankfurters, rolls, sirup, and watch the gas and electric men at the same time. Go ahead—go fishing!"

"I ordered everything," he mumbled soothingly. "The gas and electric won't be turned on today. I only wanted to go fishing—it's my last chance. Tomorrow we open the concession. Tell the truth, Esther, can I go fishing after we open?"

"I don't care about that. Am I your wife or ain't I, that you should go ordering everything without asking me—"

He defended his actions. It was a tactical mistake. While she was still in bed, he should have picked up his equipment and left. By the time the argument got around to Rosie's dowry,

she stood facing him.

"For myself I don't care," she yelled. "What kind of a monster are you that you can go fishing while your daughter eats her heart out? And on a day like this yet! You should only have to make supper and dress Rosie up. A lot you care that a nice boy is coming to supper tonight and maybe take Rosie out, you no-good father, you!"

From that point it was only one hot protest and a shrill curse to find himself clutching half a broken rod, with the other half being flung at his head.

NOW HE SAT in his beautifully dry boat on an excellent game lake far out on Long Island, desperately aware that any average fish might collapse his taped rod.

What else could he expect? He had missed his train; he had had to wait for the boathouse proprietor; his favorite dry fly was missing; and, since morning, not a fish struck at the bait. Not a single fish!

And it was getting late. He had no more patience. He ripped the cap off a bottle of beer and drank it, in order to gain courage to change his fly for a less sporting bloodworm. It hurt him, but he wanted a fish.

The hook and the squirming worm sank. Before it came to rest, he felt a nibble. He sucked in his breath exultantly and snapped the hook deep into the fish's mouth. Sometimes, he thought philosophically, they just won't take artificial bait. He reeled in slowly.

"Oh, Lord," he prayed, "a dollar for charity—just don't let the rod bend in half where I taped it!"

It was sagging dangerously. He looked at it unhappily and raised his ante to five dollars; even at that price it looked impossible. He dipped his rod into the water, parallel with the line, to remove the strain. He was glad no one could see him do it. The line reeled in without a fight.

"Have I—God forbid!—got an eel or something not kosher?" he mumbled. "A plague on you—why don't you fight?"

He did not really care what it was—even an eel—anything at all.

He pulled in a long, pointed, brimless green hat.

For a moment he glared at it. His mouth hardened. Then, viciously, he yanked the hat off the hook, threw it on the floor and trampled on it. He rubbed his hands together in anguish.

"All day I fish," he wailed, "two dollars for train fare, a dollar for a boat, a quarter for bait, a new rod I got to buy—and a five-dollar-mortgage charity has got on me. For what? For you, you hat, you!"

Out in the water an extremely civil voice asked politely: "May I have my hat, please?"

Greenberg glowered up. He saw a little man come swimming vigorously through the water toward him: small arms crossed with enormous dignity, vast ears on a pointed face propelling him quite rapidly and efficiently. With serious determination he drove through the water, and, at the starboard rail, his amazing ears kept him stationary while he looked gravely at Greenberg.

"You are stamping on my hat," he pointed out without anger.

To Greenberg this was highly unimportant. "With the ears you're swimming," he grinned in a superior way. "Do you look funny!"

"How else could I swim?" the little man asked politely.

"With the arms and legs, like a regular human being, of course."

"But I am not a human being. I am a water gnome, a relative of the more common mining gnome. I cannot swim with my arms, because they must be crossed to give an appearance of dignity suitable to a water gnome; and my feet are used for writing and holding things. On the other hand, my ears are per-

fectly adapted for propulsion in water. Consequently, I employ them for that purpose. But please, my hat—there are several matters requiring my immediate attention, and I must not waste time."

Greenberg's unpleasant attitude toward the remarkably civil gnome is easily understandable. He had found someone he could feel superior to, and, by insulting him, his depressed ego could expand. The water gnome certainly looked inoffensive enough, being only two feet tall.

"What you got that's so important to do, Big Ears?" he asked nastily.

Greenberg hoped the gnome would be offended. He was not, since his ears, to him, were perfectly normal, just as you would not be insulted if a member of a race of atrophied beings were to call you "Big Muscles." You might even feel flattered.

"I really must hurry," the gnome said, almost anxiously. "But if I have to answer your questions in order to get back my hat—we are engaged in restocking the Eastern waters with fish. Last year there was quite a drain. The bureau of fisheries is coöperating with us to some extent, but, of course, we cannot depend too much on them. Until the population rises to normal, every fish has instructions not to nibble."

Greenberg allowed himself a smile, an annoyingly skeptical smile.

"My main work," the gnome went on resignedly, "is control of the rainfall over the Eastern seaboard. Our fact-finding committee, which is scientifically situated in the meteorological center of the continent, coördinates the rainfall needs of the entire continent; and when they determine the amount of rain needed in particular spots of the East, I make it rain to that extent. Now may I have my hat, please?"

Greenberg laughed coarsely. "The first lie was big enough—about telling the fish not to bite. You make it rain like I'm President of the United States!" He bent toward the gnome slyly. "How's about proof?"

"Certainly, if you insist." The gnome raised his patient, triangular face toward a particularly clear blue spot in the sky, a trifle to one side of Greenberg. "Watch that bit of the sky."

Greenberg looked up humorously. Even when a small dark cloud rapidly formed in the previously clear spot, his grin remained broad. It could have been coincidental. But then large drops of undeniable rain fell over a twenty-foot circle; and Greenberg's mocking grin shrank and grew sour.

He glared hatred at the gnome, finally convinced. "So you're the dirty crook who makes it rain on week ends!"

"Usually on week ends during the summer," the gnome admitted. "Ninety-two percent of water consumption is on weekdays. Obviously we must replace that water. The week ends, of course, are the logical time."

"But, you thief!" Greenberg cried hysterically, "you murderer! What do you care what you do to my concession with your rain? It ain't bad enough business would be rotten even without rain, you got to make floods!"

"I'm sorry," the gnome replied, untouched by Greenberg's rhetoric. "We do not create rainfall for the benefit of men. We are here to protect the fish.

"Now please give me my hat. I have wasted enough time, when I should be preparing the extremely heavy rain needed for this coming week end."

Greenberg jumped to his feet in the unsteady boat. "Rain this week end—when I can maybe make a profit for a change! A lot you care if you ruin business. May you and your fish die a horrible, lingering death."

And he furiously ripped the green hat to pieces and hurled them at the gnome.

"I'm really sorry you did that," the little fellow said calmly, his huge ears treading water without the slightest increase of pace to indicate his anger. "We

Little Folk have no tempers to lose. Nevertheless, occasionally we find it necessary to discipline certain of your people, in order to retain our dignity. I am not malignant; but, since you hate water and those who live in it, water and those who live in it will keep away from you."

WITH HIS ARMS still folded in great dignity, the tiny water gnome flipped his vast ears and disappeared in a neat surface dive.

Greenberg glowered at the spreading circles of waves. He did not grasp the gnome's final restraining order; he did not even attempt to intrepret it. Instead he glared angrily out of he corner of his eye at the phenomenal circle of rain that fell from a perfectly clear sky. The gnome must have remembered it at length, for a moment later the rain stopped. Like shutting off a faucet, Greenberg unwillingly thought.

"Good-by, week-end business," he growled. "If Esther finds out I got into an argument with the guy who makes it rain—"

He made an underhand cast, hoping for just one fish. The line flew out over the water; then the hook arched upward and came to rest several inches above the surface, hanging quite steadily and without support in the air.

"Well, go down in the water, damn you!" Greenberg said viciously, and he swished his rod back and forth to pull the hook down from its ridiculous levitation. It refused.

Muttering something incoherent about being hanged before he'd give in, Greenberg hurled his useless rod at the water. By this time he was not surprised when it hovered in the air above the lake. He merely glanced red-eyed at it, tossed out the remains of the gnome's hat, and snatched up the oars.

When he pulled back on them to row to land, they did not touch the water—naturally. Instead they flashed unimpeded through the air, and Greenberg tumbled into the bow.

"A-ha!" he grated. "Here's where the trouble begins." He bent over the side. As he had suspected, the keel floated a remarkable distance above the lake.

By rowing against the air, he moved with maddening slowness toward shore, like a medieval conception of a flying machine. His main concern was that no one should see him in his humiliating position.

AT THE HOTEL he tried to sneak past the kitchen to the bathroom. He knew that Esther waited to curse him for fishing the day before opening, but more especially on the very day that a nice boy was coming to see her Rosie. If he could dress in a hurry, she might have less to say—

"Oh, there you are, you good-for-nothing!"

He froze to a halt.

"Look at you!" she screamed shrilly. "Filthy—you stink from fish!"

"I didn't catch anything, darling," he protested timidly.

"You stink anyhow. Go take a bath, may you drown in it! Get dressed in two minutes or less, and entertain the boy when he gets here. Hurry!"

He locked himself in, happy to escape her voice, started the water in the tub, and stripped from the waist up. A hot bath, he hoped, would rid him of his depressed feeling.

First, no fish; now, rain on week ends! What would Esther say—if she knew, of course. And, of course, he would not tell her.

"Let myself in for a lifetime of curses!" he sneered. "Ha!"

He clamped a new blade into his razor, opened the tube of shaving cream, and stared objectively at the mirror. The dominant feature of the soft, chubby face that stared back was its ugly black stubble; but he set his stub-

born chin and glowered. He really looked quite fierce and indomitable. Unfortunately, Esther never saw his face in that uncharacteristic pose, otherwise she would speak more softly.

"Herman Greenberg never gives in!" he whispered between savagely hardened lips. "Rain on week ends, no fish—anything he wants; a lot I care! Believe me, he'll come crawling to me before I go to him."

He gradually became aware that his shaving brush was not getting wet. When he looked down and saw the water dividing into streams that flowed around it, his determined face slipped and grew desperately anxious. He tried to trap the water—by catching it in his cupped hands, by creeping up on it from behind, as if it were some shy animal, and shoving his brush at it—but it broke and ran away from his touch. Then he jammed his palm against the faucet. Defeated, he heard it gurgle back down the pipe, probably as far as the main.

"What do I do now?" he groaned. "Will Esther give it to me if I don't take a shave! But how? . . . I can't shave without water."

Glumly, he shut off the bath, undressed and stepped into the tub. He lay down to soak. It took a moment of horrified stupor to realize that he was completely dry and that he lay in a waterless bathtub. The water, in one surge of revulsion, had swept out onto the floor.

"Herman, stop splashing!" his wife yelled. "I just washed that floor. If I find one little puddle I'll murder you!"

Greenberg surveyed the instep-deep pool over the bathroom floor. "Yes, my love," he croaked unhappily.

With an inadequate washrag he chased the elusive water, hoping to mop it all up before it could seep through to the apartment below. His washrag remained dry, however, and he knew that the ceiling underneath was dripping. The water was still on the floor.

In despair, he sat on the edge of the bathtub. For some time he sat in silence. Then his wife banged on the door, urging him to come out. He started and dressed moodily.

WHEN HE SNEAKED out and shut the bathroom door tightly on the flood inside, he was extremely dirty and his face was raw where he had experimentally attempted to shave with a dry razor.

"Rosie!" he called in a hoarse whisper. "Sh! Where's mamma?"

His daughter sat on the studio couch and applied nail polish to her stubby fingers. "You look terrible," she said in a conversational tone. "Aren't you going to shave?"

He recoiled at the sound of her voice, which, to him, roared out like a siren. "Quiet, Rosie! Sh!" And for further emphasis, he shoved his lips out against a warning finger. He heard his wife striding heavily around the kitchen. "Rosie," he cooed, "I'll give you a dollar if you'll mop up the water I spilled in the bathroom."

"I can't papa," she stated firmly. "I'm all dressed."

"Two dollars, Rosie—all right, two and a half, you blackmailer."

He flinched when he heard her gasp in the bathroom; but, when she came out with soaked shoes, he fled downstairs. He wandered aimlessly toward the village.

Now he was in for it, he thought; screams from Esther, tears from Rosie—plus a new pair of shoes for Rosie and two and a half dollars. It would be worse, though, if he could not get rid of his whiskers—

Rubbing the tender spots where his dry razor had raked his face, he mused blankly at a drugstore window. He saw nothing to help him, but he went inside anyhow and stood hopefully at the drug counter. A face peered at him through a space scratched in the wall case mir-

ror, and the druggist came out. A nice-looking, intelligent fellow, Greenberg saw at a glance.

"What you got for shaving that I can use without water?" he asked.

"Skin irritation, eh?" the pharmacist replied. "I got something very good for that."

"No. It's just— Well, I don't like to shave with water."

The druggist seemed disappointed. "Well, I got brushless shaving cream." Then he brightened. "But I got an electric razor—much better."

"How much?" Greenberg asked cautiously.

"Only fifteen dollars, and it lasts a lifetime."

"Give me the shaving cream," Greenberg said coldly.

With the tactical science of a military expert, he walked around until some time after dark. Only then did he go back to the hotel, to wait outside. It was after seven, he was getting hungry, and the people who entered the hotel he knew as permanent summer guests. At last a stranger passed him and ran up the stairs.

Greenberg hesitated for a moment. The stranger was scarcely a boy, as Esther had definitely termed him, but Greenberg reasoned that her term was merely wish-fulfillment, and he jauntily ran up behind him.

He allowed a few minutes to pass, for the man to introduce himself and let Esther and Rosie don their company manners. Then, secure in the knowledge that there would be no scene until the guest left, he entered.

He waded through a hostile atmosphere, urbanely shook hands with Sammie Katz, who was a doctor—probably, Greenberg thought shrewdly, in search of an office—and excused himself.

IN THE BATHROOM he carefully read the direction for using brushless shaving cream. He felt less confident when he realized that he had to wash his face thoroughly with soap and water, but without benefit of either, he spread the cream on, patted it, and waited for his beard to soften. It did not, as he discovered while shaving. He wiped his face dry. The towel was sticky and black, with whiskers suspended in paste, and, for that, he knew, there would be more hell to pay. He shrugged resignedly. He would have to spend fifteen dollars for an electric razor after all; this foolishness was costing him a fortune!

That they were waiting for him before beginning supper, was, he knew, only a gesture for the sake of company. Without changing her hard, brilliant smile, Esther whispered: "Wait! I'll get you later—"

He smiled back, his tortured, slashed face creasing painfully. All that could be changed by his being enormously pleasant to Rosie's young man. If he could slip Sammie a few dollars—more expense, he groaned—to take Rosie out, Esther would forgive everything.

He was too engaged in beaming and putting Sammie at ease to think of what would happen after he ate caviar canapes. Under other circumstances Greenberg would have been repulsed by Sammie's ultra-professional waxed mustache—an offensively small, pointed thing—and his commercial attitude toward poor Rosie; but Greenberg regarded him as a potential savior.

"You open an office yet, Doctor Katz?"

"Not yet. You know how things are. Anyhow, call me Sammie."

Greenberg recognized the gambit with satisfaction, since it seemed to please Esther so much. At one stroke Sammie had ingratiated himself and begun bargaining negotiations.

Without another word, Greenberg lifted his spoon to attack the soup. It would be easy to snare this eager doctor. A *doctor!* No wonder Esther and Rosie

were so puffed with joy.

In the proper company way, he pushed his spoon away from him. The soup spilled onto the tablecloth.

"Not so hard, you dope," Esther hissed.

He drew the spoon toward him. The soup leaped off it like a live thing and splashed over him—turning, just before contact, to fall on the floor. He gulped and pushed the bowl away. This time the soup poured over the side of the plate and lay in a huge puddle on the table.

"I didn't want any soup anyhow," he said in a horrible attempt at levity. Lucky for him, he thought wildly, that Sammie was there to pacify Esther with his smooth college talk—not a bad fellow, Sammie, in spite of his mustache; he'd come in handy at times.

Greenberg lapsed into a paralysis of fear. He was thirsty after having eaten the caviar, which beats herring any time as a thirst raiser. But the knowledge that he could not touch water without having it recoil and perhaps spill, made his thirst a monumental craving. He attacked the problem cunningly.

The others were talking rapidly and rather hysterically. He waited until his courage was equal to his thirst; then he leaned over the table with a glass in his hand. "Sammie, do you mind—a little water, huh?"

Sammie poured from a pitcher while Esther watched for more of his tricks. It was to be expected, but still he was shocked when the water exploded out of the glass directly at Sammie's only suit.

"If you'll excuse me," Sammie said angrily, "I don't like to eat with lunatics."

And he left, though Esther cried and begged him to stay. Rosie was too stunned to move. But when the door closed, Greenberg raised his agonized eyes to watch his wife stalk murderously toward him.

GREENBERG stood on the boardwalk outside his concession and glared blearily at the peaceful, blue, highly unpleasant ocean. He wondered what would happen if he started at the edge of the water and strode out. He could probably walk right to Europe on dry land.

It was early—much too early for business—and he was tired. Neither he nor Esther had slept; and it was practically certain that the neighbors hadn't either. But above all he was incredibly thirsty.

In a spirit of experimentation, he mixed a soda. Of course its high water content made it slop onto the floor. For breakfast he had surreptitiously tried fruit juice and coffee, without success.

With his tongue dry to the point of furriness, he sat weakly on a boardwalk bench in front of his concession. It was Friday morning, which meant that the day was clear, with a promise of intense heat. Had it been Saturday, it naturally would have been raining.

"This year," he moaned, "I'll be wiped out. If I can't mix sodas, why should beer stay in a glass for me? I thought I could hire a boy for ten dollars a week to run the hot-dog griddle; I could make sodas, and Esther could draw beer. All I can do is make hot dogs, Esther can still draw beer; but twenty or maybe twenty-five a week I got to pay a sodaman. I won't even come out square—a fortune I'll lose!"

The situation really was desperate. Concessions depend on too many factors to be anything but capriciously profitable.

His throat was fiery and his soft brown eyes held a fierce glaze when the gas and electric were turned on, the beer pipes connected, the tank of carbon dioxide hitched to the pump, and the refrigerator started.

Gradually, the beach was filling with bathers. Greenberg writhed on his bench and envied them. They could swim and drink without having liquids draw away

from them as if in horror. They were not thirsty—

And then he saw his first customers approach. His business experience was that morning customers buy only soft drinks. In a mad haste he put up the shutters and fled to the hotel.

"Esther!" he cried. "I got to tell you! I can't stand it—"

Threateningly, his wife held her broom like a baseball bat. "Go back to the concession, you crazy fool. Ain't you done enough already?"

He could not be hurt more than he had been. For once he did not cringe. "You got to help me, Esther."

"Why didn't you shave, you no-good bum? Is that any way—"

"That's what I got to tell you. Yesterday I got into an argument with a water gnome—"

"A what?" Esther looked at him suspiciously.

"A water gnome," he babbled in a rush of words. "A little man so high, with big ears that he swims with, and he makes it rain—"

"Herman!" she screamed. "Stop that nonsense. You're crazy!"

Greenberg pounded his forehead with his fist. "I *ain't* crazy. Look, Esther. Come with me into the kitchen."

She followed him readily enough, but her attitude made him feel more helpless and alone than ever. With her fists on her plump hips and her feet set wide, she cautiously watched him try to fill a glass of water.

"Don't you see?" he wailed. "It won't go in the glass. It spills all over. It runs away from me."

She was puzzled. "What happened to you?"

Brokenly, Greenberg told of his encounter with the water gnome, leaving out no single degrading detail. "And now I can't touch water," he ended. "I can't drink it. I can't make sodas. On top of it all, I got such a thirst, it's killing me."

Esther's reaction was instantaneous. She threw her arms around him, drew his head down to her shoulder, and patted him comfortingly as if he were a child. "Herman, my poor Herman!" she breathed tenderly. "What did we ever do to deserve such a curse?"

"What shall I do, Esther?" he cried helplessly.

She held him at arm's length. "You got to go to a doctor," she said firmly. "How long can you go without drinking? Without water you'll die. Maybe sometimes I am a little hard on you, but you know I love you—"

"I know, mamma," he sighed. "But how can a doctor help me?"

"Am I a doctor that I should know? Go anyhow. What can you lose?"

He hesitated. "I need fifteen dollars for an electric razor," he said in a low, weak voice.

"So?" she replied. "If you got to, you got to. Go, darling. I'll take care of the concession."

GREENBERG no longer felt deserted and alone. He walked almost confidently to a doctor's office. Manfully, he explained his symptoms. The doctor listened with professional sympathy, until Greenberg reached his description of the water gnome.

Then his eyes glittered and narrowed. "I know just the thing for you, Mr. Greenberg," he interrupted. "Sit there until I come back."

Greenberg sat quietly. He even permitted himself a surge of hope. But it seemed only a moment later that he was vaguely conscious of a siren screaming toward him; and then he was overwhelmed by the doctor and two internes who pounced on him and tried to squeeze him into a bag.

He resisted, of course. He was terrified enough to punch wildly. "What are you doing to me?" he shrieked. "Don't put that thing on me!"

"Easy now," the doctor soothed. "Everything will be all right."

It was on that humiliating scene that the policeman, required by law to accompany public ambulances, appeared. "What's up?" he asked.

"Don't stand there, you fathead," an interne shouted. "This man's crazy. Help us get him into this strait jacket."

But the policeman approached indecisively. "Take it easy, Mr. Greenberg. They ain't gonna hurt you while I'm here. What's it all about?"

"Mike!" Greenberg cried, and clung to his protector's sleeve. "They think I'm crazy—"

"Of course he's crazy," the doctor stated. "He came in here with a fantastic yarn about a water gnome putting a curse on him."

"What kind of a curse, Mr. Greenberg?" Mike asked cautiously.

"I got into an argument with the water gnome who makes it rain and takes care of the fish," Greenberg blurted. "I tore up his hat. Now he won't let water touch me. I can't drink, or anything—"

The doctor nodded. "There you are. Absolutely insane."

"Shut up." For a long moment Mike stared curiously at Greenberg. Then: "Did any of you scentists think of testing him? Here, Mr. Greenberg." He poured water into a paper cup and held it out.

Greenberg moved to take it. The water backed up against the cup's far lip; when he took it in his hand, the water shot out into the air.

"Crazy, is he?" Mike asked with heavy irony. "I guess you don't know there's things like gnomes and elves. Come with me, Mr. Greenberg."

They went out together and walked toward the boardwalk. Greenberg told Mike the entire story and explained how, besides being so uncomfortable to him personally, it would ruin him financially.

"Well, doctors can't help you," Mike said at length. "What do they know about the Little Folk? And I can't say I blame you for sassing the gnome. You ain't Irish or you'd have spoke with more respect to him. Anyhow, you're thirsty. Can't you drink *anything?*"

"Not a thing," Greenberg said mournfully.

They entered the concession. A single glance told Greenberg that business was very quiet, but even that could not lower his feelings more than they already were. Esther clutched him as soon as she saw them.

"Well?" she asked anxiously.

Greenberg shrugged in despair. "Nothing. He thought I was crazy."

Mike stared at the bar. Memory seemed to struggle behind his reflective eyes. "Sure," he said after a long pause. "Did you try beer Mr. Greenberg? When I was a boy my old mother told me all about elves and gnomes and the rest of the Little Folk. She knew them, all right. They don't touch alcohol, you know. Try drawing a glass of beer—"

Greenberg trudged obediently behind the bar and held a glass under the spigot. Suddenly his despondent face brightened. Beer creamed into the glass—and stayed there! Mike and Esther grinned at each other as Greenberg threw back his head and furiously drank.

"Mike!" he crowed. "I'm saved. You got to drink with me!"

"Well—" Mike protested feebly.

By late afternoon, Esther had to close the concession and take her husband and Mike to the hotel.

THE following day, being Saturday, brought a flood of rain. Greenberg nursed an imposing hang-over that was constantly aggravated by his having to drink beer in order to satisfy his recurring thirst. He thought of forbidden

icebags and alkaline drinks in an agony of longing.

"I can't stand it!" he groaned. "Beer for breakfast—phooey!"

"It's better than nothing," Esther said fatalistically.

"So help me, I don't know if it is. But, darling, you ain't mad at me on account of Sammie, are you?"

She smiled gently, "Poo! Talk dowry and he'll come back quick."

"That's what I thought. But what am I going to do about my curse?"

CHEERFULLY, Mike furled an umbrella and strode in with a little old woman, whom he introduced as his mother. Greenberg enviously saw evidence of the effectiveness of icebags and alkaline drinks, for Mike had been just as high as he the day before.

"Mike told me about you and the gnome," the old lady said. "Now I know the Little Folk well, and I don't hold you to blame for insulting him, seeing you never met a gnome before. But I suppose you want to get rid of your curse. Are you repentant?"

Greenberg shuddered. "Beer for breakfast! Can you ask?"

"Well, just you go to this lake and give the gnome proof."

"What kind of proof?" Greenberg asked eagerly.

"Bring him sugar. The Little Folk love the stuff—"

Greenberg beamed. "Did you hear that, Esther? I'll get a barrel—"

"They love sugar, but they can't eat it, the old lady broke in. "It melts in water. You got to figure out a way so it won't. Then the little gentleman'll know you're repentant for real."

"A-ha!" Greenberg cried. "I knew there was a catch!"

There was a sympathetic silence while his agitated mind attacked the problem from all angles. Then the old lady said in awe: "The minute I saw your place I knew Mike had told the truth. I never seen a sight like it in my life—rain coming down, like the flood, everywhere else; but all around this place, in a big circle, it's dry as a bone!"

While Greenberg scarcely heard her, Mike nodded and Esther seemed peculiarly interested in the phenomenon. When he admitted defeat and came out of his reflected stupor, he was alone in the concession, with only a vague memory of Esther's saying she would not be back for several hours.

"What am I going to do?" he muttered. "Sugar that won't melt—" He drew a glass of beer and drank it thoughtfully. "Particular they got to be yet. Ain't it good enough if I bring simple sirup—that's sweet."

He pottered about the place, looking for something to do. He could not polish the fountain or the bar, and the few frankfurters broiling on the griddle probably would go to waste. The floor had already been swept. So he sat uneasily and worried his problem.

"Monday, no matter what," he resolved, "I'll go to the lake. It don't pay to go tomorrow. I'll only catch a cold because it'll rain."

At last Esther returned, smiling in a strange way. She was extremely gentle, tender and thoughtful; and for that he was appreciative. But that night and all day Sunday he understood the reason for her happiness.

She had spread word that, while it rained in every other place all over town, their concession was miraculously dry. So, besides a headache that made his body throb in rhythm to its vast pulse, Greenberg had to work like six men satisfying the crowd who mobbed the place to see the miracle and enjoy the dry warmth.

How much they took in will never be known. Greenberg made it a practice not to discuss such personal matters. But it is quite definite that not even in 1929 had he done so well over a single week end.

VERY EARLY Monday morning he was dressing quietly, not to disturb his wife. Esther, however, raised herself on her elbow and looked at him doubtfully.

"Herman," she called softly, "do you really have to go?"

He turned, puzzled. "What do you mean—do I have to go?"

"Well—" She hesitated. Then: "Couldn't you wait until the end of the season, Herman, darling?"

He staggered back a step, his face working in horror. "What kind of an idea is that for my own wife to have?" he croaked. "Beer I have to drink instead of water. How can I stand it? Do you think I *like* beer? I can't wash myself. Already people don't like to stand near me; and how will they act at the end of the season? I go around looking like a bum because my beard is too tough for an electric razor, and I'm all the time drunk—the first Greenberg to be a drunkard. I want to be respected—"

"I know, Herman, darling," she sighed. "But I thought for the sake of our Rosie— Such a business we've never done like we did this week end. If it rains every Saturday and Sunday, but not on our concession, we'll make a *fortune!*"

"Esther!" Herman cried, shocked. "Doesn't my health mean anything?"

"Of course, darling. Only I thought maybe you could stand it for—"

He snatched his hat, tie and jacket, and slammed the door. Outside, though, he stood indeterminedly. He could hear his wife crying, and he realized that, if he succeeded in getting the gnome to remove the curse, he would forfeit an opportunity to make a great deal of money.

He finished dressing more slowly. Esther was right, to a certain extent. If he could tolerate his waterless condition—

"No!" he gritted decisively. "Already my friends avoid me. It isn't right that a respectable man like me should always be drunk and not take a bath. So we'll make less money. Money isn't everything—"

And with great determination he went to the lake.

BUT THAT evening, before going home, Mike walked out of his way to stop in at the concession. He found Greenberg sitting on a chair, his head in his hands, and his body rocking slowly in anguish.

"What is it, Mr. Greenberg?" he asked gently.

Greenberg looked up. His eyes were dazed. "Oh, you, Mike," he said blankly. Then his gaze cleared, grew more intelligent, and he stood up and led Mike to the bar. Silently, they drank beer. "I went to the lake today," he said hollowly. "I walked all around it, hollering like mad. The gnome didn't stick his head out of the water once."

"I know." Mike nodded sadly. "They're busy all the time."

Greenberg spread his hands imploringly. "So what can I do? I can't write him a letter or send him a telegram; he ain't got a door to knock on or a bell for me to ring. How do I get him to come up and talk?"

His shoulders sagged. "Here, Mike. Have a cigar. You been a real good friend, but I guess we're licked."

They stood in an awkward silence. Finally Mike blurted: "Real hot, today. A regular scorcher."

"Yeah. Esther says business was pretty good, if it keeps up."

Mike fumbled at the Cellophane wrapper. Greenberg said: "Anyhow, suppose I did talk to the gnome. What about the sugar?"

The silence dragged itself out, became tense and uncomfortable. Mike was distinctly embarrassed. His brusque nature was not adapted for comforting discouraged friends. With immense concentra-

tion he rolled the cigar between his fingers and listened for a rustle.

"Day like this's hell on cigars," he mumbled, for the sake of conversation. "Dries them like nobody's business. This one ain't, though."

"Yeah," Greenberg said abstractedly. "Cellophane keeps them—"

They looked suddenly at each other, their faces clean of expression.

"Holy smoke!" Mike yelled.

"Cellophane on sugar!" Greenberg choked out.

"Yeah," Mike whispered in awe. "I'll switch my day off with Joe, and I'll go to the lake with you tomorrow. I'll call for you early."

Greenberg pressed his hand, too strangled by emotion for speech. When Esther came to relieve him, he left her at the concession with only the inexperienced griddle boy to assist her, while he searched the village for cubes of sugar wrapped in Cellophane.

The sun had scarcely risen when Mike reached the hotel, but Greenberg had long been dressed and stood on the porch waiting impatiently. Mike was genuinely anxious for his friend. Greenberg staggered along toward the station, his eyes almost crossed with the pain of a terrific hang-over.

They stopped at a cafeteria for breakfast. Mike ordered orange juice, bacon and eggs, and coffee half-and-half. When he heard the order, Greenberg had to gag down a lump in his throat.

"What'll you have?" the counterman asked.

Greenberg flushed. "Beer," he said hoarsely.

"You kidding me?" Greenberg shook his head, unable to speak. "Want anything with it? Cereal, pie, toast—"

"Just beer." And he forced himself to swallow it. "So help me," he hissed at Mike, "another beer for breakfast will kill me!"

"I know how it is," Mike said around a mouthful of food.

On the train they attempted to make plans. But they were faced by a phenomenon that neither had encountered before, and so they got nowhere. They walked glumly to the lake, fully aware that they would have to employ the empirical method of discarding tactics that did not work.

"How about a boat?" Mike suggested.

"It won't stay in the water with me in it. And you can't row it."

"Well, what'll we do then?"

Greenberg bit his lip and stared at the beautiful blue lake. There the gnome lived, so near to them. "Go through the woods along the shore, and holler like hell. I'll go the opposite way. We'll pass each other and meet at the boathouse. If the gnome comes up, yell for me."

"O. K.," Mike said, not very confidently.

THE LAKE was quite large and they walked slowly around it, pausing often to get the proper stance for particularly emphatic shouts. But two hours later, when they stood opposite each other with the full diameter of the lake between them, Greenberg heard Mike's hoarse voice: "Hey, gnome!"

"Hey, gnome!" Greenberg yelled. "Come on up!"

An hour later they crossed paths. They were tired, discouraged, and their throats burned; and only fishermen disturbed the lake's surface.

"The hell with this," Mike said. "It ain't doing any good. Let's go back to the boathouse."

"What'll we do?" Greenberg rasped. "I can't give up!"

They trudged back around the lake, shouting half-heartedly. At the boathouse, Greenberg had to admit that he was beaten. The boathouse owner marched threateningly toward them.

"Why don't you maniacs get away from here?" he barked. "What's the idea of hollering and scaring away the

fish? The guys are sore—"

"We're not going to holler any more," Greenberg said. "It's no use."

When they bought beer and Mike, on an impulse, hired a boat, the owner cooled off with amazing rapidity, and went off to unpack bait.

"What did you get a boat for?" Greenberg asked. "I can't ride in it."

"You're not going to. You're gonna walk."

"Around the lake again?" Greenberg cried.

"Nope. Look, Mr. Greenberg. Maybe the gnome can't hear us through all that water. Gnomes ain't hardhearted. If he heard us and thought you were sorry, he'd take his curse off you in a jiffy."

"Maybe." Greenberg was not convinced. "So where do I come in?"

"The way I figure it, some way or other you push water away, but the water pushes you away just as hard. Anyhow, I hope so. If it does, you can walk on the lake." As he spoke, Mike had been lifting large stones and dumping them on the bottom of the boat. "Give me a hand with these."

Any activity, however useless, was better than none, Greenberg felt. He helped Mike fill the boat until just the gunwales were above water. Then Mike got in and shoved off.

"Come on," Mike said. "Try to walk on the water."

Greenberg hesitated. "Suppose I can't?"

"Nothing'll happen to you. You can't get wet, so you won't drown."

The logic of Mike's statement reassured Greenberg. He stepped out boldly. He experienced a peculiar sense of accomplishment when the water hastily retreated under his feet into pressure bowls, and an unseen, powerful force buoyed him upright across the lake's surface. Though his footing was not too secure, with care he was able to walk quite swiftly.

"Now what?" he asked, almost happily.

Mike had kept pace with him in the boat. He shipped his oars and passed Greenberg a rock. "We'll drop them all over the lake—make it damned noisy down there and upset the place. That'll get him up."

They were more hopeful now, and their comments. "Here's one that'll wake him," and "I'll hit him right on the noodle with this one," served to cheer them still further. And less than half the rocks had been dropped when Greenberg halted, a boulder in his hands. Something inside him wrapped itself tightly around his heart and his jaw dropped.

Mike followed his awed, joyful gaze. To himself, Mike had to admit that the gnome, propelling himself through the water with his ears, arms folded in tremendous dignity, was a funny sight.

"Must you drop rocks and disturb us at our work?" the gnome asked.

Greenberg gulped. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gnome," he said nervously. "I couldn't get you to come up by yelling."

The gnome looked at him. "Oh. You are the mortal who was disciplined. Why did you return?"

"To tell you that I'm sorry, and I won't insult you again."

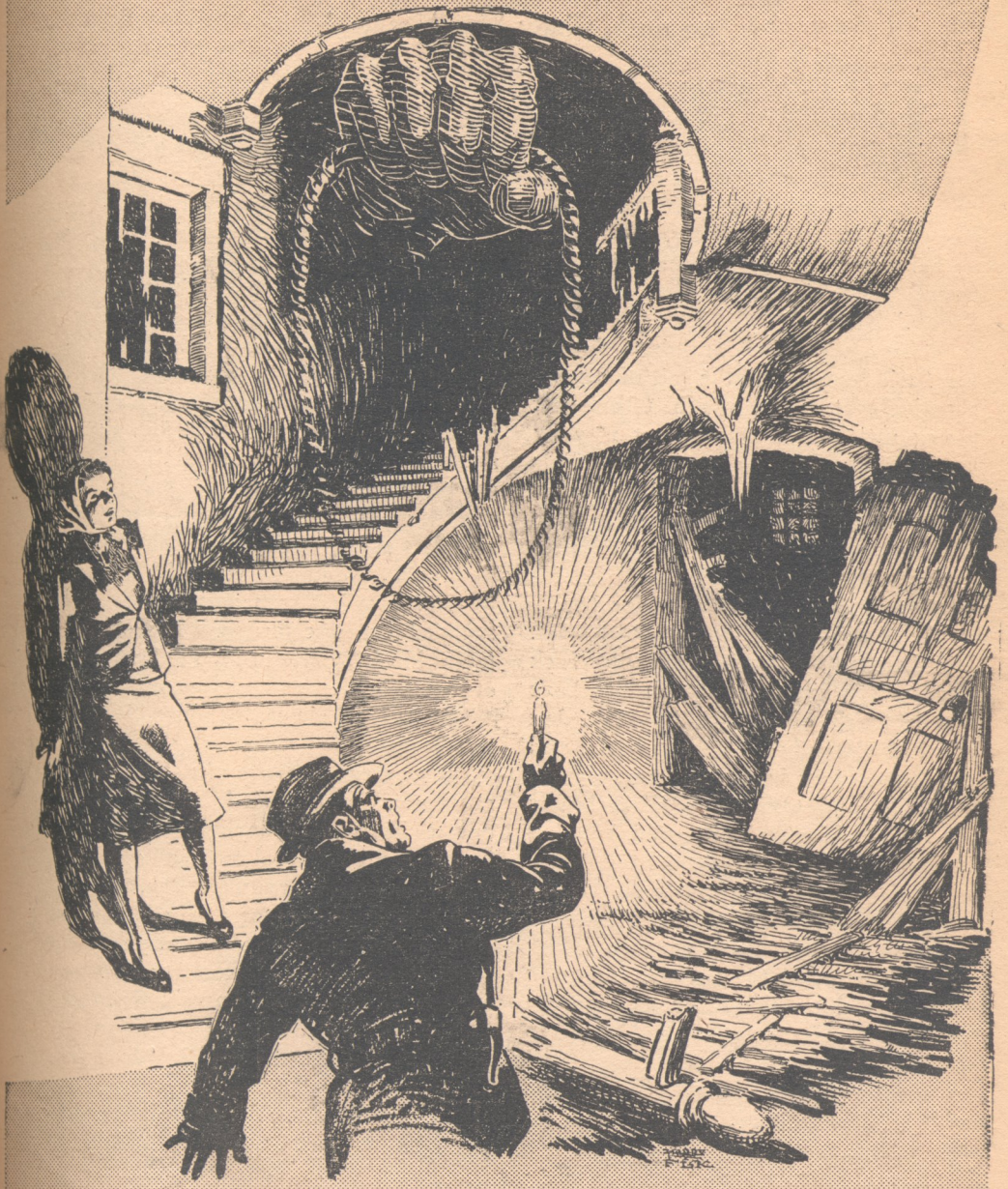
"Have you proof of your sincerity?" the gnome asked quietly.

Greenberg fished furiously in his pocket and brought out a handful of sugar wrapped in Cellophane, which he tremblingly handed to the gnome.

"Ah, very clever, indeed," the little man said, unwrapping a cube and popping it eagerly into his mouth. "Long time since I've had some."

A moment later Greenberg spluttered and floundered under the surface. Even if Mike had not caught his jacket and helped him up, he could almost have enjoyed the sensation of being able to drown.

"WHERE ANGELS FEAR . . "



BY MANLY WADE WELLMAN

"WHERE ANGELS FEAR—"

Particularly recommended for lonely people in old houses on dark, windy March nights!

HALF a mile from McCormack's cabin a paved highway crossed the rutted woodland road, and here a post held aloft in the misty darkness an electric light. Muriel Fisher paused in its brightest glow, and turned up her spectacled, good-humored young face. "Let's interview that whiskey, Scotty," she said.

McCormack smiled, and drew the silver flash from under the tail of his old shooting-coat. He was a tall, gaunt young man, made sturdy just now by rough, heavy clothes. Between his plaid scarf and the brim of his felt hat showed a fine, bony face, Gaelicly wide in jaw and brow, with a narrowness through the cheeks. "Drink," he invited, and drew the stopper for her.

She drank, with honest heartiness. Her bandanna-framed face, tilting back under the white light, seemed to have lost a touch of its healthy pink, but she looked ready enough in her tweed suit, turtle-neck brown sweater, woolen stockings and Oxfords. "That braces me to the adventure," she said, handing back the flask. "This is like the beginning of a Sherlock Holmes story—old clothes, thick walking sticks, a bottle of liquor and a dark road to travel." Her spectacles turned to scan the extension of the road on the other side of the pavement. It seemed suddenly to dwindle, to become no more than a trail in the deepening fog. "Only," she added, "Sherlock Holmes was too rational to believe in haunted houses."

"His creator wasn't," said McCormack, and drank in turn. The potent whiskey cut from his mouth the savor of those sardines they had eaten together, just before starting into the night. "Conan Doyle believed in ghosts, fairies and God. What time is it, Muriel?"

She peeled down a knitted glove and looked at her wrist watch. "Twenty minutes after eleven. We'd better hurry if we reach this boogey-bin of yours before midnight."

They crossed the highway, and plunged into the half-gloom beyond. Only a narrow strip of the sky hung between the two blocky masses of trees, and from it there filtered a slaty-blue light. The moon would be full, or almost, but the wholly mist-clouds obscured it. Underfoot the going was uneven and turfy, and the tip of McCormack's walking stick sent a pebble scuttling. Muriel started violently, laughed to deprecate her own nervousness, and fumbled for a cigarette. McCormack found himself grateful for the brief flare of her match.

"Tell me all about the house, Scotty," she begged.

"It's a treasure-trove of goblins, if it's authentic," he complied. "I've seen it only twice, and by daylight both times. It has the traditional look, all right—a big, square-roofed ruin, two stories high, on a rock above a stream. The local gossips tell me that it was built maybe sixty years ago, by a young couple who were found one morning in an upstairs room, hanging by the necks."

"Suicide," asked Muriel, "or murder?"

"Nobody's sure. After a while, some relatives moved in, a man with his wife and young son. During the first week, so I understand, the mother died suddenly and mysteriously. And the little boy was so scared by something that he had to be taken to a hospital. Next morning, the father was dangling and

dead—in the same upstairs room. That was the last of regular residence at the place."

MURIEL drew up her shoulders. "I don't wonder. What about the poor little boy?"

"He didn't entirely recover—the groceryman down at the village says he's at the State hospital. Mental case—can't rightly remember who he is or how he got there. Quiet, harmless—but they don't dare leave as much as three feet of rope where he can get to it."

"And nobody's lived in the house since?" prompted the girl.

"Well—not lived in it," McCormack told her. "Once a convict escaped from the prison camp and ran away through the woods. That was year before last. I was spending the summer at my cabin. The State police tracked him to the house, and cut him down from the hook where he was hanging."

"Wooh!" gasped Muriel with shivery relish. "In the upstairs room?"

"In the upstairs room."

McCormack lighted his pipe. Its bowl sent forth a soft rose-colored glimmer, that relieved his strong, bony features with an impression of whimsical gentleness. The night was strangely still, except for the footfalls and respirations of man and woman. No insect chirped or creaked, the autumn leaves did not rustle on the branches. McCormack thought that cold perspiration was starting on his forehead, but perhaps it was the condensation of the mist.

"I dare hope that nobody knows we're out ghost-hunting," he remarked. "Some heavy-handed jokester might dress up in a sheet and come to call."

"Have you brought any charms along?" his companion asked. "Wolfbane, a crucifix, holy water—anything of that description?"

McCormack shook his head. "I'm out to see ghosts, not drive them away," he replied, and smiled. He had an agreeable smile, but with his pipe-fire half screened in ashes, his face looked like a clay mask in the blue dimness. Muriel Fisher felt less cheerful than she had at the beginning of the walk, and far less skeptical of ghosts than when she and McCormack had shared sandwiches and coffee in his snug cabin. That cabin seemed far away just now, but she refused to wish herself back. She had come out here tonight expressly to see a haunted house.

"Where's the scene of all these Gothic horrors?" she asked after a time.

"Almost directly ahead," her companion informed her. "Yes, here's the creek, and the road ends. There was a bridge once, I daresay, but not now."

THE TREES shrank away from this spot, and the fog-strained moonlight was almost strong around the two adventurers. Before them, set deep between rocky banks, ran black, swift water. McCormack stepped cautiously to the very edge, peered down, and then across.

"It looked narrower by day, I must confess," he remarked. "However, I think I can jump it." He flung his walking stock to the far bank, gathered his body suddenly, and straddled his long legs into a skipping leap. He seemed to swing across the stream, gained the rough-looking rocks beyond, and turned back. His thin face was like a genial skull in the moonlight.

"If you go only a lttle way down, it's narrower," he called to Muriel.

But she, too, flung her stick across. "Don't coddle me," she cried gaily. "I can jump as far as you can."

She suited the action of the word, and bravely, but her stride could not match McCormack's, and her skirt hampered the scissory thrash of her legs. One blunt Oxford touched the edge of the far bank, rock crunched and crumbled beneath it. She felt herself falling backward. McCormack, moving quickly for so big a man, shot out a hand and

clutched her by the wrist. With a mighty heave, he fairly whipped her to safety.

"Thanks, Scotty," she gasped, and straightened her spectacles, then the bandanna that was bound over her head and beneath her chin, peasant style. "You spared me a cold bath." They both smiled, and breathed deeply in mutual relief. "I take that escape as a good omen," she went on. "Now, is this the haunted house? It looks to be."

They had come into a larger clearing, but here the mist had thickened to a pearly cloud. In its heart rose a great clifflike structure, with towering walls and a flat roof. The walls had weathered to a gloomy night-gray, in which shuttered windows formed indistinct deviations. A porch had once run the entire width of the front, but the roof was collapsed, the pillars fallen, and the floor all but in ruins.

"Isn't that a lightning-blasted oak in the front yard?" asked Muriel, pointing with her recovered stick. "I suppose owls hoot in its branches to foretell the death of the heir."

"There aren't any heirs," McCormack reminded her. "All of them died, or were hanged. Come around to the side. There's supposed to be an open window there."

He led the way, up a rise in the overgrown yard and through thickset brambles that may once have been a bank of roses. Three windows were ranged in line on the right side of the house, and the rearmost showed blacker than its fellows. McCormack pushed close to it, knee deep in rank shrubs that showed one or two wax-petaled flowers.

"No shutters," he reported, and the glass is all broken out of the sash. Where are you, Muriel?"

"Right with you," came her reply from just behind his arm. He turned, set his hands to her waist, and lifted her lightly through the opening.

"Whee, it's dark," she cried in protest as her feet came to light on the dully-echoing floor. At once she struck a match. It gave blotchy glimpses of a big, crumbling room, apparently running all the way from front to back of this part of the house. McCormack struggled in through the gap where the window had been. His bracing fingers found the wood spongily dry, as if the house had been decaying for six centuries instead of sixty years.

"I brought no flashlight," he informed Muriel. "Only a candle."

"You did exactly right. Why chase away spirits with electricity?" She watched as he ignited the fat tallow cylinder, which yielded a clear, courageous tag of flame. "Now where?" she asked him.

"There should be stairs leading upward," he said, and moved across the room. Its boards creaked and buckled under his shoes, and crumbs of plaster fallen from the shattered ceiling made harsh, crunching noises. The candle showed them a doorway, through which they walked together.

Beyond, they found themselves in a central hall. Here was the flight of stairs they sought, its railings fallen away in a heap, and clotted blackness above. The plaster of the walls had broken away in sheets. Again they were aware of the presence in the house of decay's very soul.

"Do we go up?" inquired Muriel, her voice automatically hushed, and McCormack nodded and again led the way. His left hand held the candle high, his right clutched his stick tightly, as though to be ready to strike a blow. He could not have told what he feared to meet.

THE UPPER landing was encircled with moldy-looking doors, two of them fallen from their hinges. McCormack went to each, Muriel close at his heels, and held in his candle for quick examination. He stopped at the right rear chamber, just above the window by

which they had entered.

"Here's our haunted room," he announced. "See the hooks there, on the wall at the back?"

The hooks he mentioned were set well into the plaster, within inches of the ceiling. Strangely enough for that house of ruin and rot, they appeared to shine in the candlelight as if new and rustless. Elsewhere clung a strange pall of gloom, though the flaked and ragged wallpaper must have been reasonably light in color.

"I wonder if a hundred-watt lamp would help this room any," grunted the tall man. "It looks to be in mourning for the four who were hanged. But we'll douse the candle anyway, in a minute. Hold it, Muriel, while I spread something for us to sit down."

From a big pocket of his shooting-coat he fished a folded newspaper, and, spreading it out, covered a space against the wall directly beneath the hooks. "Now," he said, "light another cigarette if you like. I'll put a fresh fill in this pipe. Ready?"

He took back the candle and blew it out, and they sat down in the dark. After a blinded moment, they saw that a dim radiance stole into the room. There must be chinks in the window-shutter somewhere, and the moon, now close to zenith, was fighting its way through the mist so as to peer in. The two ghost-challengers sat shoulder to shoulder, each silently grateful for touch of the other. Muriel again peered at the illuminated dial of her watch.

"It lacks only seven or eight minutes of midnight," she announced in half a whisper. "Scotty, you're quite willing to stay?"

"Strange as it may seem," returned McCormack, "I'm suddenly quite willing to depart. But I won't. I came here to see ghosts, if there are any, and I don't intend to leave so close to the proverbial witching hour."

It was not much of a success as careless chatter. Silence fell again, and awkwardly. Muriel broke in, in a voice no louder than a sigh:

"Look—"

They both saw, or thought they saw, a stir in the soft shimmer of gauzy light. It might have been streaks of silent rain falling, had the roof been open. Again, it might have been the rhythmic creeping of long, spider-spare legs without a tangible body. McCormack felt something fasten tightly upon his biceps, and started violently; but it was Muriel's fingers, closing for comfort on his flesh. Her hand slid down into his own grasp. He, too, regained something of serenity and strength in being able to reassure her.

"Scotty," she was breathing at his ear, "I wonder if there's something the matter with the doorway. Is it closing?"

He stared. His eyes had grown more used to the almost-darkness.

"Not closing," he made easy-sounding reply. "The door's off the hinges, there it leans against the wall. But the opening does look smaller, somehow. Growing narrower."

"And lower," she added. "It's only an optical illusion, of course," and she chuckled nervously, "but I'd bet good money that you'd have to stoop to get through it."

AGAIN THE illusion of bandy leglines stirring in the room, this time very near. McCormack, at least, fancied that he heard something like a stealthy scramble, and once again he lifted the stick that had never quitted his strong right hand. His left squeezed Muriel's wrist, trying to win back some of the calmness he had transmitted to her. But when he tried to fix his eyes on the spidery movement, it seemed to fade, to retreat. He echoed in his heart the words of his companion: optical illusion, of course—

"I'd have to stoop, too," Muriel was

telling him. "It looks like the door to . . . to a doll-house." Again her chuckle, more hysterical than before.

"Chin up," McCormack exhorted her. "When we get up from here and walk toward it, there'll be width and height enough."

"Are you . . . so anxious to see ghosts . . . now?" she fairly quavered.

McCormack did not wish to heighten her terror by denying; he did not wish to tempt any strange and sudden visitation by agreeing. He therefore kept his peace, and quartered the floor and walls with his straining eyes. Once again, something rustled near by, menacingly stealthy. He leaned hard against the wall, and drew up his legs so that his feet would come under him and bring him, if necessary, swiftly erect.

Too much imagination, he accused himself. This was undoubtedly the way that psychical investigators conditioned themselves to experience phenomena that never really happened. No wonder people had been frightened into hanging themselves on those hooks overhead. But he was too rational a being to be thus stampeded.

Optical illusion, he insisted once again to his thundering heart. At most, none of the things he almost saw or heard would be too terrible to face. A blow of his stick—but what if it lashed out and met no substance?

"I keep thinking I hear voices," Muriel said once again. "Not human voices—not exactly. They're too soft and—"

"Like whispers?" McCormack suggested, as casually as he could manage.

"No. Less audible than that. They're like an echo, a memory—they can be felt, not heard."

"Imagination," said McCormack, rather rudely. His eyes sought the door again.

There was no door. Only blank wall, solidly pale in the dimness. He felt a tightness on his heart and throat, and with real savagery tried to persuade himself that this was no more than curious—notable—absorbing.

"We're shut in," Muriel said aloud, and the ring of apprehension in her voice made him jump. Next moment a bell rang, clear and far away—rang again, again, again—

"It's midnight," he said briskly, and with the greatest relief he had known in years. "Hear that clock striking? Let's clear out, and head back to the cabin."

HE ROSE to his feet, feeling unaccountably light, as though he had floated up. Once more he led the way, trying to make out the vanished door through which they had come short minutes ago.

Muriel's cry of agonized terror brought him up short.

"Scotty! *Look back there where we were sitting!*"

"What do you mean?" He spun around, still with that strange, airy lightness.

Against the wall dangled two silent figures. Bands, or nooses of rope, held them by the necks to the gleaming hooks that jutted close to the ceiling. The figures hung limp, lank, unmistakably dead.

One was long and thin, in rough coat and trousers. The other, smaller and unmistakably feminine, wore a tweed suit and scuffed walking shoes.

To McCormack, those two corpses looked vaguely familiar.

Again Muriel's fear-loud cry beside him: "Scotty, I can't see you! Where have you gone?"

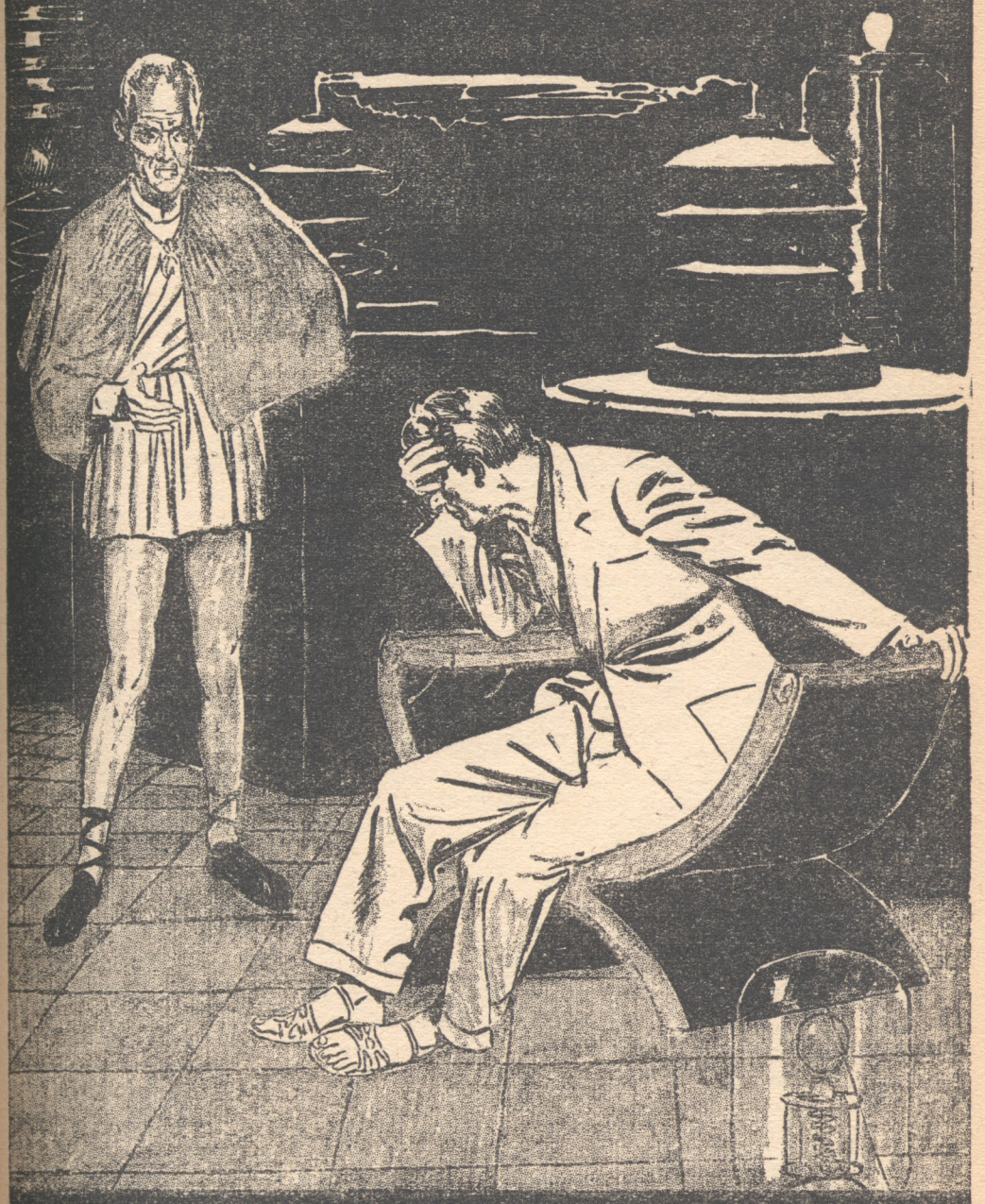
"I'm right here," he said hoarsely, and turned in the direction of her wail.

He could not see her, either. He put out a hand to touch her.

He could not see the hand.

Immediately he knew what man and woman were hanged on the wall of the haunted room.

CLOSED DOORS



BY A. B. L. MACFADYEN, JR.

CLOSED DOORS

Doors—closed on haunting memory.

A VOICE said, "He's coming around," and in the fraction of a second before he opened his eyes, he remembered the dream. A strange, wild dream, full of curious symbols. It had seemed to him that he was walking down a dark corridor, lined with a thousand open doors. Each door showed a fragment of his life, but when he passed each door it slammed shut, and that fragment vanished from his memory, until at the end of the corridor there was only one door left. That door stayed open.

He tried to remember the scenes beyond the other doors. One had shown a strange city of tall, golden towers rising against a crimson sunset, with curious air machines angling across the dusk, high in the air among the buildings. A scene perfectly familiar, and then, suddenly, quite alien.

Another room had shown a white room shining with apparatus; there had been a very old man with a smooth, bland face, and a sphere of light that whirled between the twin electrodes of an enormous electrical device. He had looked at it, known what it was. Then the door had closed, and he had not known.

Other doors, too. A door showing dark gulfs of space, and a cluster of silver spheres dwindling away toward a distant white star. Doors showing places he had been, things he had seen. Doors of knowledge. Bits of information suddenly wiped out. *Wurrukwah, Luna, population two million.* The door slid shut. A man speaking. "History cannot be altered, because it is history. All altering has already taken place. Do you see, Creon?"

Creon? The door closed. He tried to think who Creon was. Then he tried to remember the name. But it was gone.

Down the dark corridor of his life's memories, until they were all gone but one, until he had lost all identity and almost all knowledge but a fragment: "*. . . and in 1952 Miles Saunderson reached the Moon.*"

Black letters on green paper. A fragment of a sentence he had read somewhere. The last door.

Beyond the last door was a sudden noisy darkness, filled with the shrill squealing of tortured metal and rubber, gears clashing, voices murmuring confusedly, voices shouting wordlessly, bangs, creaks, hisses, howls, voices waxing and waning, and a mighty roar over all—the roar of a vast city. A thin voice quite close yelled, "Ex-x-try poiperr-r. Read all abaht ut. Sannerson repahrted mi-i-hissing!"

The same voice suddenly shouted, "Hey, look out there! Hey, *mister!*"

He did not understand. Then something rounded, hurtling, caught him a glancing blow on the left hip. His feet left the ground. A flat surface reeking of oil came up out of the darkness and hit him on the temple.

The dream ended.

And so now he opened his eyes and murmured, "Who am I?"

THE WHITE-COATED man bending over him straightened and nodded to the white-uniformed girl. "Amnesia. I was rather afraid of that. The question is, was it the bump or did he have it before? Those clothes he had on—bring them out, Miss Braley. We'll see if he knows them.

"I'm Dr. Cavendish," the white-coated man said. "You were brought in an hour ago—a car knocked you down on Broadway and a newsboy pulled you

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Master Glaze is the best I have ever used and is put on the easiest. I glazed my car last Sunday, and boy!—does it look swell. Lewis Thompson, Ill.

STANDS THE TEST

Master Glaze has been put to the test here directly in front of the Atlantic, where the salt spray with the fine beach sand, including road dirt, form a heavy film on paint. Your Cleaner lifted the film and brought back the original shine. H. M. Chambers, N. J.

LONG LASTING

Used Master Glaze on my car last summer. It stood up all winter in good shape. Now my friends are asking about it, so will sell. A. Stonis, Ill.

SELLS 8 IN HOUR

Master Glazed a car on a demonstration in the parking lot and sold eight sets within one hour. I am delighted with it as a fine product and as a good seller. Edmund M. Blanken, Pa.

VERY MUCH PLEASED

Received shipment of 96 sets and have been very much pleased with the way it sells. It out-demonstrates any and every type of cleaner and polish I have seen. Dave Jones, Mont.

It's Fun To MASTER GLAZE

It's really a pleasure to Master Glaze. You almost feel like a magician when you see the quickness and ease with which you can transform your car into a thing of gleaming beauty. New cars and good paint jobs are entitled to this protection—old cars with dull paint almost instantly look like different cars. No experience is required. Even a child can Master Glaze.

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Master Glaze glorifies the beauty of your car, protects the finish, and saves you money Less washing, less polishing, less work. You will have a more beautiful car to drive, and a car whose resale value will always be more. You owe it to yourself and to your car to find out about Master Glaze. Send your name for free booklet and free trial offer.

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Gentlemen: Please send your FREE illustrated booklet and tell me how I can get Master Glaze for my own car FREE. This does not obligate me in any way.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

out. You're a bit of a mystery—the boy said one minute you weren't there and the next minute you . . . er . . . *were*. Do you remember anything?"

He lay there, head aching under its bandeau of gauze. He had the curious idea that only part of him was there, that the most important part was an infinite distance away, and was trying to tell him something. There was something he had to do, here.

But he hadn't the faintest idea what it was.

He looked at Cavendish, and, almost without volition, made his own mind a blank, then sharpened the edge of his consciousness; it was a familiar trick, he thought nothing of it. A tiny voice, confused, whispered in his consciousness: "Handsome devil . . . wonder who he is . . . where's Braley . . . should I take Nora to lunch, or Celia . . . maybe Celia's going with Norton . . . that guy's beating my time . . . golf tomorrow . . . maybe he was at a fancy-dress ball . . . if I get away early . . . that appendectomy . . . who's on the desk in out-patients—"

The thoughts of Cavendish!

Yet Cavendish was quite unaware of *his* thoughts. That was what amazed him.

Where had he come from?

He said, "Yes, there is something I remember—" just as the girl in white returned to the room. She carried curious, glittering garments on a wire frame.

He sharpened his mind again and caught: "Gee, he's handsome . . . wonder who he is . . . this fancy dress . . . must have lots of money . . . Park Avenue . . . guess he got tight at a ball . . . wonder if he's married . . . if Bill doesn't take me to lunch Carl will . . . why didn't I fix my face . . . I should have got a wave yesterday . . . what strange eyes he's got . . . right through you . . . as wise as time . . . where did I read that . . . he doesn't think much of me . . . oh, well . . . Park Avenue—"

She held up the clothes, and he felt a swift thrill of pleasure. Sunshine shafted across the bed, and the shimmering garments flashed from blue into green fire. He said, "Are those mine?"

"That's what you were wearing," said Cavendish. "Bit flashy. Of course, you must have been at a masquerade, or something like that. You'd hardly be wearing them about the street. See if there's any identification, nurse—laundry marks, tabs."

Laundry marks? The nurse put her cheek to the shimmering stuff of the tunic, sighed, then hastily looked at the collar. "There's something. Gee, a gold tab—it says, 'Creon'—C-r-e-o-n. Would that be the tailor, Dr. Cavendish?"

"Maybe. That's a Greek name——probably a Greek tailor. We'll look up the telephone directory. Anything else?"

She was searching in the pockets. He watched, slightly annoyed. The dyed fingernails vanished, reappeared with a piece of paper. She looked at it, lips moving, then handed it to the doctor. He shook his head. "Some kind of shorthand. Mean anything to you?"

HE TOOK IT. The paper—green, thin, tough—felt familiar, but the queer script was undecipherable; it had a faintly English look. He said, "It means nothing to me."

"Well, well!" said Cavendish briskly. "What about the name Creon, then? Is that your tailor?"

"That is my name," he said automatically, and then suddenly knew that it was true.

"Really? That's funny—I mean, it's a Greek name, and you don't look like a Greek."

"What do I look like?"

"Like . . . like— Nurse Braley, what does he look like to you?"

He caught her thought: "Like Taylor and Cooper rolled into one, with a dash of Johnny Weismuller," and wondered who they were. She said, "Like . . . . like"—and finished in a burst—"like a man from another planet!"

Cavendish looked annoyed. "Come on, Miss Braley, no romantics. Mr. Creon, I'm afraid you're a case for Psychiatry, but I'll have another shot. (I'm babbling . . . what happened to my professional style . . . he's an unnerving devil.) Oh, you said you remembered something? What was that? Maybe we can build on it. What was it?"

Creon said ironically, "And in 1952 Miles Saunderson reached the Moon."

Cavendish grew impatient. "Oh, come—that can't be a memory. It hasn't happened yet. This is 1952 all right, but he hasn't reached it yet. In fact, the poor fellow's reported missing—a meteor, they think. The telescope lost sight of him yesterday. Think again."

Nurse Braley suddenly paled, and whispered, "Listen!"

Creon had heard it while Cavendish was speaking, but had said nothing.

Now the nurse went to the window and threw it up. Clearly above the city's roar, rising to the window from the street below, came a newsboy's treble: "Ex-x-try poiper-r-r! Sannerson reaches thuh Moon! Sannerson reaches—"

The two froze, staring at Creon. His mind caught twin impressions of unreasoning fright. He opened his eyes fully, and tried to calm them with his own brain.

Apparently it was too much for them. Dr. Cavendish and Nurse Braley turned as one. Cavendish gasped, "He's mad," and in an instant both were through the door. Running footsteps dwindled into silence.

Creon was puzzled. He slid out of bed, still a trifle shaky, and went to a wall mirror, glancing with distaste down at the single shapeless garment of cotton he was wearing.

The face that looked back out of the mirror was dark, smooth, bland—the face of a young man except for the ageless eyes. He tried to think how old he was. Younger than Cavendish, or older? How old was Cavendish? How did one measure age? What *was* age?

But surely there was nothing in this face to frighten a trained man into flight. Hence it must have been his mild effort to calm the pair mentally. When they felt, for the first time, another mind probing into theirs— And that returned him to the primary puzzle.

"Who am I?"

Slowly he slipped out of the bed-garment. He was very tall, and darkly tanned all over, as though he habitually went naked; he wondered why these people wore clothes in bed. He slipped into his own clothes—he would be conspicuous, of course, but there was nothing else to wear, and from the nurse's brain he had obtained the information that nudity wasn't customary, was even punishable. They even wore clothes when swimming.

The kiltlike shorts swung against his legs as he put on his high-collared tunic and short cape. He had absorbed a lot of information from the brains of those two. What were they doing now? Probably securing reinforcements.

He sighed. Creon. The name was becoming increasingly familiar. But who was Creon? Where from? Why had he come? Who—whence—why—

And whither? Four questions that summed up life. Answered, a man would have nothing else to know.

But this was not the time for philosophy. He stepped to the door and shut

the murmur of the great building out of his ears, listening with his mind. If he read aright the character of Cavendish—

Confused and excited thoughts were coming down the corridor from beyond a bend, through the walls: "He may be dangerous . . . over six feet and built like a panther . . . obviously mad . . . those eyes . . . maybe hydrophobia . . . yet he seemed normal . . . should have known from that . . . not amnesia, just madness. All right, you fellows, now watch this bird."

Six white-coated men came running around a bend. Creon wondered if everybody in this world was as stupid as Cavendish. It didn't seem possible; he hoped he had merely hit a poor specimen.

Six. He could overpower them all with his hands, he felt sure, but why bother? Creon closed the door, threw the crude bolt, and strode smoothly to the window, still open. It was fifteen stories to the dirty street and the jammed tops of cars. He stepped calmly out on the narrow ledge and moved along it for forty feet. The wind threatened to push him into the abyss.

He went in through an open window. A woman was undressing for bed. He murmured, "Excuse me," and wondered why she screamed. These people were all emotionally unstable.

He opened the door, found himself in a corridor, and ran for the elevators. He was perspiring slightly.

THREE HOURS later, toward five o'clock in the afternoon, Creon sat thoughtfully on a bench in Central Park, and watched the sun go down behind Manhattan's towers, listened to the city's eternal murmur. His swishing shorts were gone, and so was the cape. He wore a business suit of gray serge, with a blue pin-stripe. Hopelessly drab and uncomfortable, he thought. He still had his sandals, though.

The suit was almost new, but the

pockets were still empty. He smiled faintly. On quitting the hospital he had immediately sought a clothing establishment. He had picked out a white linen suit and tried to walk out with it, to find the manager barring the door.

"We only give credit to our regular customers, sir. You'll have to pay cash for the suit. Money, and I don't mean a check, either. Pay up or I call a cop."

Money? Creon felt quite sure that where he came from there was no money. He said, "Men make things for each other. I don't see the need for money. Why isn't everything free?"

The man said, "Oh, a crank, eh? Pay up, or I take back the suit."

"Take it back," said Creon.

In a side street he found a small sign: "M. Schneider, Tailor," and went in. A stooped man with a mane of white hair met him.

Creon swept off his cloak and tunic: "I'll trade these for a suit."

Old fingers touched the strange fabric. "Ach, for such a cloth as this—if it is cloth—I would give you two suits, my friend. A dress it will make for my Martha— Pick what you like from the rack."

Creon found a ready-made that fitted his long body, conscious of the old man's eyes. As he dressed he opened his mind to the other's thoughts, gleaning some information about this mad world. He was about to ask one of a dozen puzzling questions when a flat voice spoke from a small radio on the counter.

"All cars! Watch for a man in a blue masquerade costume, escaped an hour ago from Central Hospital. This man is mad and dangerous. He is believed to be a shizophrenic. Six-feet-two, about a hundred and eighty pounds, dark hair, black eyes, no scars, very strongly built. He will probably fight if cornered. All cars! Watch for—"

The little man's hand slipped under the counter. Creon got his thought and leaped through the door before the gun cleared the counter. He ran to the cor-

ner, then walked leisurely away. Things were becoming more and come complicated.

And so now he sat on a bench in Central Park, watching the evening sun go down, wondering who he was.

Creon. Creon of—

Of Earth? Of another planet?

There were several alternatives.

Amnesia. But how explain his ability to hear thoughts as clearly as the spoken word, his clothes of that unknown fabric?

Another planet? Creon dismissed that right away. He spoke English—though with a certain accent—and physically he could be nothing but an Earthman. Same stock, but more highly developed.

What was it? Perhaps an advanced Earth scientist had taken him as a baby, subjected his growing mind to intensive scientific education, developing his powers until the brains of others were open to him—and then had wiped out his identity by post-hypnotic control, turned him loose on Broadway as an experiment in adaptation, dressed in such clothes as men might wear in a time to come!

HE TOYED with this thought. It was a neat idea, but fantastic; no scientist in his senses would turn his subject loose beyond his observation.

Schizophrenic? Nonsense. Creon sighed, then frowned. What was that thought, a minute ago? In a time to come! Was he some strange wanderer from another year, a man from tomorrow, an exile of the misty centuries? More nonsense. That was quite impossible. Time was nothing but the casual direction of events. Time traveling he could not conceive.

A patrolman in the distance moved in his direction. Creon rose casually and strolled in the direction of Broadway.

Wandering slowly along that river of light he considered what seemed to be the universal thought of those around him—money. He would even need money if he wanted to sleep with a roof over his head. Maddening.

He heard a rat-faced man, passing, think: "Millions in it . . . millions —" and followed him for a few steps. Then he turned away in disgust. The fellow was mad.

He turned west and wandered down Thirty-ninth Street, then turned south down a nameless alley. A dozen more turns and he was wandering lost among the dark, smelly streets by the shadowed river, listening to the thoughts, ragged and broken, which drifted like dark whispers out of the gloomy buildings to the street.

He saw many curious things and heard many more. He saw three hold-ups and listened to the thoughts of four separate murderers, and to the dying sensations of their victims; he caught the emotions of a woman beaten by her husband, and another in the arms of her lover.

Sickened, he walked on slowly in the darkness.

Once he passed a hotel called the Chandler House. It was only one of dozens. Yet as he walked past, he felt the strangest compulsion. A tiny voice at the other end of infinity seemed to shout a wordless command at him.

He pulled the paper which bore the strange shorthand from his pocket, looked at it, then walked on.

Two blocks away he stopped, outside an ancient brownstone house. He sharpened the fine edge of his extra-sensory perception, and listened to the still, small voices which talked silently in the darkened recesses of his mind. He thought: "Criminals gambling in a basement room. And I need money—"

For a few seconds he tried to consider the ethics involved, but nobody bothered about ethics here. So he slipped silently on sandaled feet to the back alley, forced

the shaky rear door, and filtered down the crumbling basement stairs. Faint perspiration wet his forehead, and he was surprised to find his heart, now and then, skipping a beat.

He had learned about fuses from the mind of an electrician. He found the fuse-box and thoughtfully removed them, then sped along the corridor to the front room. The corridor was dark to utter blackness, and from somewhere upstairs came indignant murmurs. He would have to work fast. His finger-tips skimmed the right-hand wall.

A door opened, a man's voice cursed, and he felt an advancing thought front. Somebody was coming to the fuses. Creon placed the man's progress perfectly by the intensity of his thoughts, and dodged him in the darkness.

At the door of the room he listened with his mind. Four men were sitting around the table in the utter dark, waiting for the lights to go on. Each had one hand on his gun, and the other on his money.

Not so good. Creon was on tiptoe now. Three silent steps took him to the table. A voice muttered, "Damn these lights. Now, you take the farm. Does an oil lamp blow a fuse? Not by a damn sight, it doesn't."

Another said, "Why the hell didn't you stay on that damned farm, Lou?" And suddenly, "Is that you, Fink? What the— Hey, there's a guy in the room!"

Creon's fingers had touched his hand. Creon pounced. The fellow went over backward, and Creon swept the smooth round coins into his pocket. At last he had money.

He kicked the table over. A gun went off, shattering the silent darkness, and there was suddenly confusion in the room. They were still shooting when Creon was running down the corridor, up the stairs and out into the street again.

Creon chuckled, touched the money in his pocket, and strolled in the direction of the Chandler House. This night he would have a roof for his head, and in the morning he would search out a man of science who knew something.

THE CLOCK in the Chandler's dim, shabby lobby said half past one when Creon crossed to the night clerk and asked for a room, standing close to the desk so that his sandals were out of sight. He said, feeling the other's thought, "My bags are at the railway station. They'll be around in the morning. I just got in from . . . er . . . Chicago."

"Which station?" asked the clerk suspiciously.

"The . . . the—" Creon hastily felt in the man's mind—"Grand Central."

"Hm-m-m. Well, it's against the regulations, sir, but I guess I can make an exception. (A handsome devil—wonder who he is?) But the room must be paid for in advance. Sign, please."

He swung the register around.

Creon, for some queer reason, had been yearning to sign. He picked up the pen and tried to scratch his name.

"Try dipping the pen," said the clerk.

"Oh." He dipped it. The pen point approached the paper again.

Destiny, hovering over the desk, flapped black wings and smiled.

A fly alighted on the paper. He waved it away, and hesitated. Should he sign himself Creon, or some other name—Igor Sowatzky, for example?

No, Creon. He put the point down.

The fly came back and poised on the pen. He shook the pen, dropping a blot. The clerk applied a blotter and looked at him suspiciously. Creon put down the point again.

A voice said, "Hey!" and he looked up, thinking it was the police. But it was merely a drunk asking for his mail.

Four times. Creon was annoyed. He

applied the point. Make it, then, John Smith, of Keokuk, Ill.

Before pen touched paper a voice giggled, "Gee, sandals!"

A girl, half drunk, went past on a man's arm. The clerk leaned over the desk and looked curiously at Creon's footgear.

Creon lowered the point. He was determined to sign.

An inch from the paper. The clerk suddenly said, "One minute, sir. Would you mind paying that deposit *before* you sign?"

Creon sighed and pulled from his pocket the round shiny money he had taken from the crooks. The clerk looked at it with popping eyes.

He exploded, "Poker chips! What is this, a gag? What the hell are you trying to pull off?"

Creon said, "Isn't that money?"

The clerk waved a fistful of greenish paper under his nose. *"That's* money! Trying to push me around? You can talk to the house dick— Hey, Hutchings!"

Creon grabbed at the register and the pen. For some reason he was determined to sign. The clerk pulled it away, as a big man came striding across the lobby. Creon got it again, moved it out of his reach. Now for it!

And the doors suddenly swung open before a squad of blue-coated men, running with guns in their hands. A voice yelled, "Hold that guy in the sandals —he's a nut! Grab him!"

Creon groaned, and threw the pen away. He leaped for the stairs like a panther, and bounded up. He ran down the corridor at the top, with doors opening on either hand, to show startled faces. Two guns behind him suddenly woke up echoes. Bullets smashed bits of plaster.

AND THEN, smoothly and quickly, he was back in the dream again.

He moved with rising speed down a dark corridor. Voices, shots, the sound of running feet, faded into the darkness

behind him. Doors of his memories stayed open as he moved abreast, closed as he moved ahead and left them behind. All the curious bits of information he had gleaned about this mad world were fading and dimming, vanishing as doors closed on them.

With accelerating speed he rushed down the dark corridor. Until there was only one door left: " . . . and in 1952 Miles Saunderson reached the Moon."

Even his name was gone. He could not remember who he was.

He opened his eyes and murmured, "Who am I?"

The ancient, bland face close to his smiled. "You're Creon—Creon Am133, in full."

"Why, yes," said Creon. "Yes, I am. But that's all I know—all I'm sure of."

"Nothing else?"

Creon thought. "One thing. Miles Saunderson reached the Moon in 1952."

"Your father made you repeat that five times a day for fifty days when you were six," the other said. "Even four hundred years couldn't wipe out that memory."

Creon sat up on the metal, form-fitting couch. Across the laboratory, a curious sphere of light was whirling between the electrodes of a large machine. A wide window framed tall, golden towers shadowed against the dawn. Air machines were speeding dots in the sky.

Somehow, he felt at home here, although the ugly clothes he wore were in sharp contrast to the glittering blue cape and tunic of the other. Creon said, "You are—"

"Leban—with whom you argued."

"I argued with you?"

"Don't worry—the Psychiatric Bureau will restore your memory in full. Yes, Creon, you argued with me . . . believed that you could go back and give knowledge *then* that we have *now*. But you forgot, forgot even the simple thing we decided on, and even wrote down."

Leban handed him a book of rough paper, crudely bound, then enclosed in an outer envelope of transparent, tough plastic. *Register of the hotel: Chandler House. 1952. Museum of History,* stood out in softly luminous letters. Simultaneously, he was conscious that these were the markings that had made up the "some kind of shorthand" in the note he had found in his pocket and that they were familiar characters. "Open to page 89," Leban instructed.

Page 89 carried a list of names. Midway, there was a blank line, with names above and below. There was an ink blot on the line. That was all.

"What is the year?" asked Creon.

"2152. You see the blank line—re-

member it, perhaps? You tried to write your name on it. Look in your pockets."

Leban was patient.

Creon found a paper there and read: "I am to go to the hotel called the Chandler House, and register there. It is on West Thirty-fourth Street." He sighed. "I know you are my teacher, Leban. Explain it to me. Start with my memory. How did I lose it?"

"In the natural course of time," said Leban.

"You sent me back in time, so that I could write my name on an ancient hotel register? What has that—"

"I sent you back and brought you forward again. I sent you back two hundred years. How long do you think the process took?"

"Why—no time at all. Instantaneous."

"It took two hundred years," said Leban gently. "How could it take less? There are no short cuts in time. Think a minute, and you will see that it must be so. To you it seemed instantaneous, because all body processes are halted, which is why you did not die. You went further back than any other man has yet done. But your memories, because they were only imprints on the neurone paths, faded—as wax impressions fade when the wax smooths out across the years."

"This paper—"

"You forgot how to read."

"My purpose!"

"You forgot, except possibly for some

remnant deep in the subconscious. The imprints of the neurones smoothed out, the tissues relaxed. You forgot—everything."

Creon frowned. He could understand that perfectly. And he knew that this was where he belonged. "I remember nothing of what I did in 1952."

"You have forgotten again. It has been two hundred years."

"Well, why *did* I go back?"

"To complete your thesis—and, incidentally, to settle an argument. You were to sign your name on the blank line. You did not. We knew you did not, of course, because it was not there—and that which is not done is history, as much as that which is done. The present cannot affect the past."

"I think—somehow, I believe I tried. I wonder why I didn't, why I couldn't do that—"

Leban shrugged and touched a button. The low, soft whine of the spinning globe died away. "Something stopped you. Perhaps a fly lit on your nose. Perhaps there was no ink, no pen—something. For you didn't.

"More probably, you never tried. You have forgotten; so you forgot to try then, no doubt. You hoped to bring back knowledge to the past, and bring back to us, knowledge *of* the past.

"The body can short-cut through space, but the mind cannot. It forgets, for two hundred years pass over it. It cannot be done. There are many who go back; in the years to come, yet more will try, no doubt. Perhaps in our age today, walking our streets as you walked those of the past, are bewildered, mentally confused men of our future. In any age, in any time, there must be those few from other times who have come back.

"We cannot recognize them, nor can they tell us. We know them only as mentally confused—amnesia, perhaps we call it.

"They are there—but the door is closed. They have forgotten who they are."

DEATH SENTENCE

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

DEATH SENTENCE

When no lie can stand, when memory is the accuser—the court became the house of no return!

THE room was clean and airy and filled with light. The western side was filled from ceiling to floor with windows through which the afternoon sun was shining, its rays spread into a mellow glow by some quality of the glass. A current of fresh air flowed from grilled openings set low around the walls.

Blackie Riordan squirmed. The room was too clean, too airy, and especially there was too much light. But he kept his face emotionless, set in hard lines. He looked out of the windows, over the roofs of the buildings of the city. He looked everywhere except at the little man sitting in the seat of the judge. There was a fringe of white hair around the little man's head, and the sunlight haloed it. His face was composed and calm. He was reading a sheaf of papers before him. The prosecutor had just handed the papers to him.

There was no jury. There was no place for a jury to sit. There was none of the fuss and hullabaloo usually attendant upon a trial. No reporters, no photographers. Riordan knew; he'd been tried before, but never by this new procedure. The old trials had been sort of funny; but there was nothing funny about this.

Seated in the chair beside him, Johnson crossed his legs, and the movement called a flicker from Riordan's eyes. Ever since he had been picked up—for "questioning"—Johnson had been with him. Johnson had said he was protecting Riordan's interests. It was damned poor protection. All Johnson had done through those interminable tests—and during some of them Riordan had been unconscious—had been to watch. To give him credit, he had watched closely, but in a detached manner. If that was protection—

But, of course, Johnson was lying. The prosecutor had been lying. The white-frocked men who had made him sit in those uncomfortable chairs had been lying when they told him all they wanted to do was talk to him. The stolid guard, a husky six-footer, who sat on Riordan's left, proved they had been lying. They were trying to get something on him. But they were going about it in a new way. No third degree, which he had expected, no back room, with straps and lights.

Rumors of this new procedure had seeped down into the underworld—ugly rumors. Men had been picked up, men against whom no evidence was in existence. They had been taken to this tall glass and steel structure—and they never returned to their old haunts. They never came out of this building.

THE JUDGE finished reading the papers. The prosecutor stepped down from the bench and stood respectfully waiting. The judge moved a switch, and a recording instrument hummed momentarily. Then the sound went off into silence as the motor warmed up.

"James Riordan, alias Blackie Riordan, alias Peter Donahue, alias Bart Reagan, arise and face the bar of justice."

Riordan gulped. They had every alias he had ever used. He felt cold and fearful inside. How had they known?

He stumbled to his feet. He felt a little better as memory of what lawyers had told him came back. They were only going to arraign him—to hold him, for jury trial. Right of trial by jury was

the heritage of every man. And Riordan knew there was no evidence against him that would carry weight with a jury. He'd removed that kind of evidence, removed it in such a way that it would never testify against him.

"James Riordan, you are charged before this court with infractions of the code of criminal law, according to the revised statutes of 2001, of the items as hereinafter set forth.

"Item one: That, on September 21, 1982, at the age of six years, you violated the ordinances of this city as made and provided, and the laws of this state . . . and committed your first crime . . . by stealing from the fruit stand of one Guisippi Verlotti, while the owner was not looking, three oranges—"

Blackie Riordan looked at the judge in startled, shocked surprise. He had expected anything, anything but this. There were crimes that could be laid at his door, real crimes, but they were charging him with the theft of three oranges!

His mind slipped back over the gulf of the years, and he saw again that vegetable and fruit stand on Wharf Street. Rumbling trucks running over granite paving blocks, a narrow, littered street, with a dozen different nationalities thronging through it. Old Guisip had been engaged in an argument, and the oranges had looked tempting, and subsequently, up an alley, had tasted good. Even now he remembered how good those oranges had tasted. He did not know enough psychology to know that if the oranges had tasted bad, or had given him a stomach ache, he would not now, in all probability, stand before a judge—

In shocked surprise he looked up, and in his black eyes there was fear of their knowledge, and a little relief to think that all this legal machinery moved to charge him with the theft of three oranges.

"How . . . how did you know that?" His voice was hoarse. Then he caught himself, realizing what he was

doing. But what the hell? What could they do with him for stealing three oranges?

And then he remembered and a cold fear of some unknown clutched him. No one had known of that theft, not even Verlotti.

"Item two: that, between the ages of seven and twelve, you were consistently absent from school—"

Blackie Riordan's dark face did not change. Inwardly, he grinned. The judge was crazy, the prosecutor, standing there respectfully listening, was crazy, Johnson, standing at his right, and listening with alert attention, was crazy, the guard, standing on his left—But if they were crazy, what was the guard doing? Why should he be here?

HE LISTENED to the voice of the judge, and he heard the words, and they brought back things he thought he had forgotten. His mouth hung open a little and shifting lights moved in his eyes.

He was only a kid, and school had been a bore and a nuisance. He much preferred to hang around a small garage. There were fascinating machines in that garage—lathe, to work in metal, torches, to cut through stubborn steel, wrenches — And there were automobiles that needed repairing, engines with the heads off, the valve assembly bare, engines with the oil pans off, the maze of connecting rods a bewildering but fascinating puzzle. Wrecked cars—

Pinky Schwartz, and young Guisippi Verlotti, son of the old Guisip who kept the fruit stand, had found school a nuisance too, and helped in that same garage, in defiance of the truant officers.

It had been the nucleus of a gang, Pinkie, and Guisippi, and Blackie. There had been small thefts from the merchants on Wharf Street.

Blackie Riordan stared at the judge. Item by item the judge was enumerating those thefts. He wasn't missing a one of them. Two pairs of shoes from the display in front of the Adams Shoe Store . . . four dollars in cash from

the Thorndyke Meat Market . . . ninety-nine cents from a gum machine . . . nickels from plugged telephone boxes. . . .

How did the judge know?

Fear rose in Blackie Riordan. Somebody had squealed. And the fear climbed to greater heights, anger rising with it. Who had it been? It couldn't have been Guisippi. He had stopped a slug from a rival gang five years ago. It hadn't been Pinkie. He would have done such a thing, the sneaking rat. But he hadn't—

Page after page the judge read, his voice dry and detached, with faint undertones of repugnance in it, as if he hated to read the words on the pages in front of him. Every crime Blackie Riordan had ever committed—except one. Step by step he went over the life of James Riordan, alias Blackie, alias— He covered the theft from a fur loft on Market Street the first big crime. He got every detail correct. Blackie listened tensely. There was no detail connected with that job that was important. He relaxed. Somehow the judge had it right. Guisippi had put the shot into that watchman, not Blackie Riordan. And ever after that, Guisippi had been changed. Sullen, instead of light-hearted, nervous and always watching. When he had coughed out his life at the last, Guisippi hadn't seemed to care. He had seemed relieved.

Every crime—except one. He had covered an amazing daylight bank robbery, made in spite of tear gas and protective screens to drop in front of the tellers, and alarm bells of every kind, a crime for which Blackie had stood trial, and, in consequence of a jury that could not agree on the identification, had been acquitted.

The judge didn't sound like he was going to be acquitted this time, even if Blackie's lawyer had told him that no man could be put on trial twice for the same crime. Had they changed the law?—Blackie wondered. They had certainly made a lot of changes. They had, if this was a trial.

But it wasn't a trial. It couldn't be. Most of those offenses were outlawed. And you couldn't try a kid for stealing oranges, not twenty-one years after it had been done.

THE JUDGE looked down from his bench. He looked at Blackie.

"Mr. Riordan, do you have anything to say before we proceed further?"

Blackie swallowed. "I got plenty to say. What is this, anyhow? How did you get all that dope on me? Not that it's true. Not a word of it is true. I deny every charge. Not guilty, Your Honor. I want a lawyer. I want a mouthpiece. You got no right to hold me without bail and try me without me havin' a lawyer."

He had brazened his way out before. Bluffing, through years of necessity, had become as natural as breathing. When you were in a spot, stall. They might *think* you were guilty, they might *know* you were, but proving it was another matter.

"I'm not guilty. I want a jury and a lawyer. I got some rights."

He was sweating. The room was cool and airy, but there was a hot flush on him and he was cold inside.

"Mr. Johnson," the judge spoke, "have this man's rights been fully protected, according to the revised statutes?"

"They have, your honor," Johnson answered. He was a little man, prim and neat looking.

Riordan blazed. "My rights been protected! That's a lie! I demand to know what this is: Is this a trial? If so, where is the jury? Where is my lawyer? This man has done nothing to protect me." He jerked his thumb at Johnson.

"Your honor, this prisoner has had full and complete protection at every

step. I stand ready to testify to the accuracy of that report. According to the law, if I am lax in my duty to the prisoner, I have to suffer the same penalty with him. I assure you that I have not been lax."

Blackie gasped. He didn't understand this. Only rumors had seeped down to the underworld, and he hadn't understood the rumors. But they had been ugly.

From the bench the judge bowed. "I do not question your statement, Mr. Johnson." He turned to Blackie. "In answer to your question, Mr. Riordan. This is a trial. There is no jury. There will be no jury. As to your request for a lawyer, it cannot be granted. Lawyers do not practice in this court. They obscure rather than expedite the process of justice—"

Blackie took a deep breath. They weren't fooling. They meant business.

"If it please your honor," the prosecutor spoke for the first time, "I suggest you complete the indictment against this prisoner. Then he may have an opportunity to answer."

The judge nodded. He picked up the papers in front of him, and as he started to read, Blackie quit breathing. For that crime he thought they had missed —they hadn't missed it.

"Item thirty-seven: That, on the 24th day of December, of the year 2002 —the day before Christmas"—he ceased reading to glare at Blackie, as if the date made the crime more heinous— "you, James Riordan, did with malice aforethought—it being your opinion that by so doing you prevented damaging information from being revealed to the authorities—in cold blood murder Albert Schwartz, alias Pinky Schwartz, by shooting him in the back of the head with a thirty-eight caliber revolver, which revolver you subsequently disposed of by throwing it into the river at the foot of Wharf Street, said criminal act of murder being committed in an alley back of a saloon at Seventh and Market, at approximately the hour of 9:32 p. m.—"

IN THE SILENCE that filled the room Blackie Riordan could hear a man fighting hard for breath. He couldn't hear the man any more. The guard and Johnson were lifting him in a sitting position, and—wonder of wonders—the prosecutor was offering him a drink of water from a fragile paper cup. And the judge, looking concerned, was leaning over his bench to see what was going on.

"He has fainted, Your Honor," Johnson spoke. "He will be all right in a few minutes. Unfortunately, this has been a rather trying ordeal for him."

Then Riordan was on his feet, his dark face pale, his black eyes wild. But he was fighting back.

"Pinky was a rat, Your Honor. He was gunning for me, and he would have put the slug on me or sold me if he had had the chance. We fell out over a dame. It was me or him. I run with him long enough to know the kind of a rat he was—"

He stopped, aware of what he was saying. His face was suddenly flushed with blood. Instantly, in the flick of an eyelash, he was sullen, as the defense mechanism of his criminal training went into action.

"Not guilty—"

The judge appraised him calmly. "You deny the truth of this charge?"

"I deny everything. And you can't prove it. Have you got the gun that you say I killed Pinky with? Have you got it?"

The judge turned to the prosecutor, and the prosecutor admitted they did not have the gun. He remained his urbane self, unperturbed by the admission. They hadn't even tried to find the gun. Probably it was sunk so deeply in the river mud that even the most

powerful magnet would not bring it to the surface.

"The State does not have the murder weapon, Mr. Riordan," said the judge.

"All right then. If you won't give me a lawyer, I'll have to defend myself."

Johnson had not spoken.

"Have you got any witnesses." Something of courage came back to Riordan as he spoke. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. There would be no answer to his question. The alley had been dark.

The judge did not confer with the prosecutor. "There were no witnesses, Mr. Riordan."

"No witnesses! No guns! Then how can you say I killed Pinky Schwartz? How can you prove it? He had plenty of enemies in this town who would have been only too glad to do him in. Any of them might have done it. I didn't, and you can't prove I did."

The burden of proof, he knew from his old appearances in court was on the prosecution. A man was presumed innocent until he was proven guilty.

The judge didn't answer. The prosecutor said nothing. Johnson was silent. The guard stood quietly at attention.

The judge removed his glasses. He looked down from the bench.

"The State has one witness against you, Mr. Riordan."

"One witness?" A little of the defiance went out of Blackie. He saw how calm and sure the prosecutor was,

how quietly Johnson and the guard stood. "Who? Produce him, so I can face him. I dare you to produce him."

"He is present in court at this moment."

BLACKIE'S startled eyes went around the courtroom. He tried to laugh, and almost succeeded. He knew a bluff when he saw one. That was all this was, a bluff. They were just guessing, hoping to make him confess.

"Who is he? Let me face him."

"The witness is yourself, Mr. Riordan. Your guilty memory that stored away all the details of all your crimes, even to details that you have consciously forgotten."

"Me? Me testifying against myself?"

"Yes. For seventy-five years it has been known as a scientific fact that under the influence of certain drugs a man will tell the truth, cannot tell anything but the truth. Scopolamine is such a drug. Early attempts to use it showed it was a very tricky drug, and could not be used on all people without endangering their lives. Moreover, it was formerly held that the use of this drug usurped the right of jury. But recent refinements made its use possible with complete safety, and the statutes of 2001 have changed the law. While under the influence of this drug you were asked questions. Part of the time you were unconscious. From your answers, your whole past was built up, the details of every crime you ever committed secured. You have to face the evidence of your own guilty memory, Mr. Riordan."

"You mean I have been forced to testify against myself?"

"That, in essence, is what was done."

"But you can't do that! It's not legal. You can't force a man to testify against himself."

The judge remained urbane. "Until the Act of 2001, which brought court procedure up to date, enabling justice to take advantage of the advances of science, we could not force a man to

testify against himself, we could not use drugs or other tests to determine the truth or falsity of an accusation. However that Act, which discarded the jury system—recognized for centuries as a very fumbling method of determining guilt—also provided for the use of scientific methods of determining the innocence or guilt of an accused prisoner. The act has now gone into effect, as you may or may not have heard, together with its other sections, relating to punishments—"

Riordan stood very still, but he wasn't listening. He had heard those ugly rumors going around the underworld. He knew that a few men had been brought to this new concrete, steel, and glass building. And he was remembering that not one of them had ever returned.

The judge finished. Johnson spoke. "I believe Mr. Riordan wishes to plead not guilty, Your Honor, to deny the truth of the charges brought against him. For the sake of the record, and for his sake, I ask that he be given the opportunity to answer each charge separately, and that the lie detector be used to check his answers. This protection is provided by the law."

"Certainly, Mr. Johnson. He shall have every protection."

Riordan didn't say anything. He stood, a husky, well-built youth, with a mottled face and shifting eyes. Sullen now, clinging only to defiance, and to that without any hope. The protection of Johnson was no protection at all, for a guilty man. He was sullen, and he tried to show by his defiance that he didn't care, that whatever they did with him, they wouldn't break his will. What they would do, he had no idea.

From a side room, a chair was wheeled in. He was told to sit in that chair. Pads were attached to his arms, pads checking his respiration, perspiration, heart action, and blood pressure. The count of his crimes was read to him, beginning with the theft of three oranges.

HE REPLIED not guilty, knowing that was his only hope, and knowing that was no hope at all. And each time he answered, the flickering needles showed him a liar. He knew that this was done for the sake of the record and not for his sake. Johnson was giving himself every out. The sentence was already cut and dried. He did not think about that sentence. Under the laws he knew, premeditated murder called forth one or two sentences—life imprisonment or death. He was barely twenty-seven. He would live a long time in some foul prison. Better death. But that was bravado. Life in any form was better than death, for death you didn't know about, and even life behind prison walls was something you knew.

The test was finished, the chair wheeled out. And now there were four guards, four husky men in uniform.

The judge was looking down from his bench. "Do you have anything to say, Mr. Riordan, before I pass sentence on you?"

"Yes . . . yes—" Then he choked, and couldn't say what he had to say.

There was silence in the courtroom and the judge sat waiting. There was silence that settled over the eight men, over the four guards, two behind and one on either side of him, over Johnson, over the prosecutor, over the judge, and over Riordan.

"Would it make any difference . . . what I said?"

The judge answered. "Probably not."

"Then go on and sentence me."

The judge nodded and: "By the power vested in me under the revised statutes of the year of Our Lord, 2001, on being found guilty of the charges as set forth in this indictment, including the charge of premeditated murder, I

hereby sentence you, the personality known as James Riordan, alias Blackie Riordan, alias Peter Donahue, alias Bart Reagan, on the 27th day of March of the year 2003, and of the Republic the 228th, as prescribed by the statutes —to obliteration. I further order that this sentence be carried out within the hour."

Blackie Riordan seemed to slump. His shoulders sagged. The four guards moved and hands touched his shoulders, and gripped his arms.

On the bench the judge leaned forward. One hand touched a switch, and the soft hum of the instrument recording this trial relapsed into silence also.

IT WAS MERCY of a sort, that "within the hour" order. For within an hour there was not much time to think. Blackie could not think very well. He seemed stunned. He sat in his cell, looking up. The cell block was high in the building, on the western side. Through the grilled window the rays of the declining sun were coming.

No last breakfast for the condemned, no death watch, no special death cell.

No appeal, and the long wait for a decision from a higher court.

No haggard reporters inquiring how you felt, no pictures of the condemned man flooding the front pages of the newspapers. No sob sisters, and no prayers.

Now he was alone, with himself, with the past he had known, with all the things that had gone to make him a criminal, with all that tortuous trail that led—here.

"Within the hour—"

Blackie Riordan looked up. Immobile, he sat on the cot in his cell, waiting. He sat with his memories, with his treacherous memory that had played him false.

He heard, coming from far away but moving closer, the sound of marching feet. A key turned in a lock. Johnson entered. With him were four guards.

They were efficient. They took his arms. But Blackie Riordan shook his head, and Johnson shook his head too and the guards obeyed Johnson. They let his arms drop.

Blackie Riordan rose to his feet.

"I'll walk this last mile," he said.

Johnson walked beside him, saying nothing. Blackie appreciated that, at least.

It was not as large as the courtroom, but it was light and airy too, and cool and clean. There was a table that looked like an operating table, and a huddle of machinery around that, glass tubes with shifting lights playing in them, the dim hum of throttled electrical apparatus.

BLACKIE looked at the table, at the heavy leather straps. It was not the electric chair that he knew, the hot seat, the squat, powerful chair where they burned you to death. He had seen pictures of the electric chair, and this was not it. Rumors had got down to the underworld of this new table, but no one had ever seen it—no one who had faced it and returned to tell what happened. Something new, as new as that criminal procedure, as new as that "within the hour" order. Perhaps as merciful, as fast, and as efficient. Perhaps a death that struck like lightning, that struck so quickly that there was no time even for straining at the straps.

Blackie stared at the table. It was something he saw and didn't see. His eyes would not focus. The images forming in them constantly blurred.

Two grave men in white uniforms stood beside the table. They turned. One of them moved to a smaller table, picked up a hypodermic syringe lying there, advanced with it.

"Your arm," he said.

Blackie broke. He struck out with his fists, he lunged forward, and the hypo went hurtling to the floor from

the hand of the man in white. It was the last desperate effort of the cornered animal.

Powerful hands seized him and threw him to the floor. He sobbed in unavailing fear. His coat sleeve was ripped open.

The horror and the terror of that moment even science could not make civilized. That feeling of utter helplessness as rough hands ripped the coat sleeve open. *Death . . . Obliteration*—And another hypodermic, quickly lifted from the table, plunged home into his arm.

He could still see and feel and could not move. His memory—now his muscles played him false in the hands of these men. There was a sluggish flow of drugs through his body but he could feel the straps. He could see the light that was brought down close to his eyes, and set whirling. Hypnotically, he stared at it. He could not help staring at it. There was nothing else to see. He tried to close his eyes, but the light beat through the lids.

There was a hum, as of powerful currents. The humming slowed. Hands worked with his head, fitted something hard but warm against the base of his skull.

Then the hum came again, and he knew, vaguely, that the first hum had been only a test. Then he didn't know anything.

The hum died, and with it died Blackie Riordan.

THERE WERE two men with Johnson, and they were very respectful. They said "Mr. Johnson," and they opened the door for him. The three entered the room.

From the floor a man looked up at them.

One of the white-jacketed men became enthusiastic.

"Look, Mr. Johnson, he has already learned to crawl. That shows a good mind, a working mind. We'll do wonders with him. It won't take long,

either. What's his name? Riordan—"

Johnson frowned and shook his head sharply.

"His name is Edward Finnegan, and don't you forget it. Blackie Riordan is dead, not only legally but actually. This man doesn't even bear his name."

"Yes, sir. Sorry I forgot."

Johnson said nothing more. He looked at the man on the floor, but there was no change on his face. The man on the floor looked at him in a vague, puzzled manner. There was no recognition on his face either.

The two attendants moved forward. "Hello, Mr. Finnegan. Come now, you've had a serious blow on the head and you've lost your memory completely, even to the motor reflexes that control walking. You only know how to crawl, and you've learned that within the last few minutes. We'll teach you to walk again, then to talk, then to read—I forgot again; you don't know how to talk, do you? You don't remember the meaning of words? You don't remember anything. Well, we'll teach you."

They bent down, lifted him to his feet, started to walk across the room supporting him between them. He learned quickly, much quicker than a man who had never known how to walk would have learned. Three trips across the room and his legs were beginning to work.

Johnson watched. There was the faintest smile on his face.

"That's fine," he said. "After you have taught him to talk and read, after you start his real education, remember he is to get a thorough training in mechanics. When he was a kid he used to hang out around a garage and he learned to like machinery. This time he will get a chance to learn something about machinery, without the distracting influence of an evil environment."

Johnson paused. "I think he will make an excellent mechanic. Perhaps he may do even better than that—"

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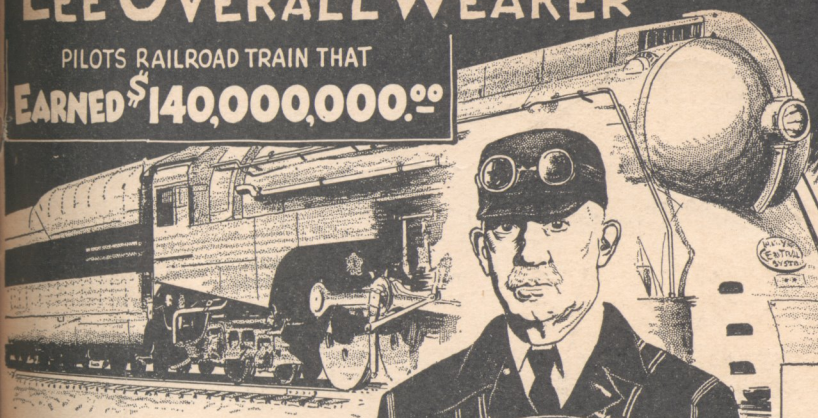

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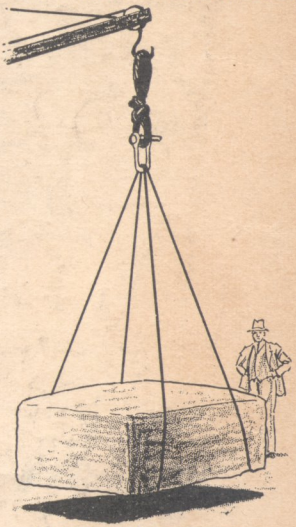

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