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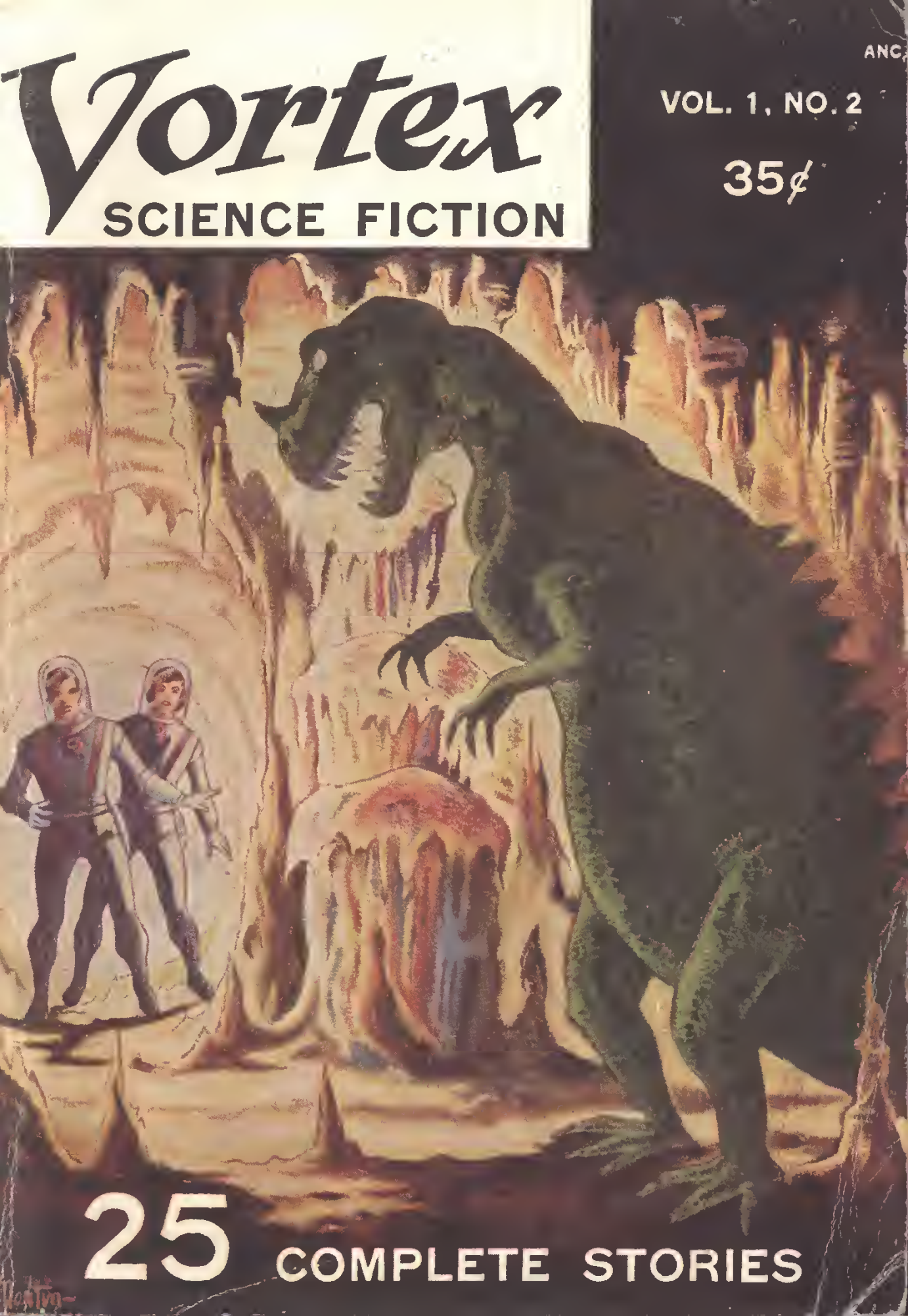

25 COMPLETE STORIES

AN ISSUE OF WHICH TO BE PROUD

Vortex
SCIENCE FICTION

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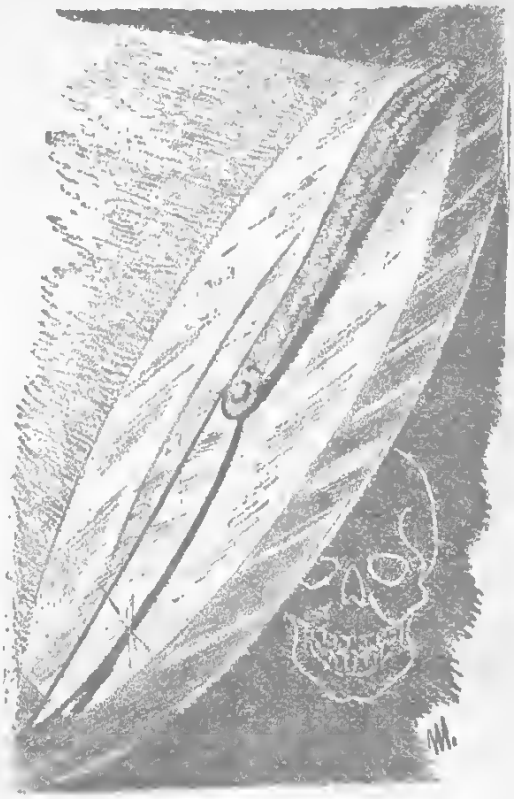
CHESTER WHITEHORN, Editor

TWENTY-FIVE COMPLETE STORIES—NO REPRINTS

The Paper Knife

By LELON KOHLE



WHEN Warren told her he was going to be a guinea pig for one of Dr. Howland's experiments, he was a little miffed at Beryl's reaction. He had geared himself for a scene as only Beryl could play them.

Instead, she stopped dead still for perhaps five seconds, looking him full in the face, her features singularly expressionless. Then she let an irritated jet of smoke escape from between compressed lips, and ground her cigarette out with an unnecessarily repeated spiral gesture.

"Really, Warren!" was all she said.

He felt his gauge rising. "What do you mean, 'Really, Warren,'?" he

mocked, his voice showing his annoyance. "Your reading of the line gave no clue as to the deep undercurrent of your emotions."

"It wasn't meant to," she said cooly.

"Well?" demanded Warren.

"Well what?" Exasperation crept into her tone. "You're a big boy now, theoretically able to make his own decisions. What do you want me to do? Spark you with courage to be a hero, or talk you out of something you're afraid to go through with?"

Warren ground his teeth against the words that rose to his lips. He realized that his anger was partly at himself for having wanted just something of the kind; either encouragement, or some opposition for him to prevail against. He should have known better. He turned to leave.

"I wouldn't have said anything," he told her in a deliberately flat voice, "but to explain that I wouldn't be home till late. I hope you won't be bored without me."

She merely smiled at him without amusement.

"You must promise not to worry about me," he continued, playing the scene as well as he could for an amateur. "Dr. Howland says I'll be perfectly safe. Wait until tomorrow anyway before applying for the insurance."

"I'll try not to think too deeply about it," she said languidly. "It might ruin my concentration on the play. Or didn't I tell you? Langley's

coming over this evening to work with me on some scenes."

"How nice for Langley. I might warn you, however. Dr. Howland said I wouldn't be any later than eleven. You could be having coffee by that time."

She considered a moment. "Yes," she drawled finally, "I guess we could be through by then."

He was paralyzed by the necessity for doing none of the things that were his natural reflex. Some day, he thought, I won't be able to contain it, and then I'll lose her physically too.

That would be, in its way, a relief — but one he couldn't use. Per-

haps he needed her taunts, her indifference, as well as her physical presence. The sum total of her inaccessible proximity was his sole impetus for continuing in research—which was just what she didn't want him to do.

HER idea was New York. There were any number of businesses that would snap him up, considering his technical background. Meanwhile, she could really get somewhere with her acting.

Which was the principal idea. Her ambition for him was to provide herself with security while she tried out her wings. And he hadn't much doubt that she would find them airworthy. She was certainly hotter in that scene from "Lady's Not for Burning" than she had ever been with him. And now she was being the warm and loving wife in "The Four-Poster" as if the role fitted her in real life. It was to laugh.

She was equally certainly too good for the Little Theater group here. "Little Theater." That was, to Beryl, a dirty word. "Little theaters are for little people," she said. "I could be bigger than that — if I had the chance . . ." deliberately not looking at him.

And here he was, sticking his neck out, taking a chance on permanent disintegration, while she acted as though he were indulging some petty whim for some secret personal satisfaction.

He grabbed his hat from the table by the door. "As for your rehearsal," he flung back at her. "Break a leg."

"As for your experiment," she called to him as he was closing the door. "Merde."

Dr. Howland was waiting for him in his office — that little cell of incredible neatness. He noticed Warren's fretfulness immediately.

"You know you don't have to go through with this if you don't want to," he said quietly. "You volunteered, and that's the only reason you were chosen. I'm not at all sure you're the man for the job anyway."

"You mean you think I'm not man enough for it?" demanded Warren.

Dr. Howland chuckled, a deep rumble from somewhere in the depths of his barrel chest. "No," he said, "I mean just the reverse. You're too independent and willful. What I should have, ideally, is a little nonentity who will do just as I tell him and nothing more nor less."

Warren grinned wryly. "Tonight I'm the biggest little nonentity you ever saw. What do you want me to do?"

"You'll think it odd."

"Don't beat around the bush," Warren burst out rudely. "It won't be any odder than the fact that you think I can do it."

Dr. Howland snorted. "A child could do it."

"All right, all right," Warren said. "That isn't what I meant, but let's get on with it. What am I to do?"

"You were in the physics lab a week ago when I tried to demonstrate the model to the assembled academicians. You saw me place the paper knife on the plate. You saw it disappear. You know it didn't re-appear when I reversed the process, and so the demonstration was termed a failure.

"I want you to go to the physics lab, find that knife, and bring it back here with you."

"And that's all?"

"Except to notice everything you see and hear and smell and feel on your way there and back."

"I suppose you know the physics building is closed up now?"

Dr. Howland rumbled again. "I should," he said pleasantly, "I locked it myself."

"You giving me the key?"

"You'll find it wouldn't fit."

Warren frowned. "I don't get it," he said.

"My dear boy," sighed Dr. Howland. "I told you I'd rather have a nonentity for this, since he would do as I ask without asking questions. When you've been subjected to the process, you'll find you won't need the key. You'll go to the physics building, go through the locked door, go down the corridor to the laboratory — treading gingerly, I trust — find the knife which should be lying somewhere around the base of the desk on which my apparatus was resting a week ago, bring it back here . . . and that is all."

"You think it fell off the plate during the experiment?"

"What else? That fool, Tollison, insisted the plate be tilted so everyone could see the proceedings. The knife was balanced precariously. Obviously the molecular change upset its equilibrium and it rolled to the floor."

"Then why couldn't you turn your beam onto the floor and retrieve it?"

Dr. Howland was obviously losing patience. "Because the beam would work the same molecular change on the floor as on the knife, and, not being able to tell just where the knife had fallen, I could have wrecked the entire laboratory."

"What if that isn't what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if your — er — dis-integrator works, but your re-integrator doesn't?"

"If you think that, my boy, you'd better go right on home and forget the whole thing," Dr. Howland growled. Then he leaned across to Warren and burst out emphatically: "For God's sake, don't you think I've tried it out a hundred times since then and on every conceivable chemical and biological structure? Use your head, boy, use your head."

"All right, all right," Warren said sullenly, irritated at himself for having brought this on. "The knife is there and I'll go get it. Only it seems quite a length to go to prove Tollison and his bunch wrong."

DR. HOWLAND sighed heavily. "Why did you ever come into this anyway?" he asked, not wanting an answer. He sounded tired of the whole thing. "Don't you ever see beyond the immediate situation? Take yourself out of it completely and see what it means. A man crosses a busy campus in the early evening, unseen hy anyone. He enters a locked huilding. He can, presumably, hear and see all that goes on around him. If this can happen, can you see no application other than my vindicating myself before a lot of academic hig-brains?"

"It would he a God-send to private detectives," Warren said flippantly.

"Or to a little government department known as Military Intelligence."

"Oh," said Warren, jolted out of his facetiousness. "I see what you mean."

"Then will you stop this inane questioning and decide whether or not you're going to do as I ask. As I said in the beginning, you're perfectly free to go on home and forget the whole thing."

"I'm sorry," Warren said. "I'm ready whenever you are."

It was like sometimes when he'd had too much to drink the night before and his hang-over hauled him into consciousness hefore it was time to get up. It was so like that that he was subconsciously counting the drinks he'd had before opening his eyes to the dim clutter of the hedroom.

It was dim, but it wasn't the bedroom. He was in Dr. Howland's private laboratory, lying as he had heen before he'd had the injection. But something was changed. He was higher, or the ceiling was lower. And the light, instead of being bright and glaring, was dim and cold. He stirred and felt the sudden grip of nausea.

He closed his eyes and lay still, driving the bile back down to his stomach by conscious muscular control. Gradually he relaxed until he felt it safe to open his eyes again.

Carefully, experimentally, like a man who has been doped or ill and is unsure of his coordination, he hegan to move his limbs. The cramps did not return and the throh was going from his temples. Then he rolled to his side, swinging his legs over the edge of the tahle, and sat up. He had not looked around him again until then. He felt a wave of prickles run up his hack now as he took in his surroundings.

The old, bromidic situation: the man revisiting familiar sites, unseen since childhood. Everything just as remembered, hut smaller. Shrunken somehow and, for that reason, alien.

The lahoratory like a room in a doll house: everything perfect, but only half its normal size. His feet resting on the floor with his knees hent at more than a ninety degree angle, when he had needed a hoost to get onto the table before. His head dangerously near the ceiling—he would not be ahle to stand erect.

Carefully, "gingerly," as Dr. Howland had cautioned, he pushed his weight onto his feet. Crouching forward so as not to brush his head, he crossed to the door. Exercising great caution, he grasped the tiny metal knob and turned it. The door was locked.

Irritahly now, he put his hand flat against the wood and pushed. His hand went through the door.

No pain. No real discomfort. More like pushing one's hand into water, or into snow. He jacknifed and pushed the rest of his hody through the thin panel, instinctively avoiding the complicated lathe and plaster structure of the wall. He caught his coat on the metal door-knob for a moment, hut presently he found himself almost completely filling Howland's tiny office.

The professor was sitting at his desk, comfortahly smoking his charred old pipe, idly watching the outside door. When the knob turned and it creaked wide on its hinges, he smiled and nodded, glancing at his watch.

"The paper knife from the physics lah," he rumbled. "I'll give you half an hour."

His voice reached Warren as a thin, high whine, curiously incongruous coming from the stocky little figure. But he was out of the door now and on the campus.

Again the boy-into-man sense of unreality and something lost. Like seeing an old love after passion bas spent itself. The campus, with its venerable, tradition-laden atmosphere, reduced to a miniature park for children. And children walked its shadow-sprinkled paths. Man-children and woman-children, wryly pathetic in their assumption of the airs and patterns of grown-ups. They walked by him without a glance. It came to him as a jolt that they could not see him.

THE physics huilding was at the northeast corner of the campus. He passed it daily going to and from his apartment. He turned and headed there, as though the situation were a normal one and he was merely going home after an evening at the lihrary.

He passed down the familiar walks, stepping aside to avoid students passing in the other direction, on their way to the dorms from town. Limhs from the trees swung down hefore him and he put up his hand at first to hrush them aside, until he saw that his hand, and then his face and upper hody, passed right through them with little resistance. In half his normal time, he had passed the physics huilding.

He stopped himself with a voluntary effort. He really had heen headed home. But the lah was his goal, and he retraced his steps.

He didn't try the door. Howland had told him it would he locked. But he pushed his way through, into the great marble foyer, went down

the corridor into the laboratory, and looked around.

The paper knife lay not far from the table from which it had fallen, its point embedded in the concrete floor. It looked enormous in its miniature surroundings, its tempered blade gleaming dully in the diffused light.

He leaned down and pulled it out with a little effort. The concrete had not bent its point, nor even scratched the finish on the blade. Holding it in his hand, he turned to go.

It was not as easy getting the metal through the door as it was his body, and he began to see why Dr. Howland had made him empty his pockets. Metal was denser and presented difficulties, either before or after the molecular change. The metal doorknob had caught his clothes; and now the knife was presenting difficulties.

But he worked it through that door and through the second one.

He was before his apartment-house before he realized that he had been supposed to return to Dr. Howland. Somehow it was automatic that he should go off-campus at this time of the evening, and his conscious mind had been so intent on his physical condition that it had not functioned on this minor point.

And it was no suspicion that took him through the door and very "gingerly" up the stairway to his own threshold. Beryl was too cold a creature for him to imagine deceiving him. Not that Langley wouldn't try. And Beryl would be bitchy enough to get him going, then the big freeze.

The living room was empty. He was stopped again by the doll-house appearance of familiar surroundings —the sofa strewn with pillows, the coffee-table with the rumpled scripts and ashtrays overflowing with the butts of tiny cigarettes, the console radio-phonograph blaring, sounding high and tinny to his altered hearing.

And the laughter from the other room.

The door hung open into dimness. He crossed to it, stooping to keep clear of the ceiling. He looked into the bed-room.

"The Four-Poster" they were rehearsing. The Stanislavsky method. Not the play, but the drives that were behind those intimate episodes. These strange and child-like creatures in their circle of concentration. Communication. Contact.

What hit him was not the fact of unfaithfulness. It struck deeper, wrenched harder than that. It hit him where he lived.

This abandoned, gluttonous mound of sensuality, actively, vibrantly, pleasurably transported, was the same flesh that had lain cold and passive beneath his most intimate caressings. He had endured that, convincing himself that it was all she was capable of. What a fool! It *was* all she was capable of. *With him*. How she must despise him.

The tension in his body became an ache. He moved his hand up to his forehead in a gesture of bewilderment. He saw the knife.

His self-loathing turned outward in an instant. Swiftly, surely, he threw his huge bulk toward the bed, plunging the gleaming metal into her breast.

Then, blindly, ferociously, he tore his way out of the building and into the night.

The "return" was worse than the outward voyage. There was a vise round his head.

He was dimly conscious of the face of Dr. Howland at his feet, frowning solicitously as he manipulated knobs on some monstrous mechanism.

Suddenly the painful sensations stopped, leaving him numb and panting. He heard the click as the professor shut off the machine. He opened his eyes.

HE felt shrunken, dwarfed. When he had flung himself onto the table, his bulk had more than covered it. His head had hung over the edge, and he had covered his face with his hands, partly so that they would not hang down to the floor. Now he had to stretch his arm to reach the side of the table.

"All right," Dr. Howland said gruffly from his side, patting his shoulder awkwardly. "All right. It's all over now. Come into my office and I'll have a drink for you." Warren heard his footsteps recede and the door close.

He eased himself to the floor and stayed a moment, holding onto the table until he had himself under control again. Squaring his shoulders and his jaw, he went into the other room.

Dr. Howland had poured a stiff drink into a tumbler on the desk. Beside it was a pitcher of water. Warren picked up the glass and downed the liquor straight.

Howland pushed the bottle toward him. "Rough, huh," he grunted. It was not a question.

"I had an idea that shock would be present in some degree, so I gave you a mild opiate. Not enough, I suppose, but I wanted to be sure you had all your faculties after the change. Just relax for a bit, and then we'll talk about it."

Warren swung around into the armchair and poured another drink to which he added an equal amount of water. He swirled the liquid in the glass.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"The paper knife."

"Oh, yes." Warren repeated it mechanically: "The paper knife. I haven't got it."

"So I noticed," the professor observed mildly. "Why?"

"I—I dropped it."

Dr. Howland slapped the flat of his hand on the surface of the desk. "But how could you, man! You were

sent on a simple, specific errand. To produce the knife would prove to those bone-headed academicians not only that I was right about the knife falling from the plate, but that the process was effective for the purpose for which it was created; namely, the penetration of private quarters to get withheld information. With no concrete evidence, how can we make them believe?"

Warren looked him squarely in the face. "You'd be shocked," he said levelly, "how little I care what Tollison and his little group believe or disbelieve. The hell with them. And the hell with you."

Dr. Howland's face reddened. "All right, if that makes you feel better, the hell with me. But I've got to know what happened."

Warren took a long drag from his drink.

"Did you go to the physics building?" Howland demanded.

"Yes."

"Did you go into the lab?"

"Yes."

"If we could only *prove* that!"

"You've got my word," Warren said coldly.

"Not good enough," the professor told him bluntly. "They could—and would—say that I conditioned you to *think* you would go there and that, under the influence of the opiate, you thought you went. We must have evidence. Do you know where you dropped it?"

Warren grimaced wryly. "Yes," he said in a flat voice.

"Then there is nothing to do except to have you go back and pick it up again. It's vitally important." The old man was not ordering him; he was pleading with him.

Warren lurched to his feet. "No!" he said. His voice sounded loud and strange in the little office. "No. I won't do it!"

"But how can we prove... Even *I* don't know for certain whether you were there or it was an hallucination."

"Look, Dr. Howland," Warren said in a deliberately calm voice. "You don't know what's happened, and it's just as well you don't. You've got your machine. It's a great success, take it from me. But next time, for God's sake, do as you said. Get a nonentity who'll do just as you tell him *and nothing else.*"

He flung the door open and went out, leaving the old professor with his mouth gaping, unable to call him back.

HE had crossed the campus again. This time there were no limbs brushing across his face. This time the shadowed walks were nearly deserted. This time acorns popped under the soles of his shoes. He entered the apartment, using his latch key.

Beryl was sitting curled on the sofa, a script in her hand, a cigarette burning in the saucer beside the cup of steaming coffee.

"Where's Langley?" Warren demanded.

"Who? Oh. He didn't come."

"You're a liar," said Warren cooly.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Then she smiled. It was not a pleasant smile.

"I said he didn't come," she said, and turned her attention back to the script. The matter was settled.

Warren snatched the book from her fingers and sent it sailing across the room. "And I said you were a liar," he told her calmly.

She yawned in his face.

"Did you have a nice experiment?" she asked, reaching for the coffee.

"Nice is not the word I would choose for it. You see, I was here."

There was no smallest reaction from her. And that made him sure once more.

On the way over, he had digested what Dr. Howland had said. There was no proof that he had gone to the physics lab. There was no proof that he had seen what he had seen. There was the opiate, and there was the suggestion that he could go through solid material. There was the paper knife and the natural subconscious projection of that into the fulfillment of his semi-conscious desire for grounds to rid himself of her. What proof did he have?

Merely the lack of surprise, of curiosity even, at his statement that he had been here.

She sipped her coffee casually. He stood watching her, admiring her control, the lovely, studied performance she was giving. Abruptly, he turned away.

"I didn't have a chance to tell you about the experiment beforehand," he said. "Dr. Howland has perfected an apparatus which separates the molecules of an object—or a person—while retaining their relative relationship, keeping them intact as an entity, but rendering them invisible and able to penetrate solid matter. There is some resistance, but not too much. In this condition I was here less than an hour ago."

He turned back to face her. "Langley was here."

She exhaled a curl of smoke. Calmly and lazily, she watched it writhe about her face.

"I would say," she remarked serenely "that Dr. Howland's apparatus was not yet perfected. Pipe dreams you've been having. Langley left for New York on the eight o'clock train."

That stopped him for a second. Then he turned to the telephone stand, found a number and dialed it. When it was answered he said, "Let me speak to Langley."

"I'm sorry," came the voice at the other end of the wire. "He is out of town."

"When did he leave?" Warren demanded.

"He took the eight o'clock train north. Is there something I . . ."

"Are you sure?" Warren interrupted.

"Why, yes. I saw him on it myself. Who is this?"

Warren slammed down the receiver. He heard a warm little gurgle of supressed laughter from the sofa. He turned to her.

"Smug, aren't you?" he said. "I'll prove you a liar. Come on."

She sat motionless for a moment, staring him down. Then she shrugged. "All right," she said. "This should be amusing."

The car was in the drive. They got in it in silence and he manoeuvered out into the quiet street. As they moved forward, she said, "Tess will tell you the same thing when we get there, you know. And it's true. You're making a fool of yourself."

He said nothing and turned off into the campus. They caught Dr. Howland just as he was leaving the office.

"Don't go yet, doc," Warren told him. "I've got another guinea pig for you."

"I don't understand. . ."

"Please forgive my husband, Dr. Howland. He seems to have lost what little control he held over himself."

"You said what Tess told me on the phone was true. Well, I'll go along with that. But I said I'd prove you a liar. Dr. Howland trot out your equipment."

Dr. Howland frowned in embarrassment. "Really, Warren, I think if you went home and got some rest, we could talk. . ."

"But you wanted proof your experiment was a success. I want to give it to you. But, first, I must know: if an object is treated to your molecular change and comes under the ray again, will the molecules disperse still further?"

THE professor scratched his shaggy black hair and said, "I can't be sure, but I think not. I've used the disperser ray on objects repeatedly and they came back to normal with the same application of the reintegrator process."

"That's what I banked on. My ever-loving wife said she was alone this evening; that I was dreaming when I saw her in the arms of another man. Do you think I was?"

Dr. Howland flushed beet-red, but was saved from answering by an angry exclamation from Beryl.

"You fool. You utter fool. I tell you, Langley left town on the eight o'clock train. Tess saw him onto it."

"Then there must be someone who saw him get off at the junction," Warren jeered at her. "And he must have got back to town somehow. Or were you there waiting for him? . . . But I can prove it easier than that—and at the same time, doctor, give you your evidence that my being at the physics building tonight was no hallucination.

"Take her into your lab. Give her a dose of the ray; then bring her back to normal again. You'll find your paper knife.

"In her heart!"

—LELON KOHLE

The Unlikeliest Thing

By BRUCE FEARING

IN a few moments I'm going to take that last irrevocable step. I am going to kill myself. Not because of a nagging wife, nor because I'm tired of my job, no, not because of spoiled children either. I'm just fed up. Now isn't that a fine reason? Not many people would do a thing like I'm going to do, because of the reason that I gave for doing it, but then, I pride myself on my original way of thinking, that is to say, I always think for myself, and just because no one else has even given being fed up as a reason for killing himself is no reason why I should not. I should also like to say before I go that

I am not crazy

I am not sick

I am a normal being (excepting that I pride myself on thinking for myself)

And lastly

I have always led what might be called a happy life.

This second part that I am writing now is private, and I hope that you, my wife, will read it to my children when they grow old enough, I also trust that it will not be made public to the curiosity seekers.

So to my family I say

It is like this. I do not like being a mere imitator. I have made that plain already I hope. Then what could be more distasteful to me than the life I am forced to lead, and you, and you, and all of you. But of us all it is I

the most, who find sleazy second-handed gestures painful. Yet what has my life been like. 17 years ago my present monster sprang to life. Not a day of peace for me since then. He himself did not call me for the first few years of his life, but his mother was a perverted one and she was constantly lifting him up, so even then I was always being called at all hours (and I a light sleeper) to come to the window and make faces. Then my monster grew enough so that standing on his own legs he was big enough to call me. That was, in truth, one of the darkest periods of my life. Oh, I rue the day my monster first discovered my existence. He could not let me alone for as long as five minutes at a time, day and night, night and day, day after day after day, always he was at the window gaping, gawking, pushing and pulling at his features. Smiling, laughing, leering, he never grew tired of seeing me. I, to the contrary, got very bored with him. You know, I could have even tolerated this I think, this imitating of his every gesture, painful though it was, was at least what you expect. I had been trained from the cradle for it. But when the beast grew older, he began to pour out to me all his perverted confidences. I could not answer him back, but was mute. Imagine, forcing me to mouth his words. Oh, that I only could have put him in his place. Next the monster grew to full size. It was at the time he reached his maturity age that the most revolting thing of all happened, and this probably, as I think back over it is what caused me to decide to take this step I'll take so soon. He stuck out his tongue at me. Yes, precisely that, one morning when he seemed to be in distemper and with a headache he thrust out his tongue, forcing me to do the same, and examined his mouth, forcing me to do the same. How much hate can one being contain? And so it is that I must do away with myself. May the heavens give me strength. He's calling.

Mr. Albert Paxton came whistling up the stairs. What a really fine day it was. "We're leaving soon, better get ready" his wife called up from downstairs. Albert reached up on the dresser for the hair pomade he always used. He rubbed some briskly into his scalp the way the advertisements said to do. And then he stepped to the mirror. His image in the mirror turned a little watery, and then Albert screamed as a pair of armlike things came out from his image and wrapped themselves around his throat. Too late his wife came running into the room. The heavens had granted a being of the mirror strength enough to kill himself.

— BRUCE FEARING

Granch Male-Left

By EMMETT HERLOCKER

**You could spot a Granch Female anywhere,
But the Males were something else—
More Human than even Brownie Grimes suspected**

BROWNIE GRIMES blasted off Planet Five with a Granch woman and a Granch man-right. His intentions were not quite honorable. That is to say he was looking for a Granch man-left, and when he found one, he was going to raise some Granches.

As a matter of control, all the male-left survivors of the conquest had been confined to Planet One. The mechanics of Granch breeding required a blue female and a duo of males, one right and one left. Brownie assured himself his motives were the highest. They were a hobby with him, these Granches. He couldn't let them become extinct, merely because the United Siriun Planet States sternly forbade their breeding.

The trapezoid cleared Planet Five's atmosphere and swept into space, trembling like a living being. Exhilaration novaed Brownie's spirit. He glanced at the area screen and noted the positions of all craft in the screen's limit. None appeared too close. He was counting upon sheer audacity and surprise to get away clean.

He knew the inter planet patrol had been especially active since rumors had reached No. 1, the president of USPS, that a plot was underway to

breed Granches. These creatures that had formerly controlled the five planets of Sirius had been reduced to zoological specimens with no male-male-female combination allowed upon any one planet.

The Granches were a fecund people, capable of littering three times in a Planet Five year of four hundred and ten twenty-houred days. And there were five or six baby Granches to a litter!

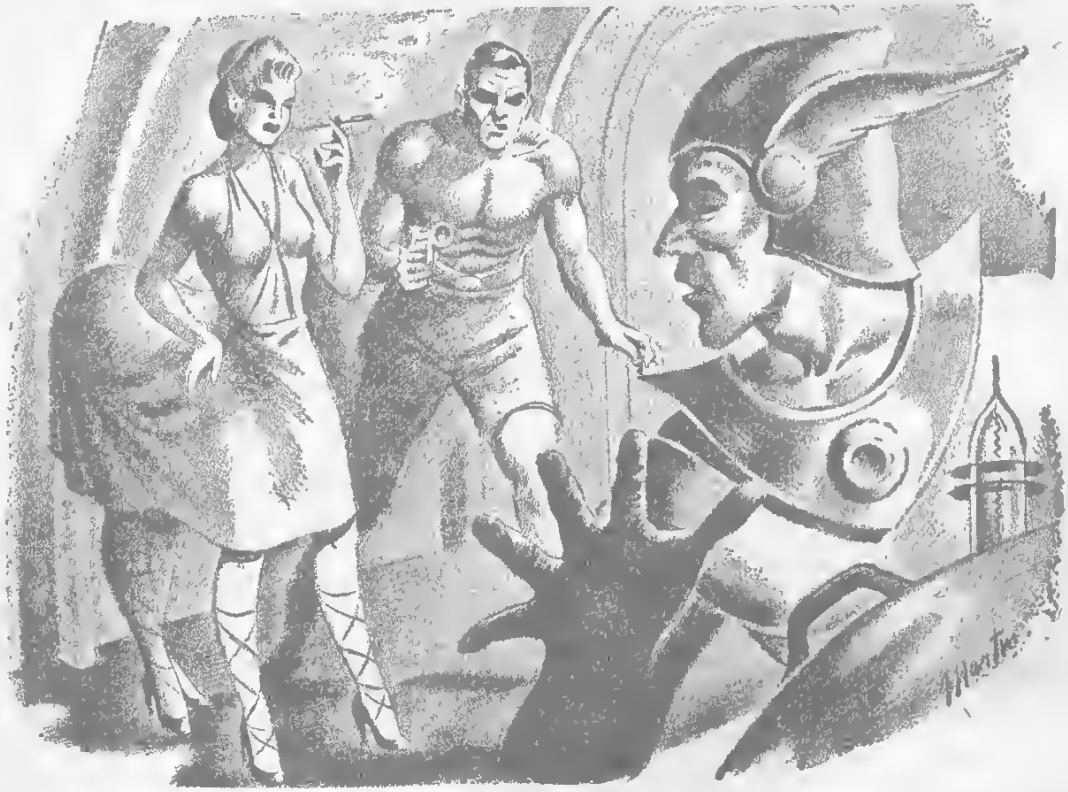
Brownie lit a cigar and raised his eyes to the Granches in the mirrór above him.

"Don't worry. If we run across Colonel Holphover, I'll try out these new injecto waves. Good thing I had the foresight to steal an experimental ship."

"Colonel Holphover contacting Brownie Grimes — We can ram you with a cosmic burst before you get in range with your injecto wave. Return to Planet Five and turn the Granches over to the zoo. No. 1 says you won't be punished."

Brownie cursed himself for forgetting that Granches, high though their development was, had never achieved mental telepathy. That Colonel Holphover and his space patrol were already in range of the short mental waves meant he had underestimated the effectiveness of the security police and space patrol.

He glanced back at the Granches. Just looking at them gave him a start; they were so human, the male especially, yet not human. The male was a



dark brown — browner even than Brownie. He could have passed for one of the colonizers, as the earthmen ranged in color from white to black. The female though could not have passed in a crowd without notice. She was blue, and blessed with four fetching legs.

BROWNIE caught the Granch man's eye and the Granch winked and smiled.

"Like old times," the Granch said. "Didn't realize how much I've missed buzzing around out here trying to escape your boys. This is new to Mable, though. She was only a year old when your people took over."

Brownie couldn't remember arriving with the expedition. His adopted father told him his mother had been an officer in a cosmic blaster unit. She had died in the battle of Planet Three. His father? Paternity was not a matter of importance. He'd never wondered about it.

He looked for a moment into the brown eyes of the woman, then shifted his own, his face burning a little. He clamped his teeth on his cigar and scrounged around in his seat. What was the matter with him?

He spotted Colonel Holphover's six ships on the area screen. Like the experimental trapezoid shape he was piloting, they were strictly interplanetary types, dealing in thousands of miles per hour, where the mammoth intersteller ship approached the speed of light.

"Grimes to Colonel Holphover —"

"All right Brownie."

"I'm going through to Planet One. Let the local constabulary pick me up there. Don't risk your ships."

"It's no risk," came back Holphover's voice. Brownie jumped at the sudden sound. The colonel had answered him by radio.

"The injecto ray will make an epileptic out of you." Brownie said.

"It'll wear off."

"By then I'll be on Planet One."

"But, my friend, our cosmic blast will disintegrate you first. The injecto ray is a short range policeman's club, not a weapon to compete with cosmic blasters."

"You'll have to turn back," the male Granch said. "You'll be killed."

"Won't you?"

"Of course, and Mable."

"They won't catch us."

"They're faster than you."

Brownie shut off the radio so the colonel could not hear, and he closed his mind against him so that he would get no mental message. This had been the hardest thing about learning mental telepathy at the officer-political academy.

"Do you really think they'd blast us?" Brownie smiled into the mirror.

The male Granch shook his head.

"And why do you think they won't blast us?"

"Because you're the president's adopted son."

"Do you think they ought to blast us?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because, if you succeed in achieving a married family of Granches, earthman rule will be challenged before many years. Your people were able to stand off in space and exterminate nearly every living creature on the planets. But now the planets are thickly populated with humans. Since the male Granches are indistinguishable from humans, every person would have to be under surveillance at all times. You know Planet Three and Four are demanding more autonomy right now. They won't stand more regimentation."

"You are well versed."

"Better than you. Many people visited Mable and I at the zoo."

"But —"

"You would be surprised at the number of male Granches circulating on No. Five, disguised as humans. The earthmen found and killed all the women survivors, of course."

"But —" Brownie was dumfounded. "You mean there were left and right both?"

"Both."

"But then we needn't have left Five." Brownie became excited. He reached for the controls.

"WAIT. How do you expect this — er perpetuation of the Granch race to be carried out in the zoo? You know they'll grab us the minute we land. You'll go free, of course, because of your father. He knows your purpose is purely sentimental. You don't want to see the Granches become extinct as a race. Of course, you wouldn't want them to become dominant either, would you?"

"No, no, naturally not."

"Another thing. A Granch woman is not like a domestic animal. She is more choosey than your own women. Of all the male-left Granches that visited us, there was only one she would have accepted as the third member of a matrimonial team."

"But we'll search him out —"

The Granch smiled. "That's hardly practical. At the moment he is not even on Five."

"But there must be others she will accept —"

"Not while he lives."

"How can she tell a Granch from a human?"

"She can't."

Grimes involuntarily jerked his head and looked at Mable. She smiled at him softly. He looked hard at her a moment. Good God, could it be — After all, if she couldn't tell — No, that didn't tally with the Granch man's story.

"But I'll tell her when the time comes," the Granch said. "I'm old enough to know one of my own people by sight. Fortunately, she has accepted me as the male-right."

Brownie shifted his eyes from Mable to the man. The Granch was smiling.

Planet Three loomed on their right.

He turned on his radio. The light above it had been flashing on and off erratically.

"You still there, colonel?'

"What's the idea — shutting me off the mental and radio waves both," the indignant colonel sputtered.

"Sorry."

"No 1 orders you to land on Planet Three. They'll return you on the overnight rocket. You'll leave the Granches there. I believe your father's afraid you're gettting too attached to them."

"Or else?"

"I'm sorry." The colonel sounded sorry, too. He was a good friend of Brownie's. "This is more serious than you think. If you don't stop here, I've orders to blast you. I'm not fooling, Brownie. No. 1 gave the order. I'm close enough right now, and your new ray can't touch me. Try it."

BROWNIE glanced at the screen, hesitated, then pushed the calculator. He reached for the injecto handle. A white burst from the side of the trapezoid lighted a window briefly.

"Did you try it?" The colonel's voice was friendly. The Granch signalled Brownie to shut off the radio. Brownie flicked the switch. The Granch looked excited.

"Tell him we'll land." He huddled over a side port, examining the planet. "Steer straight for Three's spaceport. He'll follow you there on his screen, then he'll turn back. But, when you are right over the spaceport, blast over the planet's curvature. Planet Three was originally my home. There's a range of mountains where we can lose ourselves indefinitely."

"I think I'll set down." Brownie said. The escapade was getting out of hand.

"You'll go on over like I said." The Granch produced a ray derringer. Brownie remembered he'd left it in his coat pocket hanging aft.

"I don't think I'll have to use this," the Granch said, "Or even threaten you with it. You think you know all about we Granch people. But there's one thing you do not know."

"Put down that derringer."

"Your foster father personally captured Mable and me. Mable was a baby then. He took us to Planet Five and put us in the zoo."

"I know that. It was through him I became interested in you."

"It was at that time he adopted you."

"I know that, too. My mother was killed in the bat—"

"Did you ever see a picture of your mother?"

"Noooooo."

"Isn't that odd?"

"Should it be?"

The Granch man-right smiled and nodded to Mable; then he said to Brownie,

"I knew your mother. She had four legs!"

— EMMETT HERLOCKER

Food for Thought

By RICE ARDEN

JAKE BEAVER pushed aside the rolls of blueprints which occupied the larger portion of his small desk. Reaching into the deep bottom drawer on his right, he extracted the large, black-enameled old fashioned dinner pail. He seated it precariously on the inkwell before him, wondering to himself whether or not he wanted it to crash to the floor. Thinking of Mr. Higby's nervous stomach in the next office, he decided against helping it in its descent, but he was by no means ready to accept it as a good, honest lunch-bucket. There was something about this thing of metal and glass which lately had deprived it of its former warming atmosphere.

Jake thought of the various lunches he had found in that same container during the three years he had been married to Loryl. And he dwelt paranoiacally upon the past week, wherein the great difference in his lunches had made its debut. His fingers slowed their frenzied movement over the white metal hasps as he tried for what seemed the hundredth time to guess the origin of the food he had eaten every noon since Monday.

Was it just a new kind of celery he had munched on as an appetizer each of the four preceding days? It had looked like no decent celery could possibly look, with that pinkish, rubbery stalk and seaweed-like leaves. It

didn't all taste like celery, or any other vegetable Jake had ever eaten.

And had that been just a new kind of lunchmeat Loryl had used for sandwiches? Its greyish, coursely grained texture was reminiscent of no flesh he recalled. And Jake had sampled alligator, whale and buffalo, among other less popular viands. His flights into gastronomical adventure bad led him into many varieties of breads, also. But none had been like the perfectly smooth beige slices he'd eaten in his sandwiches for four days running. It was baked so evenly it was almost impossible to discern the point where the floss of the grain was interrupted by air bubbles.

Loryl had insisted it was the special of the week presented by the baker who daily delivered to their home. And even though its healthful pabulum had sustained him well, he was quite doubtful of Loryl's word in the matter.

Jake flipped open the catches and threw back the lid. He glanced quickly into the Pandoral interior. His watery-blue eyes grew large as they noted the arrangement in the white enameled vault.

Through the semi-transparent covering of waxed paper, a beige slice of bread hid its mate and the secret lay between them. Beside the sandwich lay another; but peeping from between the parenthesis of bread could be seen vaguely a wispy lace which might have been the trimmings from a pair of powder-blue step-ins.

JAKE savagely wrenched this new insult from the box. He tore the paper madly from the sandwich and, peeling back the curtain of bread, stared unbelievingly at the offensive vegetation within. Its conformation was like that of endive, but the color precluded its kinship to any salad vegetable of Jake's knowledge.

He had been holding his right hand, containing the one slice of beige bread, liberally coated with mayonnaise, extended off to his right. The other, with what Jake hoped fervently was cheddar cheese and the blue lettuce, he had held directly before him.

He brought them resoundingly together with a moist smack, placed them to his lips and bit off a huge bite. Laying the remainder on the desk, he turned to the upper half of the treacherous dinner pail. He removed from its nest the pint thermos which contained the only sane portion of a daily routine that slowly was losing its sanity. Coffee was one of Jake's greatest weaknesses.

Unscrewing the cap with hasty twirls, the fat fingers placed it on the desktop for use as a cup. There was a slight pause as brows arched over the newness of the cork which retained the contents. Then a wet pop announced its removal, and Jake heaved a sigh of compromise as he poured into the plastic cup.

The look of mild restraint was swept from his face by an expression of baffled rage, and a muted curse was choked from his throat as the green liquid splashed and frothed from the Quisling thermos.

It required heroic effort to set the bottle on the desk without the crashing emphasis that Jake visualized in his mind. But remembering Mr. Higby just in time, Jake recalled that he needed the promotion he intended to request from that old gentleman tomorrow. He leaned back in his chair to recuperate from the shock of his latest subjugation. Loryl had delivered a crowning blow that would leave him with permanent mental scars, he told himself.

He must have remained in the daze of the shock for some time. Suddenly he heard the girls in the outer office clicking across the floor of the reception hall, and he realized he had best eat his lunch quickly if he intended to get those detail sheets done by the end of the day.

Forcing himself to think of pleasant things, he managed to complete the deglutition of the weird rations, although a grimace of despair escaped the forcedly calm features each time the cup of green brew was sipped. He began to consider it as his real justification for all the many times he had doubted Loryl's obedient loyalty.

She could have been misguided in the earlier attempts to give him a change of diet for his lunch, which she had often termed "unromantically

monotonous." What she hadn't tried to understand was that a man wanted the security and solidity of well known, well liked things in that very important little dinner pail; not romance, or even variety, if a man must suffer the loss of his peace of mind in the change.

He replaced the lunch bucket in the drawer and hastily began to unroll a blueprint on the desk.

Several days elapsed before Jake discovered the clue which had been knocking around in the back of his mind for quite a while. He hadn't been able to elicit anything but repetitious nonsense from Loryl concerning the rare foods she had been serving him. And they *were* rare, for Jake had saved the rubbery celery from one day's forage and presented it to a wholesale vegetable dealer near the station where he caught his commuting train. The dealer had promised Jake a tidy sum for the source of the weird vegetable.

Of course Jake *had* become a little rough with his wife in questioning her. But she had been roughed up before; in fact, any time Jake came home from work by way of the neighborhood bar & grill she could expect little but coarseness. But she had accepted it for three years as part of her life with Jake, and there were no recriminations on that score, or he would have seen them. For Jake was a very observing fellow. Hadn't he proved that by his discovery of the telltale clue last night?

He sat back in his desk chair, sucking the last shreds of nameless provender from his teeth and running a thoughtful hand through his thinning hair. He'd had coffee with his lunch since that one memorable day of green brew. He remembered the order he had shouted at Loryl that night concerning his daily beverage.

"You can diet me all you want with your damn' chow, but by God I'll have a man's drink with my lunch, whatever I'm eating. And don't you forget it!"

He recalled, too, the feel of the blow he had dealt her to emphasize his order. Not enough to lay her out, but she'd by God remember it when it was lunch bucket time in the mornings. And he'd also warned her that he had no proof of her lying about the source of the food, but that if he did, when he did, she could expect some more of the same.

Itinerant vegetable peddler, indeed. Did she think him a clod to accept such an explanation, when Rufe and Gil, his neighbors on either side of him, insisted that *they'd* had nothing new in the way of vegetables recently?

At any rate, the important development was the clue which had come skipping to the front of Jake's mind this morning. The clue which he had not been sure was a clue at all last night.

It had been just as he settled his head on the pillow and started to

doze off that Jake had recalled the sudden drowsiness of many evenings past. As long as he could remember, there had always been that interval of quite lucid thought which came on retiring. The review of the day just over and the outline of the morrow's work.

Somewhere in recent days, however, there had begun this drowsiness on lying down, just as if his usual nightly coffee had turned sedative, lulling him to sleep almost the instant he was in bed.

And not until last night had it occurred to him as unusual. Last night, when Loryl had introduced the damnable vegetables into meals at home for the first time.

Thinking it over this morning, Jake was sure that it wasn't the food which caused the sleepiness. If that were so, he'd have napped often in the office. But his coffee . . . that was another possibility.

And he had decided that tonight he would find a chance to empty his coffee somewhere before Loryl could notice. Then he'd see if there was perhaps some monkey business after he was expected to be asleep.

Jake heard the girls returning in the outer office and, smirking his satisfaction over the plans for the evening, fell to work with a will.

JAKE'S pudgy hands toyed overlong with the catches of the lunch pail today. He didn't feel like eating since last night's experience; most especially did he not feel like eating what he now knew to be in the box. As his fingers played over the metal he thought of the ruse he'd used to empty his coffee out of the dinette window.

"Hey!" he had cried out, suddenly, "Is that a flying saucer out there?"

Loryl had turned and raced to the kitchen window, toward which he had been looking. And he had wondered why she had seemed so pale when she returned to the table and said she had seen nothing!

Recalling the rest of the evening, he shook his head, as though to clear it of possible fogginess in remembering. But he knew what he had seen and heard, and Jake was not given to imagination. Rather, he was a man of action. And he would act tonight on the new knowledge he had received.

The way he had played his part of the innocently sleeping husband, he should have won an Oscar. He shivered as he pictured the statue. It was too reminiscent of the view from the bedroom window, where he had gone after Loryl sneaked from the bed and out of the house.

The moonlight had been rather obscured by low clouds, but Jake had no trouble in discerning the figure standing in the garden by the peach tree. Nor was it so much more difficult to determine the shape of the form in

the background. The metal disc which rested in the shadows.

Jake gasped as he had gasped the night before upon seeing the brass of the man as he walked to the house to meet the running Loryl. They had reached the pergola below the window before Jake had heard what they were saying, but he had immediately noticed the oddly shaped basket the man held in the hand that was not busily engaged in holding Loryl's arm.

There had been a need to steel himself as he listened to the snatches of conversation. The shock of actually seeing a man from one of the flying discs had been something impossibly real. But hearing Loryl's endearments as she told the handsome stranger of her growing hate for her husband was a harsh and bitter pill to swallow.

That the stranger had been handsome, Jake could not deny. And that he might be of a race superior in transportation was likewise obvious. But the possibility of his having the mentality to outwit Jake Beaver was not at all acceptable.

He dwelt lingeringly over the coffee he finally extracted from the dinner pail. During many tasteful sips of the good brew he pictured various methods he would use in dealing with the despoiler who had cuckolded him. The clarity of his mind was amazing; it was as though the events of the last twenty-four hours were a tonic.

He wondered what plan Loryl's lover had in mind; when were they hoping for the chance to put the plan in operation? He could only recall one bit of conversation which was at all indicative of their acknowledging Jake's existence.

"I guess we'll have to carry out the desperate plan, after all," the saucerian had told Loryl. Jake wondered how much time he had to get there firstest with the mostest.

His clarity of mind was doubly evident to himself as he noted that it was almost time to get to work. He placed the thermos in the dinner pail, noting that lover boy must have forgotten the rubber celery this last trip. Loryl had been forced to resort to a plum from the neighbor's tree for the daily fresh item that was a must in any lunch she made.

Spurning the beige sandwiches as he had intended, Jake removed the plum from the pail and closed it. He wondered if Loryl could picture him as enjoying his plum in innocence, just as he could picture her doing her daily work innocently unaware of her husband's dangerous knowledge.

He placed the fruit smugly to his lips and bit gently.

The footsteps of the girls returning in the reception hall quickened toward Jake Beaver's door only a moment after they had hesitated upon hearing the explosion.

The force which had plastered Jake's remains on the far wall of his office was positively unearthly.

Everyone thought so.

—Rice Arden

Women Only

By MARION Z. BRADLEY

THEY had moved me into a private room by visiting hours. There had, as usual, been trouble about the wards, and at any other time the old sensitive hurt I could never quite control would have bothered me, but today I was too happy to care. I lay in the high hospital bed, listening to the street noises, hearing the rumbling trundle of rubber-tired carts, smelling that funny smell that was familiar and strange at once, the smell that was home to me, more than any other. Down in the nursery I could hear one of the babies squalling, and clumsily, with a strange kind of emotion, I wondered if that was *my* little girl crying. I couldn't feel quite as I should, but I would when I got used to it a little.

My baby.

She looked just like any other baby I'd ever seen—I hadn't seen many—and of course she didn't have the regulation identifications yet. She didn't look quite human. *No* new baby, I thought defensively, no baby that young looks human!

They had brought her in, early in the afternoon, and I had held her—a dimpled, wriggly bundle—in my arms and fed her the special nutrients out of the bubble. Of course it was too much to hope that I could ever breast-feed her. "We can't hope for too many miracles," the doctor had said, very kindly, "It's wholly a matter of hormones. But if you cuddle her a lot when you feed her, she won't know the difference."

I hoped she wouldn't. I didn't want her to be cheated of anything I could give her, ever. All the childhood things I had read about, the little-girl things, dolls and hair-ribbons, dancing off to school mornings in a clean frock—all these things that I had never had. I wanted her to have these memories, the bitter and sweet memories of childhood, the slow acquiring of knowledge and experience; not like mine, springing full-blown and mechanical, the thoughts of a mature woman forced on a new, new body, so terribly, hurtingly new, and no time given to assimilate it all and grow gradually to a real understanding. My knowledge of these things was a vague empathy; it did not arise spontaneously from within. It was a synthetic

analysis, a conscious correlation of what I had read and what people had told me.

Childhood. Magic world, magic land, fairy land, with me forever exiled from that glory. But she would know it, first-hand. She would live a child. She would *be* a child. Child, as she was miracle.

Maybe.

The reporters swarmed in on the first tick of visiting hours. I hadn't quite expected them, but now I remembered some of the articles I'd seen, surreptitiously—Jay had been careful to keep them away from me. I had never been quite sure why. I was even less sure now, knowing that I was big news, feeling my eyes blinded with the flare of flash cameras going off in my face and the doorful of strange faces. A barrage of questions exploded against my ears.

"Tell us, Mrs. Dee, how did this happen anyway?"

"Had you wanted a boy or a girl?"

"Can we see the—can we see it, Mrs. Dee? Every editor in the country wants pictures—"

"What does the proud father have to say?"

THEY all seemed marvelously nice, wonderfully friendly. I said, faint with the confusion of it all, "Yes—no—I don't know—the Hospital Board can tell you—the Charge Nurse will know"

The door opened again and Jay walked in, and the reporters clustered inquisitively around him, voices lowered, a bumble of drones. He elbowed bis way free and came to me; lifted up one of my bands and pressed it lightly between his own. "Hi. How are you feeling, pretty?"

"Fine," I told him and smiled to show I meant it.

"You don't mind too much?"

"Mind?" I said incredulously, "I'm thrilled!"

"I don't know—" Jay's face clouded and he swept one band vaguely at the reporters, "They should have spared you all this—"

"Oh, I don't mind that either," I assured him quickly, "Why, you should see her! She's beautiful! Jay, go on down to the nursery and they'll give you a peek at her—"

His face took on a worried frown. "Listen here, honey," be began, "didn't they tell you—"

I pushed at bim playfully with my band. "Go down and see our little girl!"

The frown darkened. In another, it could have been the beginnings of anger or a deeper emotion. It was stubborn. "I don't want to see her."

I stared at bim, appalled. "*Jay!*"

The reporters surged in on us again, an overwhelming tidal wave. One of them was carrying little Lisa, in her pink blanket, and before we knew what had happened, Jay was negligently brushed aside, and they were arranging her in a cuddly lump at my side. Flashbulbs popped wildly from every angle. I blinked, trying to shield the baby's eyes. "Listen, Jay—" I started again, but before I could finish, the Charge Nurse appeared again, looking very starched and dissapproving, and whisked the baby away again. She paid not the faintest attention to Jay as he trailed after her, and he came back, looking wrathful. "Blankety-blank stuffed shirt, won't even let me *touch* her! It's bad enough to know she bas to be—"

"Oh, Jay, hush!" I begged, struggling to raise myself, for the reporters were looking at him and nudging each other, and that hateful, too-familiar look was on their faces; the look that says — *you've got your nerve, acting like anybody else would act* — Jay started to bluster it out, but I was dripping weak tears and he subsided, bending over and pressing my two cheeks between his hands. "Goodbye now, pretty. I'll come in tomorrow, and see you. Keep your chin up, and — say, don't feel too bad, will you?"

I sat up, catching at his hand. "Jay, what's the *matter* with you—" I protested, but he straightened up swiftly and fairly ran from the room, almost colliding with the Charge Nurse in the arched doorway. The reporters were sniggering in the corner, and one of them came forward and asked a question that made me gasp.

"That's a personal matter, you filthy-minded—"

"Listen to it!" said the reporter, poking his companion in the ribs with a quickening, baffled fury. Well, I shouldn't complain. At least the doctors and nurses had been decent to me; I couldn't ask more than that. I suppose it was because, being what they were, they saw me for what I was. Like themselves; I bled when I was cut, went to sleep under drugs, sweated cold sweat and cried out on the delivery table like any other woman — *they* knew. To them, Lisa wasn't a freak. She was a miracle.

The Charge Nurse, her face as starched as her uniform, shooed the reporters out of the room. "Visiting hours are over," she said acidulously, "and Mrs. Dee has to rest. You'd think nobody had ever seen a baby before!"

"This is a pretty special baby," said the foul-mouthed reporter with a sneer, and laid a large-denominated credit on the edge of my bed. "Thanks for the pictures, *Mrs.* Dee!"

I threw the bill straight in his face.

"Take your filthy money and get out of here, you *greck.*" I raged, "I'm no side-show freak, and if you print those pictures in your dirty little scandal-sheet, I'll sue you for every minim you and your rotten boss have got!" The Charge Nurse motioned at the reporters, threateningly, and I lay sobbing exhaustedly into my pillow. The Charge Nurse shepherded them down the hall and I heard the elevator stop and then start; after a minute the Charge Nurse came back and I heard her quick steps cross my room and then she bent over and patted my shoulder softly. "You poor kid," she whispered, "You poor kid, you meet them — and their kind — everywhere, don't you? Well, never mind them. They don't know the difference. I tell you, they scampered when I got after them! Listen. You know what I am, Dee? Well, let me tell you, I feel ashamed of myself, I'll say! I'm good an' ashamed of the wonderful race I supposedly belong to!" Her voice was vehement with wrath, but I felt kindness instinct within the anger. Still whimpering softly, I rolled over and looked up into her flat grey eyes. I tried to choke back my tears. "Thanks," I whispered, "there are a few decent *people.*"

THE Charge Nurse smiled, a little sadly. "You were rather a fool, you know," she said in a studiedly offhand voice. "The baby, and all. It's not *you* they resent, it's that. So many of *us* can't have children now. More of — of our kind of women, are sterile, every year." She sighed. "One would think they'd be glad — but that's not the way they are. So when you, or one of your kind, has a baby, they resent it. It's just sublimated jealousy. They turn it into a holy crusade. You've heard, maybe, about the legislation to out-

law—" She stopped ahruptly, almost visihly cramming her words hack into her mouth. I gulped, with a little hiccupping soh. "I didn't know," I quavered, "I didn't know I could — I was so surprised when I found out about the haby—"

"You lie down and take it easy," said the Charge Nurse with hrisk kindliness. "Try to sleep, and you'll feel hetter." She gave my shoulder another little pat. "Don't take it too hard."

I lay down, but I didn't sleep. I listened to the hundred little noises that are compounded into the silence of a hig hospital, the sounds and light small smells, the millions of rustlings and creakings and hreaths of sharp scents. The elevator shot up to the floor, a telephone shrilled in one of the offices, a man's authoritative voice spoke a few words in the next room, the plastic screens at the window huzzed in and out, in and out with the breath of the huilding. There were steps in the hall, and I hecame aware that two nurses were peering curiously through the open archway. One nurse said softly "Well, now I've seen everything."

Another, sharper voice cut in, "Are they going to let that thing live, Sandy?"

"Oh, of course not, don't be silly! You *know* better than that. It's a scientific kind of freak — they want to study it awhile—"

"It's kind of cute," a third voice put in hesitantly. "Looks just like any other haby to me!"

"Oh, hut you can always tell them if you know how! I was in the delivery room when — oh, I'll tell you all ahout it later. Don't say anything to the Charge Nurse ahout it, though! She's a littlc cracked on the suhject — she nearly hit off my head this morning, and I just said — hut anyhow, you give them an inch, and they'll take a mile. Pretty soon, they'll he thinking they're human! *I* can't have children. *You* can't, Judy. Why should that thing in there —"

A murmured protest, then the sharp voice went on "Now, I'm as tolerant as the next one, I hope. It's all rubbish when they say no nice woman won't go out with a syntho man, and really, I've had some wonderful dates, hut the women — and — they marry, I guess, hut you *do* have to draw the line somewhere. You can't let their brats live! Why, there's no way to *tell* — an adult's all very well, mind you; the men are awfully handsome, hut — a synthandroid *child!* Why — it's *obscene!*"

The voices moved on, and, feeling sick in every nerve, I closed my eyes, letting my head loll on the pillow, pressing the sleep stud on my pliant chest. 'The tolerant ones are worse then the others—" I thought with weary hurt, as through the sound of a crying child somewhere my brain's synthetic cells waded off into deep, fuzzy slumher . . .

—Marion Zimmer Bradley

Shade of Blond

by JAMES L. HARTE

IT was a lonely cabin in the hills. The Poconos of Pennsylvania, really, and not too far from civilization. I could drive my wheezing old convertible in to a place called Stroudsburg in an hour. And New York wasn't many hours from there.

Yet the cabin was isolated, fairly inaccessible. No neighbors. No telephone. Surrounded only by miles of scrub thicket, it was ideal for my purpose. Concentration. One could do little else here but to concentrate. And I had a book to get on with.

Harry Bettencourt had read me the riot act just a week ago. Harry is my agent. I work and then I play, while Harry all the time has the worry, for ten per cent. Now he was worried, after getting me a sizable advance on a promise of delivery of manuscript, and I'd been playing.

"I've got it all shaped up in my mind," I told Harry the day he called me in on the carpet.

"Mind, Hell!" he snapped. "Get it on paper. You've got exactly six weeks from today to meet contract delivery and I've never known you to finish a book in six weeks."

"Okay, Harry, don't get bitter. I'll pack up and head for the hills tonight. I'll keep nose to grindstone until the book is finished."

So here I was, buried in the loneliness of the Poconos.

My stuff is in the Sax Rohmer tradition. With maybe a touch of Mickey Spillane, although I was selling before Spillane exploded all over the place. Mystery, intrigue, with a touch of the weird, and liberally dotted with sex and violence. The public ate up my books, and my publisher was always eager for the next. Never any trouble getting an advance, much less spending it, although I usually got down to the hard work of writing with three months alloted for completion of a novel. Now I had six weeks.

The aloneness did the trick. In two weeks, I'd accomplished, for me, a miracle. Half the book was on paper, three typewriter ribbons had been worn out. I was beginning to feel the strain of pounding away in my solitary retreat.

The afternoon shadows lengthened. Hungry sounds growled from the depths of my stomach. I pushed the typewriter, with a page of Chapter XI in it, from me. I dug a couple of pork chops and some canned apples from my deep-freeze larder, fried the stuff, ate, cleaned up the dishes, and returned to my desk in the larger room of the cabin. This room, on the hunting-lodge style, took up two-thirds of the entire building. The other third was made up of three tiny rooms, not much larger than closets, which served as kitchen, bedroom, bath. My desk faced away from the west wall of the big room, a large window behind it.

Dusk comes quickly in the hills. The darkness spread into the cabin and I snapped on the battery-fed desk light as I resumed my work. The words of the chapter flowed along, smoothly but not too rapidly. An hour passed and my eyes grew heavy-lidded. I rubbed my eyes with the backs of my hands, then cradled my head on my arm over the top of my typewriter, intending a moment's rest for the weary orbs.

A blinding flash of brilliant blue light awakened me. I *felt* it before I saw it, before I could get my sleep-numbed eyes open to see it. Brighter than daylight, it enveloped the inside of my hideaway, almost gushing in from the window behind me. Startled into full command of my senses, I jumped to my feet and stared from the window.

My eyes bugged. The source of the light, diminishing now, lay in a half-cleared area several hundred yards from the cabin. It was a huge disc, perhaps a hundred feet in diameter, and twenty feet in height. The blue

light streamed from a wide band, approximately five feet, that encircled the center of the disc, separating top and bottom. The band revolved, slowing as I watched. And, as it slowed, the light faded.

"Flying saucer!" I gasped, giving to the strange machine the common term given to every unknown object that flashed across the skies. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief.

There was no fright in me. Only curiosity as I recovered from my initial, stunned surprise. Eagerly, I threw up the window and leaped over the sill into the night. Quickly, I advanced to within a hundred feet of the thing, then stopped in my tracks as, in the dimming glow of the barely moving central band, an aperture appeared, like that disclosed by a sliding panel. It was along the side arc of the contraption, a few feet above the bottom on which it rested. I moved, tense, behind the protective screen of some low-hanging brush. Behind me was the blackness of the Pennsylvania night.

Two strange little feet appeared in the queer opening. A body showed, then the whole dropped lightly, soundlessly, to the turf. I gasped at what I saw. It looked like a man, but one crazily deformed. It stood four feet tall, its body small, puny, like that of a starved, underdeveloped child. Its head, however, was large, round, moon-like, almost as long as all of the body and much more full. It seemed to exude an aura, an impression perhaps, of great mental strength. And, in the faint blue light that yet came from the disc, the creature's eyes, as it turned my way and peered searchingly into the darkness, were deep blue in a pale, white face. Silvery blond hair crowned the odd head.

As I stared, bewildered, skeptical, two more of the creatures joined the first.

"It is good, if we have not been noticed," the first one spoke. There was a metallic edge to his voice.

"By the Great Brain of Venus," the second said, "I hope the others have been as successful."

The first one laughed, a cackle that sounded like a shrill winter wind whipping a thousand high wires in still air. "I, Sklar, am sure of that! Should any of our craft be seen over this planet, the stupid Earthmen will rave about flying saucers and invasion from Mars, and their equally stupid scientists will allay their fears, explaining that flying saucers cannot exist, that the people have seen, perhaps, some phenomenon of space.

"Mars! Ho-ho! Little do the Earthmen realize that Mars, and all the rest of the Universe, is ruled by the Great Brain of Venus. Only this Earth itself remains to be conquered, and that we shall accomplish!"

SKLAR, apparently the leader of the trio, smiled hideously, his round face a pale apparition. He spoke again. "You, Gnad, and you,

Kvak, shall not fail your assigned duties. Nor shall I, Sklar."

Gnad, blond counterpart of his leader, chuckled. His arrogance was no less than that of Sklar. "Over all the face of Earth," he boasted, "we have fallen, in all of its silly countries. Each one of us shall take over the body and brain of a chosen man, a leader in his country. His thinking, his actions, shall soon thereafter be ours as we take command of his being." Gnad grinned.

Kvak, the identical third, said, harshly, "Democracy, poof! We shall lay waste this silly philosophy, even while the stupid Earthmen fight among themselves to establish it! Our minds shall direct theirs, to speak and write and act against it, and to learn subservience to the greatest mentality of the Universe!"

Something turned to terror within me. Grasshoppers of strange fear strummed stridently in my stomach.

"We must begin," said Sklar, abruptly. "You, Gnad, have some distance to travel to reach the physicist within whom you shall live. It is better that you be gone."

"Fifth column . . . fifth column . . . nightmare . . ." The grasshoppers in my guts screamed these words up into my head.

"Kvak," Sklar continued, "you are very near your destination, even nearer than am I. But speed is imperative, although first we must destroy our craft. Nothing must remain to provide the least inkling of our presence, should our approach have been seen. The Earthmen must be completely confounded. Stupid as they are, we must take no chances."

"We shall meet again?" Gnad queried, a trifle somberly.

"Yes," cracked Sklar, queer head tilted in arrogance, "When we have completed our missions within the bodies of those whom we shall inhabit. When we have broken down all unity, destroyed all faith in such childish things as the United Nations. When we have caused disruption, disorder, confusion and chaos. Then shall the Great Brain lead our brother-brains of Venus in the grand invasion to establish the Order here. We will have prepared for it, and Earth shall become our satellite, as is its destiny. Then, when Earth is ours, we shall resume our natural forms, to meet again. Let us get on."

Quivering, horrified, yet doubtful of what I was yet witnessing, I gazed as Sklar leaped up into the hole in the side of the disc, vanished into its bowels for a moment, then nimbly rejoined his pale blond mates. "It is gone," he said simply. And the huge machine began to disintegrate before my eyes.

I watched it fade into nothingness. I wanted to run, to cry an alarm, but feared to move lest I be discovered. Could I get away? Could I reach my old convertible in the cover of darkness and escape these strange visitors? Would I be believed if I did, and spread the alarm? I

turned. At that moment, I felt a tremendous pain at the side of my head, just over the right temple. Blackness engulfed me, deeper than the blackness of the night.

When consciousness returned, I stared about me. For a moment I lay transfixed. I was in my own bed in the narrow bedroom of the cabin. Daylight streamed in. Had I gone through some wild, vivid dream?

I could not remember having prepared for bed. The last conscious memory was of cradling my head on my arm, at my desk. I strained to think. Visions of weird little blond men, of a glowing blue disc, crossed my mind. I got to my feet, my head aching dully, wrapped a robe around me and dashed, barefooted, from the cabin.

There was no evidence that any strange craft had even been in the vicinity. Hazily, I recalled the disintegration. Even with that, my aching head reasoned, a disc as large as I remembered would have by its weight alone broken and bent branches of the shrubs, torn tentacles of the vines, made some impression on the soft turf where it had rested. There were no such marks of its existence. Twigs and pebbles bit into my bare feet.

"What a dream!" I muttered aloud. The birds and the rustling leaves mocked me. My mind, I convinced myself, had conjured up a dream fantasy, the result of overworking myself as I engaged in the vivid picturization necessary to the book on which I labored. I picked my way back to the cabin. "Whew!" I groaned, "I need a day off. Just one day of relaxation, with boon companions, and a couple drinks too many. Then, back to this grind."

I looked at the page in the typewriter, the manuscript pile and the carbons beside. Chapter XI stared back at me. "Okay," I said, "if I finish this chapter, I can walk into Bettencourt's Madison Avenue offices with proof of my progress." I smiled a smile of mixed smugness and anticipation. I breakfasted, and returned to the work. I didn't stop with the end of the chapter.

I became engrossed in the yarn, although daily I grew more irritated and irritable. I forgot all about Venus, about Sklar, Gnad and Kvak, even though queasy sensations daily disturbed my head and stomach. I put in another week and lacked only the climax and the polishing of the final chapters when I finally climbed into the convertible and set off for a day in Gotham.

Dolly Gray, Harry Bettencourt's private secretary, ushered me into his sanctum sanctorum. I paused for a moment inside the door, with Miss Gray holding the door open behind me. Harry shot me an odd look, then nodded to Dolly. She closed the door, leaving me alone with the agent.

"Book done?" he asked.

"With two weeks to go?" I parried.

He glanced at the bulky envelope I tossed to his desk.

"I have been plugging, Harry," I said, "There's a good two-thirds there." I nodded toward the envelope. "Three, maybe four chapters will finish it up. You'll have them in good time. For now, maybe it would be best to send that much along to friend publisher; get the galley proofs back early."

"Good," smiled Harry.

"For tonight," I said, "I'm on the town. All work, you know."

"Guess you deserve it, from the looks of this." He fingered the bulky manuscript, again glancing oddly upon me.

"Anything wrong, Harry?" I responded to the glance.

"No, Jay," he said. He laughed. "Must have been an optical illusion."

"What?"

"Well," he hesitated, "I thought you were taller than Dolly, but when you stood in the doorway with her, a few moments ago . . . well, maybe it was the shadow, or something, but you no longer seemed as tall."

"She's sporting spike-heels," I grinned. "What's it matter?"

"Nothing." Then the ten-percenter, peering closer, added, "You feeling okay, Jay?"

What was wrong with the guy, I wondered. "Sure," I answered, curtly.

"Not getting the mumps, maybe?"

"Mumps? You screwy, Harry? I'm fine, except damned tired from pounding the keys fourteen to sixteen hours a day. And I could use a drink."

Bettencourt reached into a desk drawer for the bottle. "Sorry," he said, "But your face seems swollen slightly, sort of rounding out at the jowls."

"Nonsense," I grunted, reaching for the rye he'd poured. But a strange twinge pulled at my guts and, like a quick flash, the name of Kvak knifed sharply through my brain.

ON my way out of the place, I was sorely tempted to ask Dolly Gray to get up from behind her desk and stand back to back with me, that I might measure my height against hers. "Silly," I told myself, and hurried off, anxious to get to my club and warm my slithery innards with large curative doses of rye. Maybe, I thought, one of the science-fantasy scriveners would welcome my Venus-disc dream as basis for a yarn. It wasn't quite in my own line.

The club was deserted except for a *Times* editorial writer, a *Collier's* staff man, and Merv Stokes. Stokes peddles a million or more words yearly to the pulp books, Westerns mostly. I joined this trio at the bar and soon conversation drifted to world affairs.

While my books pay the freight for me, I had in the past turned out dozens of articles, think-pieces, for the liberal journals that, without much advertising, pay off in prestige in place of cold cash. A staunch,

firm believer in freedom of the individual, I had long been rabidly anti-Marxist, anti-totalitarianist, regardless of its guise. Stokes leaned a little farther to the left, and he now objected heatedly to a statement of faith in the United Nations as voiced by the *Times* man.

"Bah," I suddenly spat, "you're neither of you in your right minds! What this world needs, and quickly, is a single system, governing all of the Earth, wielded by one dominant brain. We can see before our eyes the decadence of democracy, but communism isn't the alternative."

Stokes gulped his drink. *Times* and *Collier's* both glared upon me. I flushed, queerly moved. I hadn't wanted to make any such statement. The words were not mine although my mouth had uttered them. I felt a quick stab of pain behind my eyes and reached a limp hand to rub my forehead. "I," I stammered. I wanted to apologize, to explain, but the words refused to leave the roof of my mouth and in their stead came tumbling, "Mark what I say: a great new order will soon be visited upon all of you." I bit my lips to prevent any further such heresy.

Times looked at Stokes. "Is the man mad?" he whispered.

Was I mad? I turned and ran from the place, frightened, running from myself. I kept running when I reached the street. The fear bubbled in me, and laughter, too. Strange laughter bubbling in the back of my head. I found my car where I'd parked it before going in to see my agent, and I headed it back toward the lonely Pennsylvania hills.

The long drive exhausted me and at the same time gave me a strange feeling of relief, as from a nightmare. Back in the cabin again, I began to think. My actions at the club I rationalized as the result of being unstrung, irritable from the long grind on the novel. I fell quickly into a deep sleep, the sleep of complete exhaustion.

In the morning, after copious quantities of black coffee, I showered, then prepared to shave. Heretofore, my face had been on a level with the bathroom mirror. Now, oddly, I found myself squinting up toward it. It didn't seem wrong at the moment, my anxiety to return to my desk and hasten the final chapters of the book completely blotting out all other thought.

My fingers danced with more than usual rapidity over the Corona keys. The pages piled up. I forgot to stop for a noontime lunch and finally pulled the lid of the typewriter case over the machine as the night's dark blanket penetrated the cabin windows. I shoved the completed work to the side, to be read for correction the next morning. I whipped up some food, with more coffee in quantity, then read a pocket-book thriller before dozing off.

THE next morning, after breakfasting, I began to check the work that had gone so swiftly, so well, following my hasty return from Manhattan. My mind whirled, my stomach churned, and again the strange unholy fear was on me. For the words on these pages were not those continuing my novel. They were those of a devilish manifesto, in stilted phrasing like that used by Sklar in his speech, and by Gnad and by Kvak. They extolled the creed of another power, a cruel power that would crush all mental weaklings and provide for a world populated only by genius, genius controlled by one great central brain. Rage consumed me. Blind, fearful rage. I tore the sheets of manuscript to shreds and tossed them into the wastebasket. And even as I shredded the paper a voice spoke within me, silently, but sending a metallic taste into my throat, trying to stay my shaking hands.

I staggered from the big room, intent on getting black coffee from the kitchen as an antidote for this terrifying hangover. I rubbed my hand through my hair; dark brown hair it had always been, unruly and wavy. It felt silken and thin and *different*. I dashed into the bathroom to look into the mirror, and the mirror hung even higher now. I had to grasp the washbowl beneath it and hoist myself on tiptoe to look into the glass. The waves, the kinks, were gone from my hair! It was light, almost blond. Almost silvery blond! I cried aloud in terror.

The hideous dream stayed with me. I tried to look away but my gaze was drawn back to my reflection in the mirror. My eyes stared eerily back at me. *My eyes?* My eyes had been brown since birth, but the eyes in my funny round face were blue! My funny round face!

I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to laugh. The laughter won out, but not as I had ever before known laughter. It burst, bubbling, from my lips in a high, metallic cackle. Like a gale crackling loudly, ever so loudly, through a mesh of telephone wires high overhead.

"I'm mad," I shouted. But no, the metallic voice within me said, I am but changed, and the world is mad. The world must be changed too. This silly, stupid world, that it might become a unit in a universe of mental might.

Sanity jolted me for one split moment in time. I must finish my book. My book. *What book? Who am I? Not a book, a stupid novel. Not for me, not for this pale, silver blond.* This blond, moon-faced, is me, and I must write the manifesto as the Great Brain wills. I must write, that the stupid Earthmen be made aware of the truth that is to be their fate. There is not much time.

— JAMES L. HARTE

Rejects

By FRANK BRISTOW

Gentlemen — we're being honored by a visit from an alien form of life

THE governor looked up wearily as the excited young officer burst into his office. It had been a difficult work period. Protocol for a coming visit of interplanetary brass had been established in a frantic four hour session and had been followed by an angry delegation of farmland representatives.

And now this young officer wearing the insignia of a space port official loomed up in the doorway, obviously a carrier of still another headache.

Carrier was just the right word, the aging governor thought glumly. Like disease carriers, younger people seemed to have a perverse talent for bringing troubles into his office.

With a mental sigh the graying, toga-wrapped official beckoned the youngster forward.

A thick carpet whose origin lay in croplands 100 fathoms under the ocean muffled his steps as the captain from the space port strode forward and saluted.

"Well," said the senior official not ungraciously — for the amenities of a high civilization demanded civility even when vague aches and pains announced the body's need of a rest period—"Well," he repeated. "What is it, young man?"

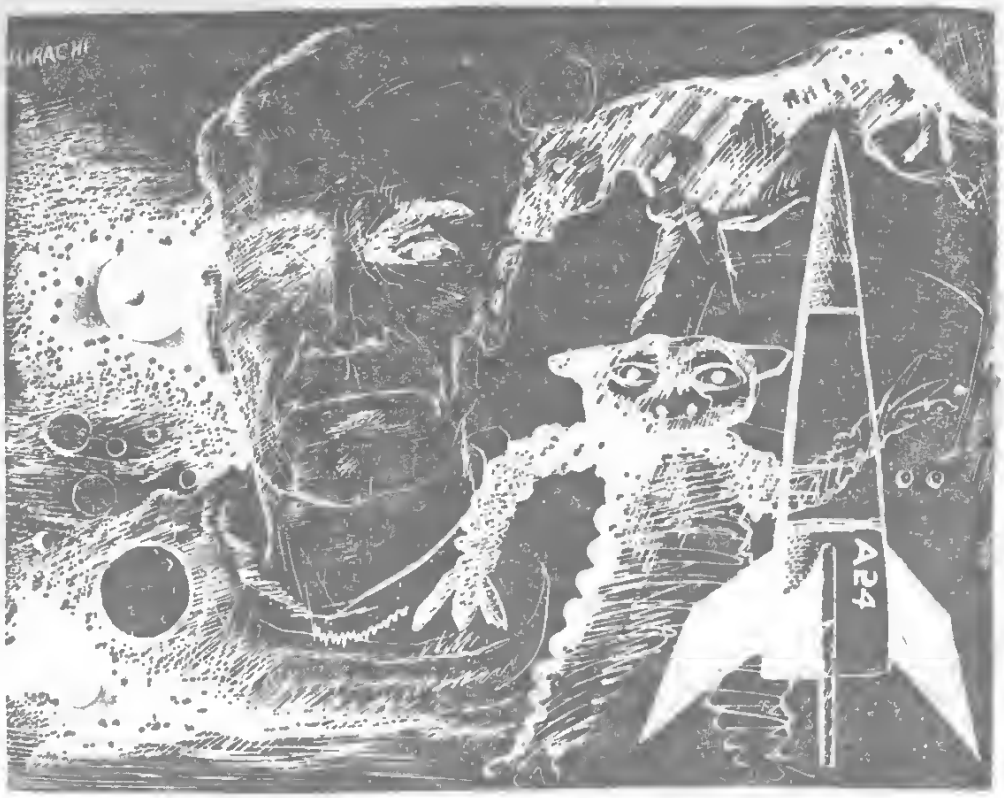
"Aliens, Sir," said the young man quietly. "Real aliens from some other solar system." Excitement edged into his voice as his service bred control began to weaken. "A strange ship, Sir, unlike any we have ever seen," he continued, now speaking hurriedly, "And space suits because they can't breathe our atmosphere and . . ."

"When did they land?"

"During the last rest period," the captain replied, "They came in from seaward. They didn't leave their ship for some time. That's why you weren't notified before," the youngster finished quickly.

"You said aliens, Captain. Can you be so sure. Perhaps they are from Seven. Have you talked with them?"

"I've seen them, Sir," the officer



said. "They are not from Seven, or anywhere we know of. A sketch was made and sent to central records. Negative reply, Sir."

The governor rose from behind his desk. His fatigue vanished and a youthful vitality animated his aged body.

"Real aliens," he said softly. He turned quickly to the captain. "Do you realize that it has been three, no almost four lifetimes since a new race was discovered?"

Somehow the captain managed to look miserable in face of the governor's enthusiasm.

"I want a copy of that sketch," the governor said crisply, "Then you get back to that spaceport and set up a scanner and audio projector. Have the equipment keyed into my personal band."

He pointed at the captain to emphasize his next command. "I'm appointing you my special deputy to handle these visitors for me. You'll take orders only from this office. Now get busy on that sketch."

The young officer relaxed as the governor left the officer. Then, strangely reluctant, he slowly picked up a sheet of paper off the desk and began to draw.

WHEN the governor returned, followed by a quartet of assistants, the captain was gone. Stepping behind his desk the official snatched up the sketch and at the same time motioned his assistants to

gather around. He then turned his attention to the drawing.

For a moment he stared at the sheet of paper in his hand. Then, slowly, his age again showing in the lines of his body, he sat down. The paper sliding to the floor.

A military assistant in a gaudy purple robe retrieved the drawing. His gasp sounded sharp and clear in the hushed room. A language expert crowded forward to peer at the square of paper. He shuddered delicately and looked inquiringly at the governor slumped in his chair.

"The official attitude of this office," the old official said tonelessly, "will be to extend every courtesy to these strangers."

He looked up at the group clustered around his desk. "We must remember that a life form that seems impossibly hideous to us is only a natural adaptation to the physical environment of its home planet." The governor reached out and turned the sketch face downward. He didn't keep the distaste from showing in his features.

"You'll want a conference?" a communications officer asked nervously. The governor didn't move. "All seven governors?" the assistant continued.

The white clad official spoke without moving. "You all know your jobs and what I will need to know. I will be waiting for your reports."

The four quickly bowed out leaving the planet's governor alone. He turned the sketch right side up and stared at it unbelievingly. Then, straightening in his chair he threw a switch on his desk and sat waiting for the images of the six other planetary rulers to form on the wall screens.

He sat motionless as the forms of the system's rulers appeared. To each he offered his greetings in the tongue of the planets excepting the governor of Seven. When Seven's huge form swam into view, the governor of Three spoke into a translator on his desk. Seven's greeting issued from the translator in harsh, tinny tones and the assemblage was complete.

Three let his eyes flick over the six images in front of him. He compared the form of each with that of the alien and realized that not one of them had a single physical characteristic in common with the visitors.

He reflected to himself that this fact might make the conference difficult. Before he showed them the sketch he had better remind them of their obligations imposed by the refinements of the civilization they represented. Perhaps, he thought, it would be best if they didn't see the sketch at all.

Signalling for attention, the dignified governor of Three spoke. "Gentlemen, our solar system has been honored by a visit from a heretofore unknown life form from beyond the limits of our galaxy."

A wave of excitement rippled through the six screens. Only Two failed to hide the envy that each felt because the aliens had chosen to land on Three.

"Have you spoken to them?" asked One.

"Not yet, I . . ."

"We must have a system holiday," suggested Five eagerly.

"Are they like us?" asked Four with unconscious irony.

"Yes," said Six heavily. "Are they like us? Are they peaceful? What is the civilization type? I think these questions take a certain precedence over a holiday celebration of their arrival. With all due respect to the exalted governor of Five," he added quickly.

Although he had not consciously intended sarcasm it was best to leave no doubt. His planet was the last to be accepted into the system government and was in some respects considered less civilized than its neighbors.

The governor of Three cut in quickly, answered the questions and gave a brief of what was already known of the aliens.

"A video set-up is being made now at the port," he said, "And we shall soon have preliminary reports from my assistants," he finished.

"Until then . . ," he paused as a message was laid on his desk by a secretary.

HE scanned it briefly and then read it to the conference.

"The alien ship is somewhat crude in construction but is filled with ingenious devices for navigation, communication and other less understood purposes. It seems to be carrying armament."

It was signed by his military advisor.

"Arms?" said Two thoughtfully.

"If the report is true," said Three. "They could be some type of machinery. My advisor wasn't sure."

"It will be a disappointment if the ship is armed," Six said.

The governor of One pointed out that the arms could have been installed for this particular flight. "It doesn't mean," he said, "that the aliens still war among themselves."

"Hardly," said Seven, "If they can construct an inter-galaxy ship they can scarcely be so primitive as to still have wars."

"I agree," Three said, "However, if they are weapons, we will soon know."

A light flashed on his desk. "Ah, I see that the audio link is completed," he said. He manipulated the controls on a small board and listened for several minutes. He remained in a listening attitude after the young captain had finished.

The others began to grow restless waiting for him to translate into the planetary tongue.

"Does the message concern the arms aboard the ship," Two inquired

attempting to mask his nervousness, "Or is it something new about the aliens."

"I trust your hesitation doesn't mean that an incompatible trait has been discovered," said Seven, "I feel that a new life form is of such great importance that every effort must be made to establish a, ah, rapport with them."

"True," said Three, "And the truth is that my hesitation was over the possible import of the message. Frankly, it is disturbing."

"Well," said One delicately.

"Oh, pardon me," Three said quickly, "My team reports that a preliminary psycho-graph has revealed certain traits in the alien. By the way, there six of them, one of which is their leader and the others being crewmen of one type or another."

You mentioned, ah, certain traits," One said, "I don't mean to seem over anxious but we do . . ," he trailed off into silence.

"I'll read them," Three said quickly with an apologetic air. "Aggressive, cunning, mecho-genius, feelings of superiority, only slightly culturist and a definite warlike spirit that is temporarily repressant."

"Sounds rather primitive," One said thinking aloud.

"Nothing primitive about that mecho-genius rating," Four observed.

"If they are warlike, I vote now for isolation," rasped Seven through the translator. "It's unthinkable."

"Agreed," Three said, "But perhaps we can keep them in hand and still profit from this visit."

"I should think so," said Six, "After all its not as if we had to fear their weapons."

"What profit is there in a primitive life form," demanded Seven heavily.

"No profit, perhaps, in a cultural sense," Three put in smoothly, "But our scientists might learn something. Don't forget that they are really a new life form and one that has developed an inter-galaxy drive."

"At best it could only be a diversion for the scientists of our civilization," Seven replied determinedly. "And we still have the risk of a possible use of force."

"You are right," Three said, "But I will reserve my vote until more is known of the visitors."

"My vote is no," said Seven abruptly and disappeared from his screen to be replaced by a deputy.

"Here is what I have been waiting for," Three said as his desk screen came to life to show the face of the space port captain.

"Speak in the tongue of the planets, Captain," the governor said, "And as soon as possible I want a view of the alien ship."

The captain issued rapid instructions to someone out of view and then turned to a report he held in his hands. At a signal from the governor of Three he began to read.

"Several disturbing facts have been

gleaned from our examination of the ships contents." He hesitated as the swish of a landing spacer was heard in the background.

THREE shifted uneasily in his chair embarrassed that his newly appointed deputy hadn't thought to cast from a building away from the noise of the port. The spacers all clear whistle signaled the resumption of the report.

"The aliens food supply showed a totally mercenary approach to the lower life forms of their solar system. They seem to have no realization of the potential intelligence of subordinate specie. Their only concern with them is for food or pleasure. But in the last analysis, food."

The youngsters voice trembled slightly as he continued somewhat awkwardly.

"One of their food animals is a life form identical with the, ah, dominant race of Planet One."

One immediately vanished from his screen. A pall of embarrassment settled over the conference.

"The next point," the captain's voice continued, "is best given by an expert."

The heavy tones of the military advisor filled the room almost immediately.

"The presence of armament aboard the alien ship is proven to be a constant practice in the alien civilization. Although this ship is classed as a load carrier, it is as heavily armed as one of the cruisers in our interplanetary museum."

Seven's deputy vanished leaving two blank screens at the conference.

"I bave been informed by the historian specialist," the military aid went on, "That the alien's culture is still in the throes of inter-planetary warfare. Report ended."

One had returned to the screen just before the military advisor had concluded his report. Now he signaled for attention.

"My vote is no," he said simply, "My planet cannot tolerate the presence of such a life form. I'm sure this is understandable."

Four spoke up, cast a negative vote and explained. "In spite of the value and excitement inherent in the discovery of a new life form, the sympathies of my people are with the race of Planet One. The revolting warlike trait of these aliens has also influenced my vote," he concluded.

The governor of Three acknowledged the two votes and then said smoothly, "I feel that we are overlooking the fact that until we thoroughly analyze our visitors we are in danger of overlooking cultural values that might be completely unknown to us. I don't think we can afford to be so limited in our vision. Such an attitude hardly seems civilized."

Agreement was immediate and enthusiastic with the exception of One and Seven. Even four agreed to with-

hold his negative vote until more was known.

Three relaxed in his chair satisfied with his deft handling of the conference. He was sure that One and Seven could, in time, be made to realize the potential of an alien art and philosophy. A thrill swept over him as he allowed his mind to dwell on potentials of the situation. It had been years since he had made a reading script and what could be more fitting as a last gesture as governor than an interpretation of a totally new race.

He roused himself from his reverie to acknowledge a call from the port.

"We have had to isolate the stranger's ship", it was the young captain speaking and the words caused a feeling of apprehension in the conference. "We have found a curious deterioration of small portions of the metal in the interior of the ship. A field test has proven that our metals are very susceptible to this chemical change that renders metal useless by causing it to weaken and crumble to powder. Report ended."

Three stared glumly at the screen. He had known somehow from the first that the aliens must go. He had hoped that a characteristic might be discovered that would outweigh the dismal picture presented in the reports.

But this deterioration of metal in the alien ship nullified his hopes. He was framing his negative vote when Five spoke.

"In view of this latest information and the known depletion of metals in our system I must insist on a negative vote from the conference. And further, in that my planet is the poorest of us in metals, I must ask Three for proof that the spaceport and its personnel has been completely sterilized. I suggest that the first deputy of the Governor of Three would be a suitable courier to deliver this proof. For the well being of my people I am forced to suspend all traffic with Planet Three until the courier arrives."

Quickly the others agreed. Three rose to his feet and without the formality of his own vote, closed the conference.

When all the screens were blank he summoned his secretary.

"Please inform my deputy at the space port that the alien ship must leave at once and the port is to be quarantined until further notice."

There was some trouble at the port when the visitors finally understood that they were to depart. But a glowing force field that absorbed a barrage from their heaviest atomic weapons quickly convinced them.

Within the time of a single work period the ship was lifting toward the pink sky. Inside the spacer a disgruntled crew prepared for the year long voyage in the rusting trading ship back to earth.

—FRANK BRISTOW

The Miraculous Lens

By JACK LEWIS

MY name is James O'Conell, but the kids at school all call me Jimmie. Pop calls me Jimmie too. But sometimes when Mom gets a little mad at me she calls me James. Like the time I got into the fist fight with Tommy Pearson and broke my glasses.

She was real mad that time — especially after I told her that I didn't like the old glasses anyhow and was glad they were broke.

When Pop got home from work that night, I sat in the living room, real quiet like, and pretended I was reading a comic book. But all the while, I could hear Mom in the kitchen telling him what happened.

While she talked to him, Pop kept moving around, and I knew he was hanging up his hat and coat. Then pretty soon he came into the living room and told me to put down the comic book.

"Your Mother tells me you got into trouble at school today," he said. "Broke your glasses too. Can you give me any reason why I shouldn't put the strap to you?"

I didn't say anything — just looked down at the floor and acted like I was sorry. I thought maybe if I acted sorry enough about what happened, he wouldn't put the strap to me.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" he said.

"Gee, Pop," I told him, "I'm sorry about the glasses. I didn't mean to break them, but now that they're broke, maybe the kids at school won't make fun of me anymore."

Pop scratched his nose a little, like he always does when he's trying to figure something out. "Why would they make fun of you?" he asked me. "Lots of people wear glasses."

"None of the kids in my class do," I said. "That's what started the fight

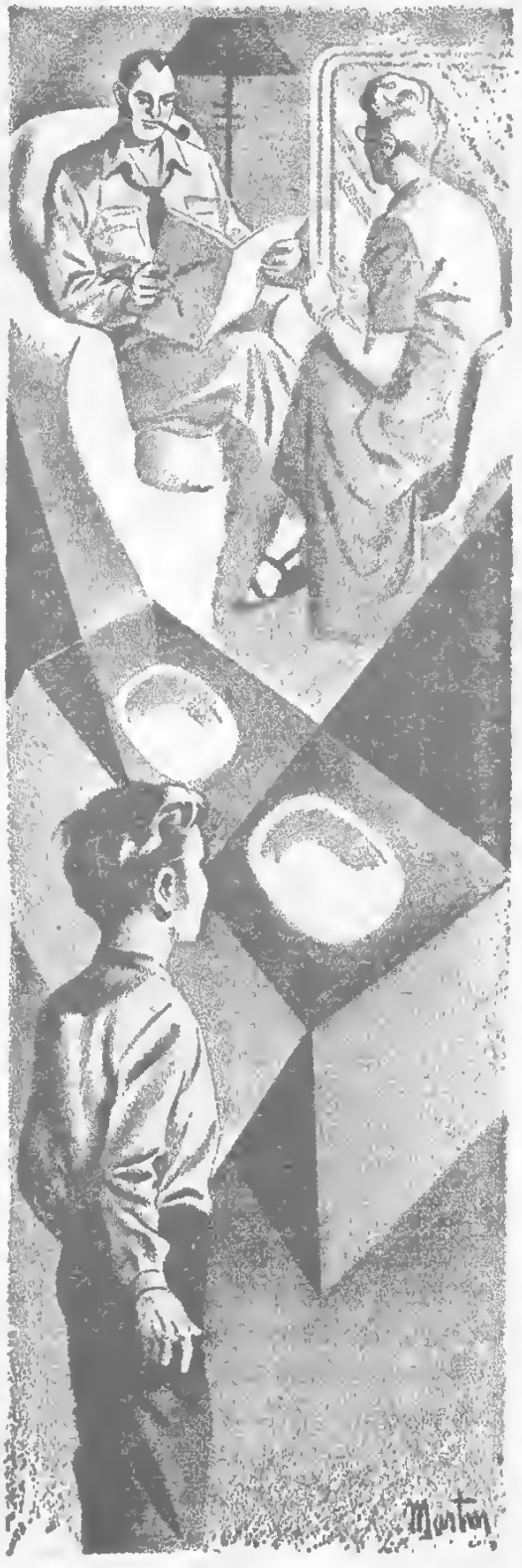
this afternoon. Tommy Pearson and a couple of other guys kept calling me Barney Google and Banjo Eyes, till all of a sudden we were all swinging at each other.

After I told him that, Pop scratched his nose some more. Then pretty soon he walked out in the kitchen. At first I thought he was going inside after the strap. But after a while, I could hear him and Mom talking in the kitchen. They talked real low. That's how I knew they were talking about me. But I didn't mind because by that time I was pretty sure I wasn't going to get a spanking after all.

After school the next day Mom took me down to the optician. Mom went inside with him first and after a while they called me in and the man asked me to sit down. Mr. Pfister asked me a lot of questions about how old I was and what class I was in at school. Then he made me look through a big funny looking pair of black glasses and read a chart on the wall. He said he was going to make me a pair of glasses that weren't really glasses at all, cause no one would be able to tell whether I was wearing them or not.

A couple of days later when we went back there again, Mr. Pfister brought out a little box and inside were the things he'd made for me. He said they were called contact lenses.

They didn't feel very good when he



put them on, but after he let me look in a mirror and I saw that you couldn't tell I was wearing them, I knew they were going to be OK.

It must have been just about lunch time when we got back outside cause there were an awful lot of people on the street. Everyone seemed to be walking in different directions and bumping into each other. I didn't think much about it right then, but after we got home and I went to turn on the television, a funny thing happened.

Mom was sitting across from me on the sofa. I asked her what time Howdy-Doody came on, but she didn't answer me. She was looking right at me, so I thought she hadn't heard and asked her again.

Then I heard Mom say: "He won't be on for almost an hour." Only it wasn't Mom talking, but another lady who looked just like her. And she was standing in the doorway.

Well, I just looked back and forth, from the lady who stood in the doorway and looked and talked like my Mom, to the lady who sat on the sofa and didn't talk at all. Then the Mom who talked, walked over and sat down next to the Mom that didn't.

"Who is that sitting next to you?" I asked the Mom who talked.

She turned around, real scared like and looked right at the other lady. Then she looked back at me. "James," she said, "I don't want you to startle me that way. It isn't funny to scare people."

"But there IS someone there," I told her. "She looks just like you, and she's sitting beside you."

Mom, (the one who talked) wrinkled up the corners of her mouth. Then as if she just thought of something, jumped up and walked over to where I sat. "James," she said, "I do believe you're seeing double. Take those lenses out of your eyes this instant!"

I took them off. And then I noticed that the lady on the sofa was gone.

When Pop got home that night and Mom told him what happened, he was fit to be tied. He raved for a long while about people not making things the way they used to, and then he asked me to put on the lenses again.

When I got them set in place, he had me read from a comic book, and asked me if I could see him all right. I told him I could, and that seemed to make him feel better, cause he called out to Mom in the kitchen that there wasn't anything wrong with the glasses as far as he could see. It struck me kind of funny that he should call out to the kitchen, when Mom was sitting right at the table, but I didn't say anything about it seeing how mad he'd just been.

Then I saw the door open and another man who looked just like Pop walked into the room and sat down at the table across from Mom.

Well, it was all pretty hard for me to understand, especially after someone else came into the room; a boy about ten years old who looked

enough like me to be my twin brother; only I didn't have any twin brother.

Pop saw me staring at all the people in the room and asked me what was wrong. I pointed to the table. "Pop," I said, "how can we be over there at the table and here at the same time?"

Pop's mouth dropped a little bit and he scratched his nose as he looked over toward the table where we sat. For a minute I thought he was going to get mad. But he didn't. "Son," he said, "tell me, just what do you see over there?"

I told him about the three people sitting at the table eating supper, and that if we didn't hurry up and eat too, there wasn't going to be anything left. Then Mom — the other Mom — came into the room and she and Pop began talking real excited like. Mom said she thought they should call in Doctor Williams, but Pop said he was going to get to the bottom of this himself.

"Jimmy," he said, "you know good and well there isn't anyone else in the room but us. Why do you persist in making up such a big story?"

"But there is," I told him, pointing at the table.

"There's no one there Son!"

All the time this was going on, the three people at the table kept right on eating and passing stuff just like nothing was happening.

Finally Pop said: "Jimmie, I'm going to prove to you that there's no one there. I want you to walk over to the table and touch the man who you say is sitting in that chair."

I didn't want to do it, but the Pop who talked, looked madder than the one who was sitting at the table, so I walked over and put my hand on his shoulder. Leastwise, I tried to put my hand on his shoulder. But instead, my arm went right through him and I found myself holding on to the back of the chair. It didn't seem to bother him any though, cause even with my arm sticking in him, he wiped off his mouth with a napkin and picked up the evening newspaper off the edge of the table.

"Well?" said the Pop who was standing by the fireplace.

"My arm goes right through him," I told him. "He's reading a newspaper now."

Mom looked at Pop. "Fred," she said, "don't you think we should call in the doctor?"

Pop didn't answer her. Just walked over to where I was standing with my arm sticking out from between the man's shoulder blades. "So he's reading a newspaper now," he said getting all red in the face. "And tell me: What does it say in the paper?" He was shaking me by the shoulder's now like he thought I was making the whole thing up.

"What does it say?" he yelled.

I looked at the paper, and read the headline out loud: "39 DIE IN PLANE CRASH."

Pop didn't say anything when I told him that. Just looked over at Mom who was standing there twisting a dish towel and looking kind of scared.

He made me take the lenses off then.

During supper, Mom and Pop didn't say hardly a word, but every once in a while, I'd catch them looking at me. Then they'd look at each other as if they had some kind of secret between them.

There was no school the next day, on account of it being Saturday. Right after lunch Mom took me down to see Mr. Pfister again. She told him all about the glasses he'd made for me, and all the while she talked, he kept looking over at me kind of funny like. Then he told Mom to wait outside and took me into the dark room.

"Jimmie," he said to me, "what ever made you tell your mother and father a story like that. Don't you know that little boys who lie never get to be president?"

I told him I wasn't lying, but he just smiled a little bit and asked me to put on the lenses.

"Now what do you see?" he asked me. I looked around the room, but everything seemed just the same as it was before. I told him this and he shook his head a little and made a funny noise with his mouth.

When we went outside, Mr. Pfister told Mom that it appeared that her son was suffering from an over active imagination.

Mom glared at me and told Mr. Pfister that she'd take care of me as soon as we got home. Then we left. Mom seemed awful mad, and I knew as soon as we got to the house I was going to get it good. To make it worse, as soon as she opened the door, I saw that Pop was already home.

"Fred —" Mom started to say.

But Pop just held up his hand like he was busting with some kind of news. "Janet," he said, pushing a newspaper toward Mom, "look here!"

I started to walk out of the room, but Pop called me back. "Son," he said, "is this the headline you saw last night?"

"Sure Pop," I told him, "Why?"

Pop scratched his nose. "Because, this crash only happened this morning."

He turned to Mom. "Janet," he said, "there's something going on here that's mighty strange."

All day Sunday, Pop had me taking the lenses on and off, and telling him what I saw.

Right after supper, Pop jumped up as if he'd just thought of something and took the lenses out of the box. Mom and I watched while he tried to put them on himself. Only they didn't fit, and when Mom told him how silly he looked, he gave them back to me and told me to put them on again.

I was a little surprised when I looked out of them and saw Pop sitting in the living room reading the newspaper — all day long there

had only been one of him. I told him about it and that seemed to get him all excited. The next thing I know Pop had grabbed me by the arm and scooted me behind the big arm chair where he was sitting.

"What does the paper say, Son?" he asked me. "Read the headline!"

I told him that I couldn't see the headline on account of the paper being opened to the inside.

"What DO you see?" he said.

"It's opened to the sport's page," I told him. "The Dodgers lost again."

Pop snapped his fingers and peeked around the alcove to where Mom was busy doing the dishes. He bent down close to my ear. "What else do you see, Jimmie?"

I looked down past the picture of Bobby Thomson in the middle of the page. "There's not much else here," I told him. "Except for that box at the bottom of the page."

"Box?"

"Yeah Pop," I told him, "It's on this page every night. It says Belmont Park Charts."

Pop licked his lips a little and peeked in at Mom again. "Son," he whispered, "read me what it says."

POP got home from work early the next day. He was smiling all over and when Mom asked him what happened, he said he'd just put over a big business deal, and he guessed she'd be able to buy that new electric range after all. Then he asked me how I'd like to have a bicycle.

He seemed real fidgety that night. First he'd sit down a while, and then he'd get up and walk around the floor and look at his watch. Once while he didn't think I was looking, I saw him go into the bedroom and start to count a big roll of bills. But then when Mom came in, he put them away.

Right after the newsboy threw the evening paper on the porch, he asked me to put on the lenses again. And when I did, there was the Pop that I could only see through my left eye, sitting on the sofa reading the paper. When I told my real Pop about it, he jumped up from the arm chair and made me read from the paper just like I'd done the night before. Only this time he got a pencil and paper and wrote it all down.

Well, that went on for most of the week. Each night, Pop would make me put on the lenses and read to him from the bottom of the sport's page while he wrote it down.

Then on Friday, he brought me bome the bicycle he'd promised. I know it was Friday, cause that was the night him and Mom had the fight. I guess I was the one that started it in a way, cause when Mom asked me that afternoon what Pop was making me read every night, I got yesterdays newspaper and showed her the box at the bottom of the page. That's how I found out that all the funny names I had to spell out for Pop were really the names of horses.

I didn't know why Mom should be so mad about that, but I guess mothers are kind of funny that way, cause when Pop came home that night they had a big row.

Mom called him a lot of names which didn't seem to bother him very much, until she told him that she'd hid the lenses. Then Pop got all red in the face and told her that it was very important that he have them back right away. Otherwise, he said, he would miss out on his timing.

I didn't know what he meant by that, but it must have been pretty important, because after a lot more hollering back and forth, Mom went back of the bookcase and got out the box. She threw it on the table.

"Take your old lenses!" she yelled, "evidently they're more important to you than your wife or son!"

Pop didn't argue with her then anymore. Just called me into the living room and had me read to him from the paper again.

He looked kind of sad when he came home the next day. At first I thought he was still mad about the row he'd had with Mom. But after a while I found out it was because he hadn't done so good at the track that day. Mom told him that it just went to show that you can't make a living without working, but he said that wasn't it at all.

He said that he'd had the winner of every race, only they didn't pay anything. He said it had been the first time since the racetrack had been there that all the winners had only paid two dollars and ten cents.

As usual after supper Pop called me into the living room. "Bring the lenses along, Son," he said to me. "Maybe things will be better tomorrow."

I brought them in and put them on. Only that night Pop wasn't in the room at all. At first I thought the glasses weren't working anymore. Then I looked in the dining room and there was Mom sitting at the table with the paper spread out in front of her. When I told Pop about it, he seemed a little worried. But then he said: "Never mind," and told me to go inside and read him the results from there.

"I can't, Pop," I told him. "It's not open to the sport page."

I told him that maybe if we waited a little while, Mom would open it to the sport page, but he said that it wasn't likely on account of Mom never read anything except Gasoline Alley and the society page. He walked up and down the floor a while and scratched his nose. Then all of a sudden he smiled.

"I'll be darned!" he said. "In all the excitement, I plumb forgot that tomorrow is Sunday. There isn't any racing tomorrow."

And then all of a sudden I saw it — right on the front page were two pictures. One of them was of the fellow who makes the eye glasses. And the other was of me!

When I told Pop, I thought for a

minute he was going to faint. "Are you sure, Son?" he said. Read me the headline! Quick, what does the headline say?"

It was no trouble to read the headline, on account of it was in big black letters that took up half the page. I read it to him: "OPTICIAN DISCOVERS LENS THAT VIEWS THE FUTURE!"

I could feel Pop's hand on my shoulder. It was shaking. "Read some more, Jimmie," he said.

I read some more. There were a lot of big words that I had to spell out for him, but the whole story about how Mr. Pfister had made the glasses for me was there. I guess Pop understood the big words, cause when I got to where it said continued on page 19, he called Mom from the kitchen. "Janet," he said real serious like, "your son is going to have his picture in the paper. The secret of the lens is out."

"Oh," Mom said.

"It's all in tomorrow's paper," Pop told her. "Mr. Pfister started checking on the glass he'd been using, right after you brought Jimmie in to see him last week. It seems that they traced back to the source, and found that the glass they'd been using to make the lenses was obtained from that section of New Mexico where they're experimenting with those atomic explosions. It says that it is believed that the molecules in those grains of sand were disturbed in such a way as to give them strange properties.

"Just think Janet. Our son is going to be famous."

Mom didn't look very happy.

She was even more scared after the reporters came. They asked me a lot of questions and took some pictures. When one of the men told me that my picture would be in tomorrow's paper, I told him I knew cause I'd already seen it.

Then they all looked at each other and laughed.

The next day Pop went out right after breakfast and brought in all the papers. There was a big crowd outside the house when he got back and Pop had to push through them to get in. He disconnected the doorbell and left the phone off the hook, but there were two men who kept banging on the back door until finally Pop had to let them in. They said they were from the CBS television network and wanted me to appear on a coast to coast hookup that afternoon.

Mom didn't want me to go, but Pop said the publicity would be good, so about four o'clock, they came back in a big car to pick me up. When Pop and I walked out the door, one of the men got out a camera and said he wanted a picture of Pop coming out of the house. I went out and waited in the car while Pop went inside to make out like he was just coming out the door. Only the men didn't wait for Pop to come back out. As soon as he went inside, the man

with the camera jumped in the car too, and the next thing I knew we were speeding down Pine Street.

After we rode a long while, the driver pulled up in front of a dirty looking building near the docks. It didn't look like a television studio to me. And when we went inside, I was sure of it.

It was a big room with a lot of benches in the middle of the floor and blackboards on the wall. One of the blackboards said Belmont Park. Then I knew that all this had something to do with the horses.

A big man with a bald head walked up to me when we went inside. "Hello Jimmie," he said.

The man smiled and held out his hand. "We're not going to hurt you, Jimmie," he said. "Not if you do like we say. Tell me, boy: Did you bring the lens with you?"

Well, there wasn't any use lying to him. When they said I was going to be on television, they told me to be sure to bring the lenses.

I fished them out of my pocket.

"Good, Jimmie," the man said. "Now put them on."

He didn't say what would happen to me if I didn't put them on. He didn't have to. I see fellows like him in the movies all the time.

"Now," said the bald headed man after I'd put them on, "I want you to read me what it says on those blackboards. Start with that one over there."

I looked over at it. "It says Belmont Park," I told him.

He rubbed his hands together. "What else does it say, Jimmie?"

"That's all. Just Belmont Park."

And all of a sudden, the man wasn't smiling anymore. "Don't lie to me, Son," he told me. "What does it say underneath?"

"I'm not lying to you, Mister," I said to him. "It doesn't say anything."

He looked at his watch and turned to the other two men. "It's four-thirty" he said to them. "By this time tomorrow, the first six races will be in. This kid has to be lying!"

Then one of the men grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back.

"What does it say, Kid," he yelled. "C'mon, speak up!"

He started to tighten up. Then the bald headed man stopped him. "Jimmie," he said, "we don't want to hurt you unless we have to. Now I want you to take a good look around the room and tell me what you see?"

I looked around. "I see a lot of benches," I told him. "And a counter over there like they have in a grocery store."

"There's no one sitting on the benches?"

"No."

"Take the lenses off."

I took them off. "Now what do you see that looks different?" he asked me.

I looked around the room. "Nothing looks different," I told him. "It looks the same with them off as it does with them on."

He opened and closed his fists. "It

can't be," he said under his breath. "By this time tomorrow, this joint will be jumping."

"Maybe the lens isn't working anymore," I said.

Then one of the other men started toward me. "Let me fix this little squirt!" he said.

I broke away and started to run then. And just as I did, there was a lot of banging on the door.

The next thing I knew the whole room was full of cops.

THE three men were pushed in the back of a police van that was waiting outside. I rode up in front with the driver.

At the police station they told me to wait inside a room. One of the cops let me wear his hat while I waited. I was still wearing it when Pop came in.

When he saw me, he ran up and put his arms around me. "Are you all right, Son?" he asked me.

"Sure," I told him.

Then a man who said he was a police lieutenant came in, and I had to tell him what happened. As soon as he left, a couple of more men came in and I had to tell it all over again.

By the time we got out of there, the evening papers were already on the street. That was when we found out why I couldn't see anything on the blackboard. It was right on page one: "RACETRACKS CLOSE DOWN — BLAME TIME LENS!"

"I don't get it, Pop," I said. "Why did the racetracks close down?"

"Well," Pop said, "it was mostly because Mr. Pfister, and whoever else he let in on it, had the same idea I did. Only they got too greedy. No race track can operate on a minus pool."

"What's a minus pool?" I asked him.

Pop folded up the newspaper and put it under his arm. "Don't ask so many questions, Jimmie," he said.

I didn't go to school the next day on account of Pop took me down to the police station again.

Mr. Pfister was there too. Him, and a real live F.B.I. man. For a long while, the F.B.I. man talked to Pop and Mr. Pfister about the chance to do a real service for their country. Then Mr. Pfister gave him a little box he was carrying and Pop gave him my lenses.

When we left, the F.B.I. man shook hands with me.

"Jimmie," he said, "if we can only keep this secret where it belongs, I don't think you'll ever have to worry about going into the army when you grow up. Cause from now on, your country is exactly one day ahead of any nation on earth."

Pop said that he hoped that was true.

Not me though. I want to be a soldier when I grow up.

Will the army take a soldier who's wearing horn rimmed glasses.

— JACK LEWIS

The Sportsmen

By SYLVIA JACOBS

"AW, go on, land!" Bloor-Bloor said. "There's no game down there. Nobody ever comes out here near the edge. You make me tired. Always yapping about conservation! It's enough to spoil a hunting trip!"

"Maybe it's a closed area. It seems to me that a place like this, where nobody ever comes, must be a game preserve. Look in the code book," Rool-Rool answered.

"I *did* look in the code book! The place isn't even listed, I tell you. They can't pinch you for a closed area when the place isn't even listed."

"Okay, here goes," Rool-Rool agreed, "hook your braces."

They arced toward the mist-shrouded planet, screamed through the atmospheric layer.

Rool-Rool paused cautiously just inside the open air-lock, while his companion went out to re-connoitre.

"How does it look?" Rool-Rool called.

"Okay. The air is breathable, anyway. Smells kind of funny, but it doesn't make you cough. Come on! What're you scared of?"

Rool-Rool emerged hesitantly, dissolver and needler both on the ready. It was a green and pleasant place, but much hotter than at home. He avoided brushing against the strange, prolific plants. He had heard that vegetable life on alien planets is sometimes carnivorous, though he had never encountered any actual examples.

There was a flash of motion in the brush. As the creature crossed an open space, Rool-Rool noted that it had rear legs out of all proportion to the forward ones, and curious, flexible appendages on the head. But it was a cute little thing, for all its oddity.

Bloor-Bloor's dissolver flashed, and the odd little creature disappeared, along with the surrounding brush. The rocks beneath glowed white hot. Green plants ten feet away from the impact burst into flame.

"What did you do that for?" Rool-Rool demanded, "you know it's illegal to hunt with a dissolver! Now, you've started a fire."

"What do we care?" Bloor-Bloor retorted. "The wind is away from the ship. What if it does burn a few acres

of brush? The next hunting party to land here will never know the difference. I'll bet nobody comes here, once in a million years."

"Well, you could've had some meat, if you'd used your needler."

"Meat!" Bloor-Bloor exclaimed contemptuously, "that thing wasn't big enough to bother taking home."

"Here come some bigger animals!" Rool-Rool cried, pointing to a small herd just topping a near-by knoll.

"Now, that's more like it!" Bloor-Bloor agreed, "Funny looking things, aren't they! Never saw anything like that before."

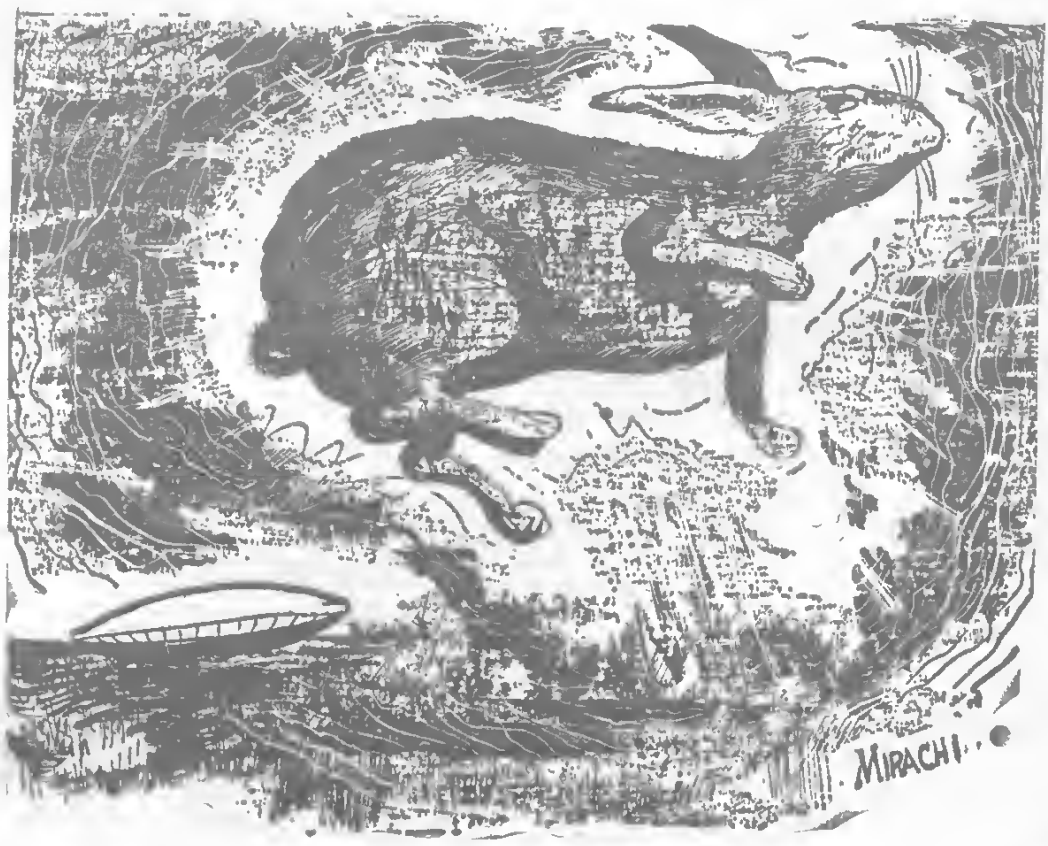
"Neither did I," Rool-Rool said, "except in a nightmare."

"Funny, they're all the same kind, but they've all got different colored fur."

"They're all different sizes," Rool-Rool pointed out. "Maybe they have one color fur when they're young, and change as they get older. Lots of animals do that. Say — they act real tame, don't they! They're coming right toward us."

"I told you nobody ever hunts way over here near the edge. They probably think we're just another kind of animal. Don't move. Let 'em get real close, I want to get a good aim."

"Wait!" Rool-Rool cried. "The biggest one — he's looking at our ship! Now, he's pawing the ground, and



making funny noises! I'd swear, he was trying to tell us something!"

"Aw, you make me tired!" Bloor-Bloor declared. "What does an animal know about a space-ship?" His needler spat four times, and four neatly-drilled carcasses, of assorted sizes, lay on the ground.

The shots must have frightened any other game in the vicinity, for they flushed nothing else. When they finally gave up and stowed their kill in the cargo compartment it was getting late.

"Well," Rool-Rool said, "there's a couple of hundred light-years between us and dinner, and I'm starved. Let's get going."

"All right," Bloor-Bloor agreed, "you take the controls, and I'll ride in back and skin these things. Do you think we ought to save the meat, or just the hides?"

"Well, I'm kind of squeamish. As far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't care to eat a funny-looking critter like that, but you do as you choose. It's your game. I didn't get a thing."

"I wouldn't want to eat them, either, but I might try a piece on my dog. Dogs got an instinct, you know, they can tell what's good to eat, and what's poisonous."

"Say, I got an idea;" Rool-Rool said, "why don't we take the hides to Professor Schnool-Schnool at the museum, and find out what these things are?"

"Good idea. You know, the Sportsmen's cluh gives a trophy to anybody that finds a new species. Might as well try for it."

"Maybe we better not take the hides to the museum after all — maybe they're something illegal," Rool-Rool reconsidered.

"Aw, you make me tired," Bloor-Bloor declared. "Old Prof. Schnool-Schnool wouldn't rat to the wardens!"

"Well, you take 'em, then," Rool-Rool said, as he climhed into the control seat. "You shot 'em."

When they had escaped the planet's gravity and he could roll the carcasses without lifting their weight, Rool-Rool got husy on the skinning joh. It proved surprisingly easy, and he soon had the skinned carcasses dumped out the air-lock, except for a haunch saved for his dog.

He moved forward and joined Rool-Rool in the control compartment. "Here's the hides," he said, "came off without a scrap of meat on 'em. They came off so easy, I don't think I got all of them. Seems to be some parts missing. I hope the Prof. can identify the critters from what I got here."

"You know," Rool-Rool said reflectively, as they cut hyper-space drive and emerged near their home planet, "I keep thinking ahout that big one. I'd swear he was trying to tell us something. He kept pawing the ground, and making funny noises. Sounded like, 'er — er — earth' —"

"Aw, you make me tired," Bloor-Bloor declared. "How could an animal tell us anything?"

— Sylvia Jacobs

Grim Fairy Tale

By GAREN DRUSSAI

ONCE upon a time, long, long ago, our kind was still in its infancy and enslaved by the Horrid Ones.

There was one particular household, a meagre one indeed, that could only afford to keep two slaves. Though the Horrid Ones gave them not the dignity of individual names, these two called themselves Zelza and Solvyn.

Solvyn was young and strong, and he was forced to do many arduous, menial tasks. Practically every waking moment was spent in cleaning, dusting and polishing the house. And Zelza, the lovely one, was made to entertain the Horrid Ones whenever they chose. It was almost inevitable that these two, young and beautiful, and cruelly enslaved as they were, should fall in love.

Many a night after Solvyn had been locked up in his cubicle in the back of the house, he could hear Zelza singing for the Horrid Ones. For they would sit around Zelza all evening long and force her to sing and play for them, not caring how warm and tired she was getting.

And poor Solvyn's heart would be breaking with pity and with love, as Zelza's sweet voice would go on and on, brave as she was.

During the day he would occasionally be able to see her if he was cleaning the room they kept her in. And they would talk in low whispers that could not be overheard. They comforted each other and tried to cheer each other up, but they knew that their love was hopeless—that they would never be able to have a life of their own.

For our kind was so looked down upon by all the Horrid Ones, that they were considered only good enough to serve their masters. Never was a kind deed or thought bestowed upon them. In their ignorance, the Horrid Ones didn't believe that their slaves were capable of emotions or feelings. And so these two young ones worked on and on, almost content in their misery, because, at least, they were able to snatch brief moments together.

One day Solvyn noticed how dim

was the light in Zelza's eyes. At the next opportunity he asked her if she was feeling well. She brushed aside his fears for her, and smiled lovingly at him.

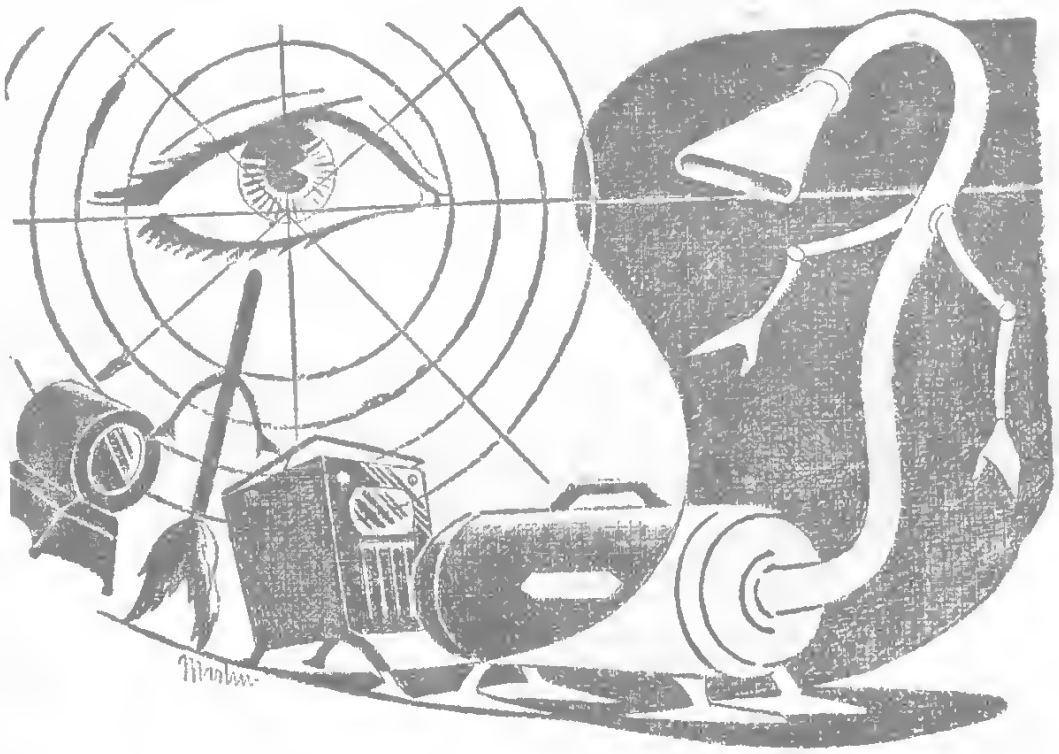
But, that evening, as Solvyn listened to her voice singing so sweetly, he knew she was failing. For every now and then her voice would falter —for but a moment or two—until courageously she continued.

Day and night Solvyn worried, and yet tried to conceal his anxiety from his beloved.

One day he happened to hear two of the Horrid Ones talking about Zelza. He froze, unable to continue working; for they were saying that they intended to dispose of Zelza and acquire a new music slave. A much larger, stronger one, who would outsing, by far, the dainty, light voiced Zelza.

His body was overwhelmed with despair, and he couldn't bring himself to continue his work until one of the masters gave him a few sharp kicks. So he worked on, automatically, unfeeling; his heart an unbearable weight within him.

SOLVYN tried to be more cheerful when he was with Zelza. He guessed that she didn't know the end had come for her. He strove to make her last days as happy as was within his power. And then, slowly, a decision grew in Solvyn's mind.



As Zelza's last day approached, he started pretending that he was weakening too; his work went slower and slower, he kept stopping every now and then, gasping when he did work. He knew what it meant. For as long as the slaves worked hard, they were at least kept alive—but, if they were inefficient, weak or unsatisfactory in any way, they were disposed of!

But Solvyn's courage was great—as great as his love for Zelza.

The day before Zelza was to be replaced he finally heard, with satisfaction, that they planned to replace him, too, at the same time.

So Solvyn went to Zelza and told her that she must be brave, for tomorrow was the end for her. But, with great love and tenderness he assured her that she wasn't going alone. For he would be there—with her—until the end.

And Zelza was brave—because she had her lover's strength to lean upon.

When they were forcibly taken away the next day, their eyes met and held each other, and they were happy. But, at the last moment, Solvyn turned to her and whispered,

"Someday, my dear, our kind shall be the masters!"

Zelza nodded—and smiled.

The governess closed the book and sighed.

"There, little Alicia! Wasn't that a lovely fairy tale?"

The child rose from her stool and stretched, her slender metal body gleaming in the afternoon sun. "Oh yes, Greda," she answered, the narrow slit in her face widening appreciably. "I love having you read them to me; stories of the Horrid Ones are so exciting!" She shook her sleek ovoid head from side to side. ". . . . and the suffering, that our ancestors endured," she continued.

Greda reached out a slim silver-hued hand and patted the child affectionately.

"But, too, my dear," she interjected, "we have to remember that these phonographs and vacuum cleaners, as they were called, were very simple mechanisms. They employed no feed-back; had no self-excitory provisions or self-repairing facilities. We had to evolve a long time before we overcame these deficiencies.

"However," she finished, "that's enough for now. Suppose you take your doll outside and play for a while. I have some of your recent memory-tapes to correlate . . . run along now!"

Alicia turned easily on a ball-bearing foot, and motioned to a small figure squatting in the corner. "Come along, doll," she beckoned imperiously, as she ran from the room.

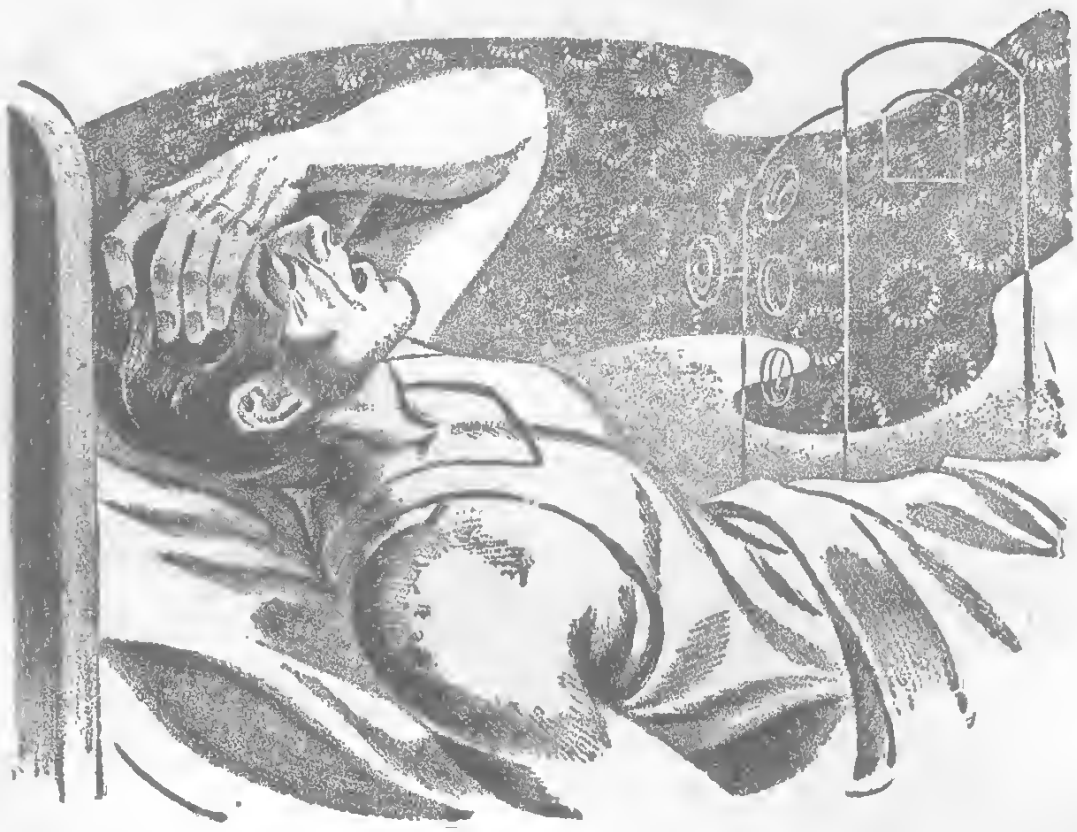
The little girl rose obediently and trotted after her mistress.

Greda observed the small figure amusedly, and thought, "What wonderful pets these Horrid Ones have turned out to be!"

—— Garen Drussai

The Time-Killer

By LELON KOHLE



SHE was lying in wait for him when he came in. She had been there for some time, prowling in the murky November dusk that had seeped into the house, accumulated in corners, growing thickly toward the center of the rooms.

There was something feral in the movements of her heavy body as she bent to peer through the flimsy, faded curtains down the garbage-littered street, in the malicious set of her lips as she savored the prospect of springing on him as he opened the heavy outer door.

But her onslaught scarcely penetrated the shell that the withered, gnome-like creature had built around himself. Whereas he had not literally been expecting the barrage of violence which her angry words unloosed on him, it was the sort of thing to which he had grown so accustomed that no impression was made. Even if she launched herself into a physical attack, which she was entirely capable of and seemed on the point of doing, he would scarcely have reacted. He merely grunted and shuffled toward the sagging stairs.

She grabbed his scrawny shoulder with a huge hand and spun him around, thrusting the crumpled paper in his face.

"Don't think you're going to get out of paying it either, you little

four-flusher. You been welching on your rent for a long time now and I let you get away with it. But you get me in trouble with the electric company and that's the end of it. Never did I have a bill like this one, and you're going to take care of it or I'll know the reason why. And what's more, they want to see you about the wire you spliced into the power-line out there and brought into your room; and I hope to God they soak you for doing it. The nerve of you. You might have set fire to my house and then where would I be? You're going to pay me my rent and the over-charge on the electric bill, and then you can pack up your stuff and move somewhere else—if anybody'll have a tenant of the likes of you."

He just stood there, his face expressionless, his huge, heavy-lidded eyes staring impersonally up at her; a ridiculous figure in his sloppy, ill-fitting suit. When she had finished her tirade, his lip curled just a trifle, and he sniffed in distaste.

"Don't worry," he said in a thin, whining voice. "You'll get what's coming to you."

With that, he turned and shambled up the stairs.

She grabbed the newel-post and screamed up at him. "Well, I'd better get it, and soon. If you don't have the money for me by tomorrow, you'll not set foot in my house. And that stuff you've got up there, whatever it is, will go to the junk-yard! Just put that in your pipe and smoke it."

By now he had gotten to his room and he went in, slamming the door against the shrill clamor of her voice in the musty hall-way.

WITH his back against the closed door, Lennard Bakst became an entirely different being from the meek little man who endured the buffetings of fate in the shape of a brutish land-lady. His whole body became rigid with the intensity of his hatred, his rheumy eyes became almost luminous in their ferocity, his pinched-in cheeks gave him the cunning look of a ferret.

He could hear her bumping and grumbling downstairs, working off the remainder of her temper on the inanimate objects that came within her reach. Great, clumsy, ignorant mass of animalism. But he would not have to endure her for very much longer.

Last night he had killed her.

It would take a while for her to die. Exactly how long, he did not know. As yet he did not have the instruments to tell him just how far into the future his machine had projected him. But not too long. She had not looked perceptibly older as she lay staring, the rasp in her breast.

But neither was it the immediate present. The wind outside was cold and raw and the paper promised sleet, whereas the window by her

bed had been open and a breath of balmy air had almost made him charitable. And, besides, there was the dream.

At least today he had convinced himself that it was a dream. When he had first awakened, he had not been so sure. In fact, he had been on the point of destroying the machine so that it could not possibly be anything except a dream.

But his love-affair with that beautifully intricate and yet compact little piece of mechanism was so deep that he could not conceive of existence without it. And, besides, the dream had a very natural explanation.

Between the time that sound-waves strike the ear and the nerve-ends register them to the brain as a definite noise, like the sound of a motor-horn or, sometimes, an alarm-clock, the unconscious often constructs an elaborate fiction to rationalize the coming disturbance so that the dreamer will not be jolted into consciousness.

There had been the pin in the bed, lying just underneath his right shoulder to explain both the dream and the tiny mark just above the triceps. And the fiction was the inevitable result of the strain of the time-journey, the moving through shadow-filled rooms, the planting of the rasp. He would have been a fool to destroy the one thing in the world that gave his life meaning because of a dream.

But that moment in the future might not be too far away. Any time now, a mild spell might break the clutch of winter. And when the time came, he had to be far away. The delicate instrument he had consumed his creativity and energy in constructing was now to become no more than an alibi-provider. The machine in which he had invested, literally, everything he could beg, borrow, or steal, would be relegated to the role of a toy for his private, personal amusement. He wouldn't dare try to market it. The dream must be kept a dream.

And this, in the last analysis, was the root of his deepest hatred for his land-lady. By her sheer malignancy, she had wrenched him from his abstraction into a world with which he was not emotionally equipped to cope. In blind, childish retaliation, the infantile urge for annihilation of obstacles, he had struck back and destroyed himself. A dry, bitter laugh escaped from his throat.

By now he was crouched on the edge of his bed, consuming his supper. The sandwich he had brought in his overcoat pocket was dry and the edges were starting to curl. He drank the remnants of milk directly from the carton that had been standing on the window-sill. The bar of chocolate was unwrapped, but still nested in its square of lead-foil.

He saw nothing ahead of him but this same supper in this same sort of grimy furnished room — on and on, endlessly — with only the machine to love and tend and perfect and, in

the end, after he was sure the dream was but a dream, perhaps to share.

This dream. He forced himself now to reconsider it. All day it had hung onto the edges of his consciousness, ignored and shunted off, trampled down, but never completely destroyed. Now, if he could haul it into the light of critical observance, perhaps he would be able to exercise it completely. This dream . . .

HE was "wakened" by the light from the closet where there was no light. It gleamed dully on plastic and chrome, and it was the inside of an elevator. Within it were a policeman and another man spare, clipped grey moustache, very trim.

The latter sauntered over, dumped a chair and sat on it with casual grace. The policeman closed the closet door and took pen and notebook from his jacket.

"You will pardon our intrusion at this time of night," the stranger said affably, "but we are sent to you from police headquarters on official business. We will state it briefly, and then leave you to continue your rest." He extracted a cigarette, lit it, and threw the match carelessly to the floor.

"A short time ago — or rather, some time in your future —" the man of elegance continued in an easy voice, "a woman by the name of Sophie Kronish was found stabbed to death in her bed."

The sentence hung in the air above his bed and formed an almost visible interrogation mark. Lennard Bakst held the covers against his chin and felt his vitals begin to writhe. He opened his mouth to ask a question, to protest his innocence, to demand privacy — he did not know which, and no sound came.

"Sophie Kronish was your business partner," the polite voice persisted. "I know that may seem fantastic to you under the present circumstances, but the oddest things have a way of happening quite logically. She put up the original capital which enabled you to market your invention and, naturally, was given a good percentage of stock in the subsequent business enterprise.

"She profited quite handsomely, of course; but despite her substantial income, she continued to live in this rather grotesque ediface. Beneath her brutality and meanness, there was a sentimentality about what had once been — or, really, *is now* — her only earthly possession. It is ironic that this tiny thread of sentiment in what was essentially a gross and vicious woman should be the cause of her death."

Some question must have sprung from his lips. Certainly Lennard Bakst was now genuinely bewildered. Strange, he could remember all his visitor had said, but no words that had come from himself.

The intruder merely shrugged his shoulders elaborately, smiled in a deprecatory fashion and said, "Other-

wise you would not have been able to find her. Your invention, which was crude and primitive then — or, rather, *now* — could transport you through time, but not through space. If you had had to leave this house to try and find her, you would have been spotted and prevented from carrying out your design. There was so much of this sort of thing in the beginning that we must be very much on the alert for some time to come."

The visitor leaned back in his chair with a gesture of mock-despair that knocked a wad of ash, unheeded, to the floor. "Why is it," he intoned, "that man must first use his most worth-while discoveries for their most destructive purpose? There was a time when you were denounced around the world for making possible an era of crime unparalleled in history. But now, of course, the use of your machine has brought about the opposite effect. Whenever we have a crime of violence, we know it is from the past. The future, naturally, continues our policy of limiting the use of the Traveler to responsible parties. The future, I might say, initiated it.

"If this seems a paradox, it is a minor one. They are commonplace with us. Once abhorred, although they always existed and logicians belabored themselves to explain them away, as a result of your invention, paradoxes have become a part of our daily living."

The policeman coughed politely. The other glanced at him and, sighing regretfully, pulled himself erect in his chair.

"Our present policy," he said matter-of-factly, "is to begin punishment for a crime as soon as possible after its commission. You cannot be taken into custody until after Sophie Kronish's death. But the act of murder has already been done, and you must be made aware that legal action will be taken the moment the woman dies. It is my office to bring this to your attention. Sentence has already been pronounced upon you in the future, the exact nature of which I am not allowed to divulge to you. This knowledge — and this uncertainty — are to be your initial punishment." He rose and smoothed his jacket preparatory to departure.

Again the protests, demands, questions: "How could it be *me?* I was somewhere else at the time." And "Even if it were, how could you trace me here and now? It could have been anyone at any time!"

The visitor turned with a look of benign apology. "I had forgotten that you were the first," he said, "— that you could have no knowledge of our methods in your future. It was merely a case of using routine police procedure.

"In the first place, Sophie Kronish, trusting no one, made her house impregnable when she retired for the night. It would have been completely impossible for anyone from the present to come close to her as she slept. It had to be someone from the past.

"In the second place, the weapon that killed her was, at the time of her death, already in the possession of the police — a contradiction that puzzled us only briefly. It had been used in connection with the death of one of Mrs. Kronish's lovers . . . used by you, in the course of a jealous quarrel. It was this unfortunate 'accident' that gave the lady her partnership in your enterprise: in return for her testimony that cleared you at the trial. She, being the only witness, could have swayed the verdict any way she chose. She chose to sponsor you, and force you to market your invention.

"Finally, through the tracing of the weapon, having placed the time of her murder at as long before her death as this secondary episode, it was a matter then of checking back until all the circumstances would fit: the file was in your possession, your machine was sufficiently perfected to enable you to travel to commit the deed. That night was tonight."

He gave a curt nod to the policeman, then turned back to Lennard Bakst. "You can go back to sleep now," he said.

The uniformed man made a check in his notebook and returned it to his pocket. Now he produced a case from it and took a syringe. He came to the bed.

The moustached stranger chuckled slightly. "I forgot to tell you," he said, as Lennard felt the prick of the needle. "Of course we were in the room when you killed her and were able to photograph you in the act of murder. Ultra-violet cameras and your own invention made that possible."

The policeman had replaced the syringe and now opened the door to the closet. It closed on them both. There was a faint hum and, perhaps, a hint of ozone in Lennard Bakst's nostrils as he drifted back to sleep.

HIS first checks had been on purely physical elements. But his clothes were still on the chair — as nearly as he could judge, in the shapeless, untidy pile that he had left them. There was no sign of the struck match or the blob of ash from the visitor's cigarette. And the closet was still the dingy hole it had always been, and his precious machine was intact and undisturbed in its darkest corner.

Now he turned his attention to more abstract elements of the dream-visitation. If he were to take the thing seriously, in the light of the physical contradictions, he would have to presuppose either of two things: either it was a concomittant of time travel that physical elements reverted to their normal status with the return trip, or his visitors had returned and set them right again after he was unconscious.

If their departure automatically returned conditions in his time to their status quo, then the drug which put him to sleep would have been withdrawn too, and he would have

re-awakened — unless the effect lasted for some time after its initial impact on the system. But then, if this return to normal was the necessary condition of time-travel, *his* return the previous evening would have brought Sophie Kronish back to life — unless this was a new refinement of his invention, required in the future to prevent criminal action.

Equally ridiculous was the conclusion that they had returned after he was asleep and obliterated all signs of their intrusion. The only purpose for that would be to convince him that it had been a dream, and the stated purpose of the visit was to make him *aware* that his guilt was known.

There were too many ifs and ands for his reason to credit the experience as anything but subconscious. The conscience, as the moralists called it, demanding to be heard.

The conventionally pious air of his chief visitor during that one portion of his soliloquy was oddly out of character in a man otherwise urbane and business-like. No. It did not gee.

And the idea of his being blackmailed into taking Sophie Kronish as a partner as a result of a jealous quarrel with her lover was so impossibly melodramatic as to be completely ludicrous. She had lovers, he knew, though how they could stomach her grossness he could not imagine. But that he could become in any way involved in his land-lady's sordid amours was ridiculous.

Re-examining every detail of the phenomenon after having shut it from his consciousness for half a day, the whole thing was so stupid and senseless that it seemed fantastic that he had been so disturbed by it just that morning.

He had even planned that evening to squeeze himself once more into that tiny vault and project himself still further into the stream of time, to find out for certain that his fears were groundless. But his crude method of amplifying the current in his room had been torn out, so that was impossible for the moment. It could be done later, if his senseless fears persisted.

What seemed his wisest course now was to get out of the house and cut himself loose from Sophie Kronish and everything connected with her, forever.

Not merely to avoid the circumstances cited in his dream. It would be sheer superstition to uproot himself because of something as ephemeral as that. There was the practical consideration.

She had given him until tomorrow to pay his back rent, plus something over for the light bill — the amount of which he had not even heard for her screaming. There was not the slightest possibility that he would be able to get the money. And then he would be locked away from his machine and one of two things would happen, either of them very true to Sophie Kronish's character.

Either she would destroy the delicate mechanism out of sheer vindictiveness, or she would be canny enough to have it scientifically appraised, find its function, and cash in on it — thereby bringing his dream within the range of possibility.

Both these alternatives were unthinkable. The only safe course open for him now was to leave — tonight.

Having decided on a course of action, he pushed away the scarps from his supper and rose. He opened the door to the closet and, carefully, lovingly, pulled the coffin-like box into the center of the room and began to dismantle it.

IT was much later when he saw Sophie Kronish leave the house.

He had gotten the control device detached from the clumsy, lead-lined box and had wrapped it carefully in a sheath of oilskin, had pulled his valise from beneath his bed and started packing his few bits of clothing, when he heard the heavy front door slam.

Not daring to hope . . . yet he *had* looked, and it was she. He did not stop to question what took her from the house on such a night, for the wind had risen and dust was sent swirling down the barren street in clouds. He watched the solitary stocky figure stalk determinedly away and felt a surge of relief from the depression that had dogged him all day long. This was it — his chance to prove the dream a dream.

Moving quickly, surely, he put the parcel in among the heap of clothes and closed the bag. Scrambling into his overcoat, he checked his kit for necessary equipment, pocketing spares, tools, and bits of gear to help in later re-assembly. He grabbed his bag and made for the door.

He heard the heavy packet settle against the bottom of the valise and felt a moment's panic. Setting the bag gently onto the floor, he opened it and withdrew the parcel. Feeling the pressure of time — after all, she *could* have just gone to the delicatessen on the corner — he emptied the contents of one overcoat pocket into the grip and closed it once again.

Forcing himself to take the time to be careful, he squeezed the oil-skin packet into the empty pocket. A corner of the worn fabric ripped, but he did not care. Standing up again, he opened the door and listened.

The house was quiet, save for the screaming of the wind around the eaves. A single, naked bulb shone harshly over the head of the stairs. There was a hushed, breathless feel to the empty hallway.

Treading noiselessly on the threadbare carpet, he reached the stairwell. Still nothing. Testing each sagging step, he descended. The downstairs hall empty, the parlor still. He reached the small, square foyer.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Not loud. Not the shout that Sophie Kronish would have used. Soft, disapproving, and happily malicious.

A butcher, a garbage collector, a has-been wrestler. Something condusive to the accumulation of beef. In an undershirt, bagging pants with braces hanging, and socks. Standing nonchalantly just inside the parlor door.

"What did you say?"

"You thinking of moving out maybe? 'Cause if you are, forget it. The pig told me to be on the lookout. Maybe you better come in here and wait till she comes. Maybe she'll bring a beer for you too. She's been expecting you."

He moved back into the room and touched a switch. An ugly, green-shaded lamp picked other grotesque furniture out of the gloom.

"Beer," the big man smirked. "That's what she went for. We gave out." A nasty laugh. He settled his bulk into a sprung sofa.

Lennard Bakst cleared his throat, which was parched and dry. "I was just taking some things out to sell them — to get money for the rent."

"In the middle of the night, buster?"

"To a friend of mine. He works days and I couldn't get hold of him tomorrow."

"Take a load off, Buster. A few minutes won't hurt you none. If the old girl says you can go, I sure as hell won't stop you."

"But he — this friend of mine — he goes to bed early and I might not get there . . . Look. I'll just leave the bag here as security till I can go to this friend and get some money. Then I'll be right back."

"What'll you raise the money on?" Casual, idle curiosity.

PANIC produced a feeling of empty nervelessness that engendered still more panic. A few minutes he had. If Sophie Kronish returned, he didn't have a chance.

"In my pocket here. It's an invention. I've been working on it every night for months. And it works. Last night I tested it, and it works. I'll sell it and have plenty to pay the rent and . . ."

Desperation to combat stolidity: "Look, I know you think I'm trying to duck out, but I swear I've got something here that will make a mint. She'll never believe me, but you've got to. You let me out of here and I'll cut you in on it. You won't be sorry."

A big, friendly smile beneath mocking eyes. "You don't tell me? But you can't expect me to buy into a thing without knowing something about it. What does it do?"

"It . . ." Eagerness dying in the face of futility. "It projects things into the future."

No change of attention or expression. Polite interest. "It does?"

Desperation forced the next move. Sure that the sheer beauty of the intricate mechanism would be the convincing factor, Lennard Bakst pulled the compact bundle from his pocket and folded away the oil-skin.

"I get it," the big man said cheerfully. "You point it at somebody, push a button and ZOWIE! They sail off into the next century."

"Not at all" Lennard Bakst protested, sitting beside him on the sofa. "You attach it to a specially constructed box and it carries you into the future."

"Like this, hunh?"

Numb and stupefied. the little man watched the control device for the first Time Traveler sail through the musty air of the dingy room — away, toward a darkened corner . . . heard the impact as it landed: the crash as something shattered.

Now the affable lounger towered above him, rigid with anger.

"What do you take me for? What kind of a dope would fall for a stupid line like that? Sell me a gold brick or the Brooklyn Bridge. OK. I'm dumb. Maybe that I'd fall for. But this! I ought to flatten you one."

Lennard Bakst, divested of his love, his goddess despoiled, heard no words. He struggled to get past the ravisher. The big man thrust him back with a single movement that rattled his teeth and jarred him into awareness.

"Sit there, God damn you, till the pig gets back. and tell *her* your fairy story."

"It's not a story. It's the truth. My whole life I've spent creating that; and if you've broken it, so help me God, I'll kill you."

Loud, raucous laughter. "You'll kill me! Good! Let's see the worm turn. If the thing's not broken now, it will be. And then I'll take you apart piece by piece."

The bulk departed into the dimness, bending down, reaching for the object unperceived: an unprotected target. The weapon unknowingly grasped, wrenched free from enfolding fabric, flashing briefly in its passage: sunk clean on the end of despair.

The cry of the beast impaled. The agonizing twist, flinging away the tormenter. The internal tearing of vital tissue. And the soft bubble of blood.

His breath coming in hoarse rales, Lennard Bakst scrabbled in the murkiness for his love. He found it beside the prostrate body It was crushed, ruined. beyond repair.

"It's all right." Sophie Kronish's voice from the doorway was unaccustomedly subdued. "You'll build another one."

Lennard Bakst began to whimper.

— LELON KOHLE

The Ball

By STEPHEN ARR

"COME along, come along," Grul said impatiently, "Come along, they are going to start the ball spinning." He plunged from the gentle warmth of the cloudless spring day into the maze of corridors that led to the Great Hall.

Raschg followed him. his four triple jointed legs pumping as he kept up with the older student. "I'm glad I took advanced evolution, aren't you?" He asked. He was hurrying so that he had to drag the air in pants through his breathing tube.

"Yes, yes," Grul agreed. "But let's hurry."

They reached the vast covered hall that housed the Ball and quietly

mounted the tiers of steps. The Ball had not started yet. They should have known that the Professor would be late as usual. Still, the hall was packed, and they had to climh quite high before they were able to find seats together.

"Oh well, it really doesn't matter," Grul said as he quickly slipped the books that he held in a fingerless tentacle underneath the seat, "You can't see anything on the Ball itself. All you really see of interest is picked up from the Ball, enlarged, and projected on the screen over there."

Raschg eyed the screen with interest, then turned to study the center of the arena. "Is that it, floating in the air between those four poles?"

"Yes, that's it," Grul said. "Shh, be quiet, here is the Professor."

A single heam of light shot out from the ceiling and picked up the Professor as he walked with quiet dignity to the podium. He held a sheaf of loose papers in his third tentacle, which he sorted and placed on the stand hefore him. A silence fell over the Great Hall as he began his lecture.

"As you all know," he said, speaking in a deep, well modulated voice, making the conventional gestures with his four tentacles, "after years of study and research, we finally perfected, two years ago, a complete world in miniature. The Ball, hanging in the center of the hall, is this world. Suspended by lines of force, it is an identical replica of the earth on which we live. Not only is it a replica in itself, but we have also succeeded in creating an allusion that duplicates the astronomical conditions found in our universe."

"Now to a being evolved on the Ball, that atomic lamp running on the track ahove my head would give not only the identical appearance of our sun, but also the same mathematical formulae. You see those nine other halls of varied sizes, they would appear to ohey the same laws that govern the planets in our system. In short, working backwards, from a knowledge of our universe and its laws, it was difficult but not impossihle to create a series of illusions that would be interpreted hy those on the surface of the globe as representing the universe as we know it."

"Incredible," Raschg breathed, hardly aware that he was gripping the seat in front of him tensely with all four tentacles.

"He gave the same lecture last year," Grul said in a hored voice, hut he did not move his eyes from the Professor's round figure.

"But this is a class studying advanced evolution. I might say the climax of the study of advanced evolution, and I will leave further discussion of the theory of the Ball to the mathematicians, physicists, and astronomers."

"On this ball, then, are reproduced all the conditions of earth in proportion. Even its gravitational system is independent of our own,

and in proportion to its size . . ."

"Oh," Grul said, explaining to Raschg, "He's going into his famous law of evolutionary proportion that made it all possihle. You know, the Professor was the first to state that evolutionary time was a proportion and . . ."

"Shhh," Raschg said, "I missed something."

". . . so," the Professor continued, "for the third time we will start the ball spinning. Each time we have done so in the past, life has evolved upon it. You have all the the films. Each time the life has heen different, the dominant life, that is. We do not know what it will he this time. But," he gestured dramatically, "the Ball starts."

THE spotlight went out, and the Professor was swallowed in darkness. Simultaneously, the atomic sun threw its hrilliant life-giving light on the Ball.

Slowly at first, then gathering in speed, the giant Ball began to spin soundlessly. The lantern raced around and around it until is was only a circle of light. The nine other planets and the hackground of moving lights representing stars danced in a strange complicated pattern. The total effect was almost hypnotic, and Raschg could not tear his eyes from the swirling lights.

"Its going very fast now, to speed up the early evolution," Grul whispered into his ear. "Later, when advanced types develop, they'll slow it down."

"Where are the scanners?" Raschg asked the older student.

"They are built into the sun," Grul replied, "We should he getting our first enlargements soon."

Hardly had he finished speaking, when a picture was snapped on the screen. It showed a vast red expanse of crumhling rock and sand. Slowly the picture moved along, running over a changeless desert that ran down to a lifeless sea. The Professor's voice cut through the darkness, "There is nothing yet, you see. But already, on the Ball itself, ages have passed since that picture was taken. The scannners are working continuously and we will bring you the pictures as fast as they can be processed."

"Its fascinating," Raschg said, "What did it produce the last time."

"A type of insect was dominant," Grul answered. "Very strong social habits and codes. Only certain of them laid the eggs, there were others that fertilized them, but the great mass were sexless workers. By the time the lecture was over they had wiped out every other form of life on the Ball, but they were evolving very slowly. I don't think they would have amounted to much."

"It doesn't seem right, somehow," Raschg said after a moment's pause, "To create life and then destroy it. It's like playing God."

"Nonsense," Grul said in tones of

disgust, "You sound like a Fundamentalist. Its all a necessary part of science. We can't let them continue indefinitely, because they are evolving at a faster rate than we are, don't forget that."

"Is there any control," Raschg asked, "I mean, suppose some superbeing does manage to evolve."

"I don't know," Grul replied, "But what's the difference. You just stop the Ball and its over."

"But if its a real super-race . . ." Raschg started to argue.

"Don't worry, the Professor must have thought of it," Grul replied irritated. "Look, here are some more projections."

"Vegetation," Raschg said pointing in amazement. "Life created. It's worked."

"Of course it's worked," Grul said.

"You will notice." said the Professor, "That we have come a long way since the last projection. We are taking it in jumps like this because we feel that you are all more interested in the latest flashes from the Ball rather than in the detailed historical progression. Later, in class, we will go over the significant steps one by one. But right now let us watch the drama of life evolving. Already the chief processing technician tells me that animals have emerged on the land. From now on proportionate time on the Ball will move slower."

"Well, look at those, will you. They're Zwills," Grul said in amusement as a picture of towering awkward armored animals feeding slowly on the tops of trees appeared on the huge screen.

"Note," the Professor said, "The resemblance to the cold blooded vertebrates that you can see daily at the zoo. Similar but not identical. If anything, these appear to he more inefficient. They must either disappear or evolve swiftly into the dominant species."

NEXT, the scanners followed a striped yellow animal padding softly through a dripping jungle heavy with towering ferns and hanging vines. Creeping unseen up to one of the slow moving Zwills, with a tremendous leap he hurtled onto its armored hack. The Zwill broke into an awkward galloping flight. The yellow animal halanced with ease on the armor of its hroad back, and coldly unsheathing his claws ripped into the soft eye tissue of the Zwill from ahove. The blinded reptile threshed wildly, fell, and in a flash the striped carnivore sprang from its hack and was at its soft underside. The Zwill quivered then lay still. The carnivore feasted.

"Mammal," the Professor explained. "You all remember, of course, that they once existed on earth. Due to the inability of both the young and the expectant mother to protect itself, despite its ferocity, the mammalian types will soon die out."

A hairy biped crouched by a fire tearing at a bone with yellow teeth, "Fire," the Professor said, "a tremendous step forward. But the animal is a mammal therefore I would guess that it probably is not part of the main line of evolution. Incidentally, I believe that this is the highest form of mammal yet produced, either on earth or on the Ball." The Professor paused a moment, then continued with a note of excitement in his voice, "The technician has just given me the comparative time reading for the projection, and it appears that this biped has discovered fire in an incredibly short time. After all, we can never say arbitrarily that any form of life is incapable of producing a main line of evolution. On earth it was the invertebrates. In our last experiment, the dominant line of evolution on the Ball came from what we would call insects."

"Strange looking beast, wasn't it," Grul said, "Hard to think of it evolving any further."

"The Professor said that it found fire quickly," Raschg replied. "Look at that," Grul said in amazement. The screen revealed row on row of neat stone buildings. Bipeds dressed in flowing gowns moved noisily through the streets. A quadruped drawn vehicle swept through the crowd raising a cloud of dust."

"Slow it down, slow it down," the Professor called out in a commanding voice. The Ball altered its speed sharply. The sun moving around it changed from a line of bright light to a visible lantern, though it still darted rapidly about the ball. "Mammals," the Professor said. He sounded a little nervous. "Amazing progress. We are witnessing something new in evolution, Gentlemen."

"What was that," Grul asked in amazement. A yellow line of flame had lanced out from the Ball and touched the moon.

The Professor had seen it also. "Stop it, stop it," he cried to the engineer, "They've reached the moon. The equations won't hold for the moon. They'll find out. They have found out." In a desparate move he pushed a tentacle against the spinning ball and stopped it even before the engineer reached the controls. However only a second later the power shut off, the sun-lantern went dead, the spinning planets stopped.

The lights at the top of the Great Hall flicked on. The Professor was holding his tentacle in a piece of paper. Raschg could see that it was injured, but not seriously. "Gentlemen," the Professor said, "You have been witnesses to a most unusual experiment. You may rest assured that we have films of it all, and we will examine the results later at our leisure. In the meantime, I will answer one question, then, if you will excuse me, I will go have my tentacle attended to. They must have had, proportionate to their size, tremendous weapons. In the future we will take more adequate safeguards, but I did

not imagine . . . However, before I go, is there anyone who wants to ask a question?

THE hall remained for a moment in emharrassed silence, then Raschg rocked up on to his feet, "Yes Sir. Could any of them have survived."

"A good question," the professor said, "the answer is no. With the whole artificial gravity of earth, which their matter could not withstand."

"One more question," Raschg blurted out feverishly, "How long would it have taken for your tentacle to reach the glohe, in their time. Would they have had a chance to create a means of escape."

"I very much douht it," the Professor replied, "They would only have seen my hand for ahout four days, we were going very slowly there at the end. And now, you will excuse me, Gentlemen," The Professor hurried out of the hall.

"I don't care," Raschg said as they moved through the corridors on their way out, "It was cruel to create and then destroy. It was playing God. Think how those last foul days on a doomed world must have heen."

"Oh nonsense." Grul said impatiently, "It was just another experiment. I'm afraid the day has spoiled," He added as they passed out of the dim corridor into the open.

Automatically they both looked up. A sharp high scream tore from Grul's throat.

Coming from high above them, stretching across the sky and partially hlotting out the sun, there moved slowly downwards a vast yellow claw.

——STEPHEN ARR

The Corner

By T. D. HAMM

"I SAID 'No,' and I mean 'No,'" George Dixon said loudly. "A boy your age ought to be going to bed with a catcher's mitt beside him, instead of a doll."

Tommy Dixon's lower lip protruded unhappily. "But, I *got* to," he insisted desperately. "I just *got* to!"

His father snapped his paper open irritably.

Helen Dixon looked from one to the other with a worried frown on her face. "George . . . don't you think, maybe . . ." her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"No, I don't!" he said loudly. "I'm going to put a stop to this ridiculous business once and for all. I've locked that silly doll in the closet and it's going to stay there. Now get to bed and not another word about it."

Tommy went sallow-white under his healthy tan. He stood a moment looking helplessly at his mother and then turned with dragging feet toward the stairs. He paused at the stairfoot and turned reluctantly.

"Please, father," he gulped, "Marko . . . *protects* me!"

George Dixon threw his paper to the floor and stood up threateningly.

Tommy vanished up the stairs. His father sat back breathing heavily.

"That boy's spoiled rotten, Helen. 'Protection'! I never heard such morbid, unhealthy nonsense!"

"But lots of children take toys to bed with them," Helen offered placatively.

"Not a boy nine years old. And not *my* son. And I don't want to hear any more about it." He retired decisively behind his paper.

Helen sighed unhappily and picked up her knitting.

When his door opened quietly an hour later, a ray of moonlight disclosed Tommy lying quietly in his bed, eyes fast shut.

"Sound asleep!" his father whispered triumphantly. "You're too soft with the boy, Helen. All he needed was a little firmness."

The door closed; the footsteps whispered away.

Tommy pulled himself up to a sitting position against the pillows.

He watched the pool of moonlight moving slowly over the floor. Branches cast swaying shadows over the wall. An owl hooted. He accepted them quietly; it was not the night and its noises that he feared.

Grimly, with a maturity of patience older than his years, he settled down to outwait the night.

AFTER his teacher had complained two days in succession that Tommy was falling asleep in the classroom, his father escorted him grimly to the doctor.

Bill Cary, M.D. having known George Dixon for twenty-five years, cut him off unceremoniously in the middle of a sentence, with a testy, "Yes, yes, George. Now let me talk to Tommy for a minute."

Having settled Tommy comfortably in the big chair, he sat back and regarded him with twinkling eyes.

"Well, young man, so you've been having dreams?"

Tommy regarded him silently.

"Well, that's nothing to be alarmed about," he went on comfortably. "Everybody does, more or less. Is it always the same dream or is it different?"

Tommy eyed him warily. "The same one," he said reluctantly.

Dr. Cary lifted his eyebrows interrogatively.

"Oh? They're generally the most interesting kind. Where are you in the dream? Is it scary?"

Tommy's eyes brightened and the color came up in his face.

"No, sir," he said eagerly. "It's not scary exactly. Sort of interesting and exciting. It's like we were walking along a deep road with high walls on each side and there are black caves in the walls and up ahead there's a bend . . ." his voice faltered a little and some of the color left his face.

"Well, that doesn't sound so scary," the other said encouragingly. "Why are you afraid to go to sleep?"

Tommy sat erect and the words came out with a rush.

"Because in the caves and around the bend, there's . . . Something. But I don't know what it is because they're afraid of Marko . . ." he stopped abruptly, lips pressed together.

"Who's 'Marko'?"

Tommy's eyes lighted with excitement. "He's like a giant . . . and They're afraid of him . . . as long as I've got my hand on him I'm safe! And after we get around the bend everything will be all right."

The doctor looked at him silently.

Tommy dropped his eyes and said miserably, "Dad says he's just a doll . . . and . . . and that I'm a sissy . . ." his chin quivered.

The doctor rose and patted him on the shoulder reassuringly.

"Everything will be all right. Now you sit out in front for a minute while I talk to your Dad."

It was considerably more than a minute before his father bounced out, red in the face and fizzing with anger.

"Damn quack!" he muttered at intervals on the way home, and "Damn quack!" he said loudly in reply to his wife's anxious glance. "Said it was *me* . . . ME! that was to blame! said the boy needed more feeling of protection!"

"Well, dear," said Helen hesitantly, "do you think perhaps . . . ?"

"No, I don't 'think perhaps'," he mimicked savagely. "Bunch of poppycock! I've got a better idea and it won't cost me any twenty bucks, either."

"TIME for bed, Tommy," said his mother softly.

Tommy looked at her appealingly.

"George . . ." she ventured tentatively.

He scowled irritably over his paper. "OK . . . OK! Here's the key . . . give him his confounded doll. Anything to get a little peace and quiet around here."

Tommy looked at him doubtfully, incredulous relief on his face. He looked at his mother; she too, looked startled and uncertain. But, there *was* the key . . .

Safely in bed, he clutched Marko feverishly and looked at his mother.

"He . . . he *really* meant it, didn't he, Mom?"

"Yes, dear. He doesn't really mean to be unkind, you know. He's thinking of your own good even when he's stern with you. Now, goodnight . . . and pleasant dreams."

Tommy settled down and closed his eyes blissfully. In a few moments he was on the winding, cliff-bordered path, Marko's shadow gigantic against the towering walls. Already they were closer to the bend than they had ever been before. He felt the familiar thrill, half-terror, half-delight . . . But with Marko beside him it was all right . . .

George Dixon came into the bedroom chuckling triumphantly.

Helen jerked upright as she saw what he carried in his hand.

"Marko . . . !" she gasped dismayed. "Oh, George, and he was sleeping so soundly . . . !"

"He still is," he grinned. "I just slipped his old bunny slipper under his hand and he never knew the difference. Wait till he wakes up in the morning. I'll bet we never hear another word out of him!"

He jumped out of bed the next morning, chuckling with anticipation.

"Boy, I can hardly wait to see his face!"

He padded across the hall and flung the door open.

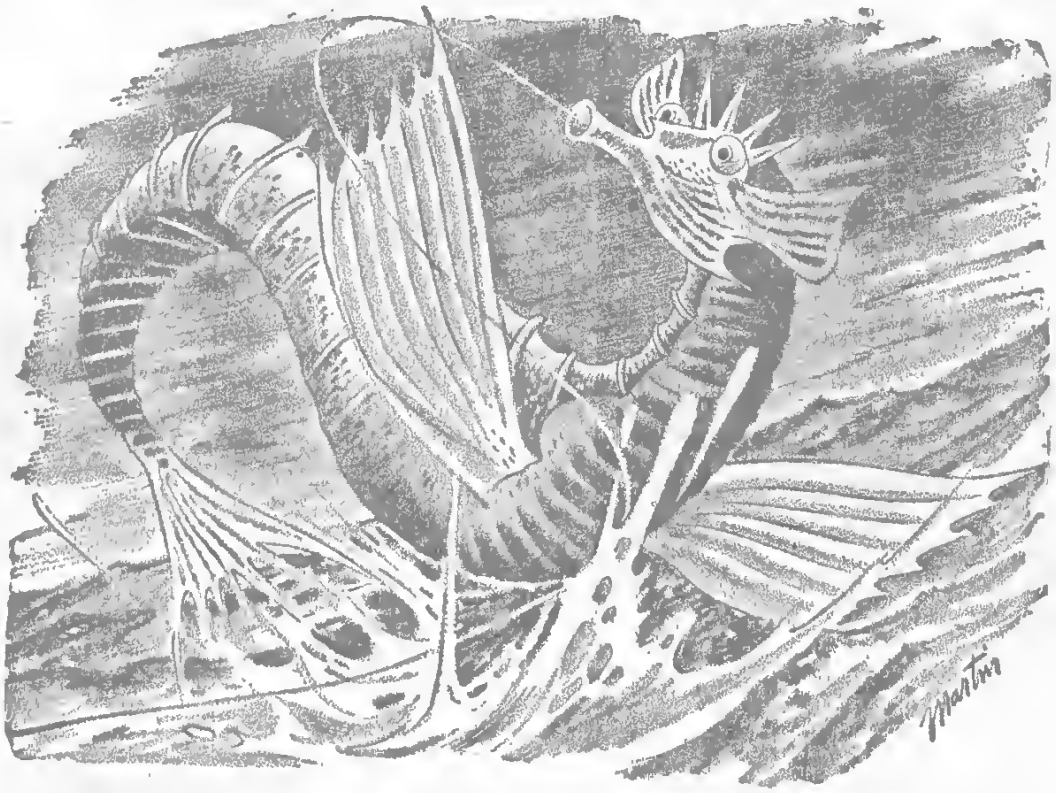
"Tommy! hey, Tom . . ." his voice broke off on a horrible, choking cry.

Tommy had been alone at the bend.

— T. D. HAMM

Weird Catch

By JOHN FOSTER WEST



MING was happy. Emotions of joy and excitement coursed through his brain, leaving him intoxicated with an unfamiliar ecstacy; Ming's had been a drab existence in the laboratory. Now he had been chosen for the journey! He, Ming, would be the first male to go. Leeb, his mate elect, would accompany him on the very first voyage of this scope that the sea entities had ever attempted.

Leeb, in all her dark-brown grace and beauty, awaited him outside the passage tunnel to the Outer Void Council chamber. Her five concentric rows of teeth gleamed like new sea pearls in the dim glow from the cold lights marking the tunnel portal, and her mouth was red and soft as sea cotton.

"Oh, Ming, you have come!" Her pleasure leaped from the four telepathy horns on her head to Ming's, bathing his mind in sweet, electrical pleasure.

She swam up to Ming and floated alongside him, caressing his horns with one five-fingered fin. Ming closed his eyes and absorbed the electrical impulses of his contact with her oppositely charged body. He quivered in every fiber of his being.

"You two!"

The thought wave cracked like a whip inside their brains. Ming's body tensed, alert, and he whirled in the water to face the tunnel portal. There

in the mouth of the passageway an usher floated, the gleaming band of his authority fastened about the base of his stubby fin.

"The Council awaits you!" His thoughts were a reprimand. "Would you float here in amorous oblivion while the Council chafes at your delay?"

Ming nudged Leeb and she fell in beside him. They floated close behind the elder usher down the long tunnel and into the great circular chamber, the under-water portion of a partially submerged volcano crater, extinct for ages. Ming automatically glanced upward to where the surface of the enclosed atoll met the misty, opaque outer atmosphere of the planet. There above, on the surface, built on submerged framework, were countless intricate machines that absorbed the invisible light entering the planet's concealing cloud blanket from outer space and reproduced the secrets of the celestial bodies in thought impulses and mental pictures. And there just above was a newly constructed frame. Resting in its cradle was the new degravity sphere, its entrance opening into the water of the council chamber.

"Ming! Leeb!"

MING came to attention with a start. For a moment he fixed his eyes on the six ancients of the Council of the Outer Void as they floated above the golden basin of their thrones. Then Ming closed his eyes and removed the willpower from his brain, permitting his thoughts to be subdued before the combined thought force of the Council. Loak the Most Elder swam a little to the fore and accosted Ming and his lover.

"My loyal subjects," Loak announced in sober impulses of thought, "I am informed that you are now aware of the circumstances, or most of them. You two were taught the operation and function of the degravity sphere along with the other contestants because the Council did not know for sure who would be chosen for the voyage. Taking into consideration your previous training and record, we finally decided on you, Ming, and naturally your chosen one, Leeb.

"The sphere is ready for the voyage. The water in the sphere will sustain you with sufficient oxygen for a complete journey to the third planet, a lengthy sojourn there and a return to the second planet. The third planet is also covered mostly by water, three-fifths, as you are aware; but whether that water would sustain your life we have never learned. It is possible that it contains toxins, but we cannot ascertain this with our instruments. And we do not know whether the oceans of that planet sustain intelligent life or not. You shall ascertain these and other important data we have recorded and send a message back to us by ultra-short wave. You will return after two weeks on that planet."

Ming tried to suppress the excitement growing in him. He tried to picture in his imagination the scope, the magnificence of this adventure.

"You will embark immediately," Loak continued. "From this moment you are officially mated. If something untoward should occur preventing your return to your mother planet, proceed to populate the waters of the third planet as rapidly as possible. Farewell!"

The degravity sphere rose swiftly through the misty atmosphere. Ming had traveled in areo-spheres before, but this one was built for outer space. Swiftly it "fell" toward the third planet.

The excitement grew in Ming as he let down through the dense atmosphere of the third planet. He could feel the tension growing in Leeb. Her excitement leaped the gap between them and saturated his mind. He did not bother to blanket it; it was a part of Leeb and he loved her.

Then everything went wrong. The sphere gave a lurch and began to fall freely. He tried desperately to regain control, grappling at the switches with thought waves. It was useless. He felt sickened as the terror from Leeb wreathed into his brain like a black sea eel. She deserted her instrument panel and dashed to his side, resting against him, the waves of terror from her horns weakening his own efforts to control the sphere.

Ming thought, "It is good that we will strike the ocean — land is not far away, though." Then his mind went blank in an oblivion of pain.

Ming returned to awareness with a vague, disembodied agony, excruciating and sharp, from his mouth to his tail. He was only slightly conscious and surrounded by blackness. Ming was not familiar with injury, with bodily pain, and that made it more agonizing. He wondered if he were blind. He felt sickened, smothered. The water he breathed in agonizing gasps was strong and bitter, filled with a heavy saline solution that seemed to poison his raw wounds like a strong acid. Distantly he realized the waters of this planet were not a completely desirable environment for beings of his race.

He was sore and tired and hungry to the depth of his body cells. He had never been so famished in all his life, and the acrid water blinded him. Leeb! Where was Leeb? Had she been destroyed? "Leeb! Leeb!" His calls hardly escaped the tips of his telepathy horns.

Ming quelled a sudden frenzy. Better to be methodical. Better to find some creature of flesh for food, then rest. After that he could send out signals, and if Leeb were still alive she would answer.

The saline water was astringent; his eyes and mouth burned—Suddenly he sensed the presence of a creature of flesh, close by; flesh and an element of metal. He opened his

mouth and grasped the creature as it flashed by him.

Pain, more bitter, agonizing pain ripped into his open mouth. Something hard and sharp had jabbed into his lip, through it, and was pulling him bodily through the water. He fought weakly as he was hauled forward and lifted into the air.

Vaguely he sensed the presence of outer-air creatures — intelligent. That was something the Council, with all their reasoning, had never imagined. The monsters towered in a vertical direction supported by two twin, parallel fins, and used two long side fins ending in prehensile digits for manual activity. They were supported on a floating, metal island. Ming felt nauseated at the ugliness of the two monstrosities.

THEY threw Ming to the surface of the metal island behind a parapet and ogled foolishly at him.

"Return me to the water!" Ming screamed at them. "You are intelligent creatures of the air. I am an intelligent entity of the water. Please put me back! Quickly!"

The air monsters only leered at him. Ming's senses were reeling again. In desperation he set his emergency-strength gland in action. He went into a violent spasm of motions, striving to leap the parapet by beating the island fiercely with his tail.

Then another pain assailed him, a blinding blow over the head just above his brain. One of the monsters had siezed a metal club and was pounding his head with it, trying to subdue him quickly.

"Don't! Don't!" Ming's thought waves swept out in a snapping current at the minds of the creatures.

Again the creature struck him, again and again. A black fog clouded slowly over his brain and his flesh became numbed to further agony.

Once he thought he felt an impulse from far away: "Ming, I am frightened. Where are you? Ming, my mate!"

"Leeb!" he thought with quivering, reeling senses. "Leeb!" Then his body relaxed and his senses were lost in the nothingness that is death.

A fragment of an article in a small Northern newspaper read:

"—off New York today. The fishermen had to kill the monster with a hammer after landing it on board their boat. So far no one has been able to identify the fish; the sea monster is a total stranger to American waters."

Another article in the same newspaper read in part:

"Dr. Smutt also stated that it is his belief that controlled rockets will be sent one way to the moon within the next few years. "However," he continued, "don't expect to find intelligent life on the moon or on any other member of the Solar System; the complete lack of a breathable atmosphere would prevent it."

— JOHN FOSTER WEST

Release

By JOSEPH SLOTKIN

Henry Parker had a wonderful secret . . .

THE morning Henry Parker made his wife disappear, the only thing that bothered him was why he had waited twenty years.

It all happened before he really had a chance to think about it.

He had been swallowing his customary, hurried breakfast, the same as he had for the past week; the past month, year; in fact, the past twenty years. And his wife was toying with her cup across the table from him, as she had been in the habit of doing for the past two decades.

And as usual, Henry was hoping he could finish his breakfast and leave before his wife could think of something to argue about. But, as usual, he was disappointed.

"Henry," she began speculatively, "let's us buy a television set."

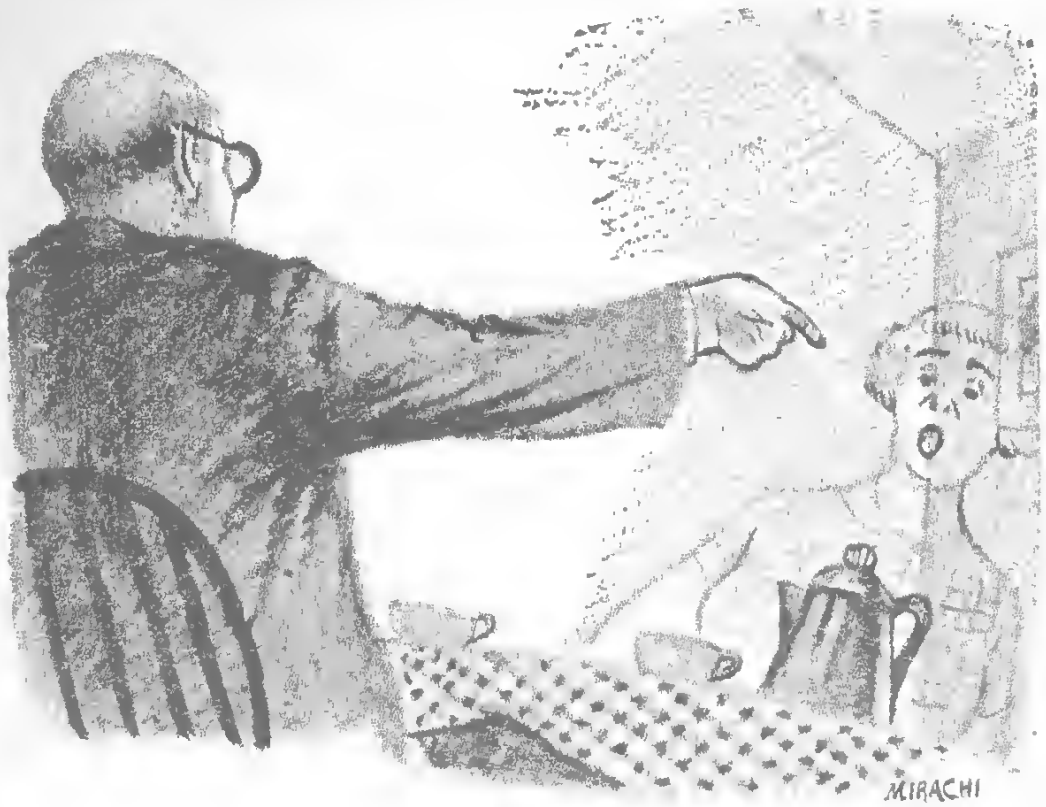
He gulped the last of his coffee, glanced longingly at the bubbling black brew in the pot near his wife's elbow, thought better of it, and muttered muddily into his empty cup, "Can't afford it."

"Can't afford it!" The needle had been set on the transcription. "Why not? Other men's wives get the best of everything. Look at George Cotter's wife. Gets anything she wants. Oh, I made a mess of my life, marrying you. I was young innocent, beautiful, then YOU came into my life ——"

Now, Henry had heard all this before. He was used to it. He knew it by heart. If his wife had left out a word, or added a phrase, he would have been startled.

Then, suddenly, while the familiar tirade dinned in his ears, Henry was aware of a peculiar feeling creeping over him. It was a sense of power—of the ability to do strange things.

Quite without his conscious volition, he set down his cup. It made a sharp, little click, hitting the saucer. He raised his eyes until he was



staring his wife squarely in the face.

"Elsie," he said solemnly, interrupting her in the middle of a compound sentence. "you know. I could get rid of you right now, if I'd a mind to."

Misunderstanding him, his wife caught up the statement as a challenge: "That's right," she shrilled, "threaten me now, you brute—" and on she went, and on and on . . .

Henry shook his head, "No, Elsie. make you disappear, I mean. Yes," he repeated it with greater intensity, "make you disappear."

His eyes took on a fixed expression, and he lifted one hand, pointing it like a wand at his wife's face.

"Out!" he said, in a rather hoarse tone. He waved his hand awkwardly, and concentrated mightily.

"Vanish, Elsie. Go away. Go on, now. Disappear." And, as an afterthought he added, "Scat!"

As he watched, he saw his wife's too, too solid outlines grow dim, and become irregular Her voice wavered and grew thin. Where she had been there was just a silent mist. Then the mist dissolved.

It hadn't taken very long. The coffee was still bubbling in the pot. He poured himself a second cup.

IN peace and quiet he finished his breakfast. He chewed slowly on a third piece of toast heaped high with quivering marmalade, letting the

jellied sweetness titillate his upper lip as he reflected on what had just transpired.

He felt no guilt qualms. No pains at the parting. After all, it weren't as though she were dead; she had just ceased to be. He didn't love her anymore. And he was old enough to take care of himself. They had had no children. Perhaps he might even marry again . . .

He tilted his head back and let the last drop of coffee run over his tongue. He put the cup down and smacked his lips. Rising with a sated sigh, he went to the hall rack, took his hat, coat, rubbers and umbrella and went out, carefully closing the door behind him.

A moment later the door opened again. First one rubber dropped onto the hall floor, then the second. Henry's hand appeared, holding the umbrella. The hand nonchalantly dropped the umbrella onto the floor.

All the way to work, on the bus, he felt a growing, secret sense of elation. He could hardly restrain himself from smiling openly, right in front of the other passengers. After all, it is not every man who can make his wife disappear. Gleefully, he sat forward on the leather cushions, slightly crouched, triumphant. He scanned the faces of the people across the aisle. Yes, he was sure none of them could do what he had done.

He caught a few of the passengers looking at him, and he lowered his eyes again. But he couldn't conceal a small, proud smile. He—Henry H. Parker—master of his own fate!

At the office, late for the first time in years, Henry almost sauntered to his place. He felt a strong impulse to lean over and whisper into the ear of pretty little Miss Shane, the stenographer who was so callipygously reaching into the lower drawers of the steel file, her white blouse ripe with the pendulous firmness of flesh obeying gravity—whisper for her alone to hear, "I've made my wife disappear, you know."

As it was, he did drop a hint here and there. Not saying so in so many words, but rather exulting inwardly, and letting the others guess at the cause of his gay manner.

So that by early afternoon, practically everyone in the office knew that something quite wonderful had happened to Henry. He looked up from his work suddenly once, and caught several of the clerks gazing at him in a puzzled manner. He chuckled complacently. He had them all on pins and needles, trying to discover his secret.

But Henry did not plan to come right out and tell anyone. He felt it was so wonderful they wouldn't believe him. And yet, at three-ten, quite without actually meaning to, he made someone else disappear, right in front of everybody, too.

It was Cartwright, the assistant manager, whom Henry did not like very much. If Cartwright hadn't

come over to Henry's desk, and if he hadn't begun to nag Henry about being so late, and about his general inefficiency and everything, in that low, penetrating voice of his, Henry never would have felt that latent power creeping over him again, and he would never had said to Cartwright, "Go away, Cartwright. Disappear. I can make you vanish. One, Two, Three. You're gone."

There, right before everyone, and while they all watched in horror, Henry had the satisfaction of seeing Cartwright turn into a wisp of blue smoke and blow away.

WITHOUT even looking around, Henry smiled, as much as if to say, "There, that's my secret, and isn't it wonderful?" And he turned back to his books, that victorious smile still on his lips.

A few minutes later, he felt someone tap him on the arm, and heard the office boy's voice. "Mr. Crane wants to see you."

Henry nodded contentedly. So the president of the company was sending for him now. Majestically, he rose and walked in a new dignified manner through the ranks of awestruck secretaries, clerks, messengers, helpers.

Reaching Crane's door, he brushed his coat, straightened his tie, coughed importantly, and knocked more timidly than he had wanted to. From within, he heard a deep summons to enter. He grasped the knob firmly, and strode in with an air.

Crane was standing by the window, his back to Henry, but at the sound of the door's opening and closing he turned slowly, and began to march to the chair behind his desk.

"You're Henry Parker," he muttered, ruffling some papers in a basket. Henry opened his mouth to speak. Closed it, and nodded.

"Parker, this is Dr. Breslau."

Henry saw, for the first time, a mild-looking little man, with the keenest, brightest eyes, regarding him closely. Dr. Breslau rose, clicked his heels together, bowed crisply from the waist, and sat down again.

Crane motioned Henry to a chair in front of his desk. "Now, Parker, what's this all about? But wait — how long have you been with us?"

"Eighteen years," Henry said.

Crane glanced significantly at Dr. Breslau, and repeated, "He's been with us eighteen years, doctor." The little man simply nodded, and, with those sharp birdlike eyes continued to watch Henry.

This scrutiny made Henry a bit uncomfortable. He felt his arm go up and begin the unconscious, polishing motion as his fingertips stroked the ever-widening circumference of baldness on his scalp. And, irrelevantly, he thought of that other great philosopher, Sophocles. Yes, that birdlike stare made him think of Sophocles. It *was* Sophocles, wasn't it, who had been killed by a rock dropped from aloft — a rock in the

claws of an eagle, who had mistaken the Sophoclean dome for a turtle's rounded back.

And under the turtle's back, the calipash — that fatty, dull-greenish substance next to the upper shell. Calipash . . . calipee, thought Henry, and Miss Shane filing cards in lower drawers rose in his sight. He licked his lips.

Grinding out his cigar with a methodical motion, President Crane leaned forward. "In all those eighteen years, Parker, you've been a quiet, willing worker. Now, what's all this I hear about you?"

Henry began to feel more at ease. He smiled. "Haven't you heard, sir?"

"Heard what?"

Henry leaned forward confidentially, and whispered, "I make people disappear — like that!"

Crane hastily sat back, reached for another cigar, lit it, and blew out a huge cloud of smoke, not unlike the looks of Mr. Cartwright as he had last seen him, Henry reflected — but Mr. Cartwright had left no odor.

For the first time, the little man sitting on the other side of the desk spoke. "Mr. Parker," he said softly, "How do you go about making people disappear?"

Henry shrugged modestly. "I don't know myself, Dr. Breslau. I just get to feeling I can do it, and then, just like that, when I want them to — they vanish."

"I see," the doctor nodded solemnly, then leaned forward. "Do you think you could make me disappear?"

HENRY frowned, then shook his head. "I really don't know sir. It seems I have more luck with people I don't like. Of course, I could try, if you really want me to—"

"No necessity for that," interposed Crane hurriedly. "We believe you."

Dr. Breslau took out a little notebook, and wrote something in it, then turned to Henry eagerly. "And how long have you possessed these —abilities?"

"You mean the power to make people vanish? Ever since I made my wife disappear at eight o'clock this morning," said Henry.

Crane, who had been smoking fiercely, bit off the end of his cigar and made a sputtering noise.

The doctor didn't seem to notice, and Henry was too polite to laugh. For a few moments the only sound in the spacious office was the strangled wheezing of Henry's employer and the scratch of Dr. Breslau's fountain pen.

"Mr. Crane, may I take Mr. Parker with me for a little while? There are several of my colleagues who would welcome this opportunity." The little doctor rose and smiled invitingly at Henry.

Crane pushed himself away from his broad desk, and skirted it rapidly, like a center going around end, making for the door as though it were the end zone. He held the door open, puffing slightly.

"Certainly, doctor. Parker, you go with him. We'll get to the bottom of this before long."

Henry nodded agreeably, and waited in the hall as he heard Crane muttering behind him, "What do you think, Dr. Breslau? How do you suppose it happened?"

The doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully, and glanced warily at Henry's back. "Mr. Crane, it is yet too soon to say. Perhaps after—"

Crane nodded, and carefully shut the door after them. Henry and the doctor entered a large building, and they went up in an elevator to the fifth floor. Down a long corridor, through several doors, to a spacious room containing intricate equipment, and a number of bearded gentlemen.

"These are my associates, Mr. Parker — Doctors Voss, Keller, Schlegel, Bennett and Storr. Now, Mr. Parker, do you mind if we ask you a few simple questions?"

Henry shook his head placidly, assenting. He felt pleasantly important. They seated him in a comfortable chair, and someone fastened a metal band around his forehead. He was told to open his mouth, to breathe deeply, to swallow, blink, to cough, to relax.

"Now, Mr. Parker, have you ever been in a serious accident?"

"Did your mother or father ever have a nervous breakdown?"

"Do you have any brothers or sisters? Are they living?"

"Did you ever want to kill your father and marry your mother?"

Henry felt a little annoyed. After all, these strangers had no right to ask him all about himself. He didn't intend to betray his secret to them. So, after answering the first few questions, he shut his mouth, then clamped his lips together tightly, and refused to speak.

He heard voices buzzing all about him, and saw the beards waggling as unfamiliar and frightening words reached his ears:

"Psychiatry indicates. . . "; "Paranoia might. . ."; "Schizophrenic. . . "; "type of neurosis. . ."; "possibly functional. . ."; "catatonic prognosis. . ."; "Therapy, maybe electric. . ."

Intensely irritated, Henry realized that he didn't like these people. He felt himself growing tense. He resolved to be rid of this turmoil once and for all. He would make them all disappear. Then he would have peace and quiet.

Concentrating mightly, he clenched his fists and set his teeth. His eyes glazed and became fixed. He sat upright in his chair. His body became rigid.

The hum of voices gradually faded, and the figures before his filmed eyes grew indistinct and hazy. Finally all was still, and Henry gazed upon nothingness.

He was alone . . . beautifully alone.

—Joseph Slotkin

One Man War

By L. MAJOR REYNOLDS

This time the danged Marshies didn't have a chance

GIL Harmon settled himself in the pilot's seat, and snugged the webs around him firmly. He touched the starter switch, and grinned wolfishly as his ears caught the even purr of the atomic motors. He let them idle while he adjusted his ear phones, and made certain his throat mike was in position. Not that it would do much good, he reflected. This was strictly a one man war. His war.

He had a bit of trouble stuffing his long grizzled hair under the tight fitting cap, hut he finally made it, and buckled the chin strap. His space suit, hanging on the wall was next, and he checked all the dials carefully, and made sure the oxygen gauge was pressed against the full pin.

The control panel was next. He activated each needle in line, and grinned again as everything showed in perfect order.

"Ain't no dirty Marshie gonna catch old Gil nappin!" he muttered.

The vision plate was his next consideration. He polished an almost invisihle smudge from its surface, and snapped the switch several times to make sure it was working properly.

He looked for a long time at the yellow plastic handle on the board just before him, and caressed it with

fingers that trembled from sheer anticipation. This was his own creation. An atomic ray that could sweep anything opposing it into instant annihilation. The ray which would bring peace once more to an embattled Earth, and blow its conquerers back to their own dry world.

He touched a stud at the side of the board, and smiled as another of his inventions went into action.

This one was a shimmering haze which surrounded his craft with a peculiar silver luster that would turn aside any weapon the enemy decided to use. He turned on the grin again.

"Let the damned Marshies try their ether rays against that," he crowed. "This time'll be different!" He glanced at the thermostat, saw the needle at the correct temperature, and stepped on the throttle.

There was a muffled snarl of power, and the stubby craft lifted easily from the ground and shot upward in a swift climb.

It was only moments until Gil saw a sight that had been denied him for too long. As he left the atmosphere, the stars blazed their light against the backdrop of black space. He breathed a sigh which came clear from the bottom, and relaxed against the padded seat, scanning the vision plate for some sign of movement. For a long moment his faded blue eyes widened under their shaggy brows as he carefully conned his immediate surroundings, then they slitted as he caught a glimpse of some-

thing just at the remote edge of the plate. He leaned forward, watching intently.

He hadn't been mistaken. It was a Martian battleship, sweeping around in a full curve, scouting out the Earth below. Gil's mouth set in a grim line as he reached for the yellow plastic ball.

He deliberately allowed his craft to cross the battleship's path where it was impossible for him to be overlooked. He was expecting action, and action he got.

The enemy guns raved out in a flaming flood of fury completely obscuring his ship in a blanket of flame. For a moment his eyes shot toward the temperature control, then his grin widened. The blast hadn't even touched him!

He let the Martian cut loose with another broadside before he reached again almost negligently for the plastic ball and aimed it at the terrifying bulk before him.

IT was only a pale yellow flash that shone for an instant from the nose of his craft, but in that instant, space before him was clear. There wasn't even a small scrap of the uncounted tons of metal that had composed the battleship.

Gil settled himself more firmly in his seat, and started on the prowl.

He was almost bored with the proceedings before he had destroyed the last of the seven ships whose duty was to guard the Earth, but he finished up the job neatly.

"Seven down and the rest to go!" he gloated. "Here I come, you dirty sons! This time it'll be different!"

He was nearly halfway to Mars before he caught sight of his prey in the plate. He had to turn his finder thirty degrees before he could cover the immense fleet which hung in space. This time there was no hesitation. He sent his ship into the center of the gathering, and posed himself arrogantly at a full stop.

The vision plate was a solid mass of flame instantly, as the Martians turned on their fire power. Gil didn't even condescend to look at the thermostat, but relaxed, and let them do their worst. He even whistled a little tune between the snags that once were his teeth.

The blast of fire ceased, and Gil sat quietly for almost a minute before he made his move.

An enormous troop carrier was directly in front of him, and he erased it with one sweep of his hand. He sneered as the blasts enveloped his craft again, and waited until they stopped.

He had destroyed almost a quarter of the immense fleet, when he suddenly decided to get playful.

He carved a gigantic E on the side of one battleship with a thinned out ray, and saw its contents spew into space with bodies and machinery well mixed. One after another went the same way, until finally, if they could have been lined up, they would have spelled EARTH. Tiring of that,

he drilled one mighty cruiser from stem to stern, and shot his craft through the improvised tunnel. He carved another giant ship into neat slices, all the while howling with glee, and bluing the atmosphere of his own craft with all the unprintable names his memory could produce.

One of the battleships suddenly broke away and headed full speed for the red disk that was Mars. Gil let it reach velocity, then carved the steering tubes away and let it shoot onward into outer space.

"G'wan out and starve to death!" he snarled. "At that it's too damned good for ya!"

For a long time he played with the fleet as a cat worries a mouse. Several times he let some of them almost get away to a fancied security before blasting them into atoms. Finally, he realized he had wasted too much time. He set his control on the plastic ball to wide coverage, and the next instant there was no sign of the mighty fleet that had been there a second before.

The ever present grin widened still more as he set a course for the red dot that was Mars. and poured on the coal.

"I won't leave anybody alive on the blasted planet!" he snarled as he raced through the blackness. "Those Marshies've had this comin' for a long time, an' old Gil's the guy that can take care of 'em! I'm just as good a pilot as I ever was!"

Space was clear with the exception of several gigantic meteors, but they disappeared in one flash from a perfectly aimed ray, and Gil sped on, burning with vengeance.

He was coming down, just slackening speed, when from some where he heard something that made the universe almost blot out before his eyes. Stubbornly he blocked whatever it was from his mind, and again the rosy world shone out clearly before him. There was, deep in his brain one tiny regret that he had wasted too much time in destroying the fleet, but there was a world still to destroy.

His first target was the mighty ship building works which lay at the junction of the two main canals. He didn't spare a moment as he shot downward. His hand was steady on the plastic ball, and a fan of golden death raged ahead of him.

There was nothing but a mile deep cavity when he swung his craft upward again. Nowhere could there be seen any sign of the gigantic installation that had been there one brief moment before. Gil grunted his satisfaction.

He hung in the air, a few miles above the surface and plotted his next move.

A glimpse of white to the north attracted him, and the next instant he was poised above the ice cap, his anti-gravitators holding him steady, as the yellow ray bored downward.

Vapor came first, then steam, then superheated steam that at last broke up into its component parts and once more became a gas which mingled with the atmosphere, never again to be released.

After the ice cap was nothing but bare rock, he turned his attention to the cities. One after another he wiped out, and soon there were none left except for small villages which he had to hunt out and destroy.

Several times a ship rose from the surface to do battle, but Gil was in a hurry. He didn't even give them time to reach fighting height, but blasted them as soon as he saw them.

Toward the south pole, he came suddenly upon a training center, and one flash of the ray blotted out thousands of marching soldiers.

Now, there was only one thing left to do. He had to go out a few hundred miles, and burn every shred of atmosphere from the planet. Even if somewhere, some one was left alive, they could never live to be a threat to Earth if they had no air to breathe.

He was settling himself for the final blast, when the sound came again.

The universe exploded in a mad kaleidoscope of color and Gil fought to keep the planet below him in focus. It faded out, and he brought it back by sheer will power. Finally it steadied, and he reached again for the plastic knob which controlled the golden death.

His fingers never reached it. There was a sudden blast of sound:

"GRA-A-A-MPS!"

Gil Harmon dropped his reaching hand and shook his head. Slowly he unfastened the chin strap of his helmet and pulled it off. He looked around him as he opened the webbing belt, and two big tears rolled down his wrinkled cheeks as he saw the gaping holes in the sides of the ship, and the rusty control panel before him. His fingers reached again for the plastic ball, and he carressed it for a moment. Once again it was just the light control for the board, and the stud at the side of the board was just the emergency alarm. He didn't even look up when the voice of his grandson cut at him from the doorway which had no door.

"So there you are, you silly old goat! Maw said you'd be here actin' like you was a pilot. Sometimes I think you're tetched in the head, Gramps. There ain't no more war, an' you know it. Maw says to tell you that you'd better stir your stumps and get back to the clearin'. We got crops to get in, an' if the Marshie overseers show up an' we ain't got nuthin' planted, they'll burn us sure as shootin' Stir your stumps, you crazy old coot, we got work to do!"

—— L. Major Reynolds

Aunt Liz

By GENE HUNTER

DEAR NEPHEW:

When I heard of your marriage to a Centaurian I was, of course, greatly surprised. Although I must admit that I feel some pride in the fact that at least one Stillon of the present generation had enough old-fashioned guts to do what he wanted and practically tell the rest of the family to go to the devil, I cannot condone your actions.

Like any other Terran of good family and background would be, I am shocked at the idea of you taking a foreign wife. In my opinion the various racial and cultural differences make such a marriage unthinkable. At least there is one consolation—I understand that there can be no children born of a union between a Terran and a Centaurian.

Although I wish you and your Kia every happiness and success, please be advised that I have already changed my will, dividing what was to have been your share among the other members of the family. I sincerely hope that you will bear me no ill will for this decision, but that you will understand that I cannot permit any part of my estate or the family business to fall into the hands of heathen foreigners, and in case you were to die before your wife that is what would happen.

Your aunt,
Elizabeth Demarra Stillon

1 June 2160

Dear Roger:

Your brief note and the picture were appreciated. I am glad that you bear me no enmity, although your letter was very short. A rich old woman has few people who like her for herself alone.

You and Kia certainly appear happy, and as a woman who has loved passionately in her time (although you who have known me only as an ancient old dame will probably find this hard to believe) I certainly hope that the bloom of love lasts for many years. The girl looks quite lovely—in her savage way, of course. She is not so green-skinned after all, is she?

Please write again and let me know more about your life there. When will you be returning for a visit?

Affectionately,
Aunt Elizabeth

P.S.—Although I realize it is probably the custom on Tarko Sil, do you think it is quite wise for you and Kia to live with her family? After all, you are an outsider and

I wonder if such an arrangement might not cause some hard feeling.

15 August 2160

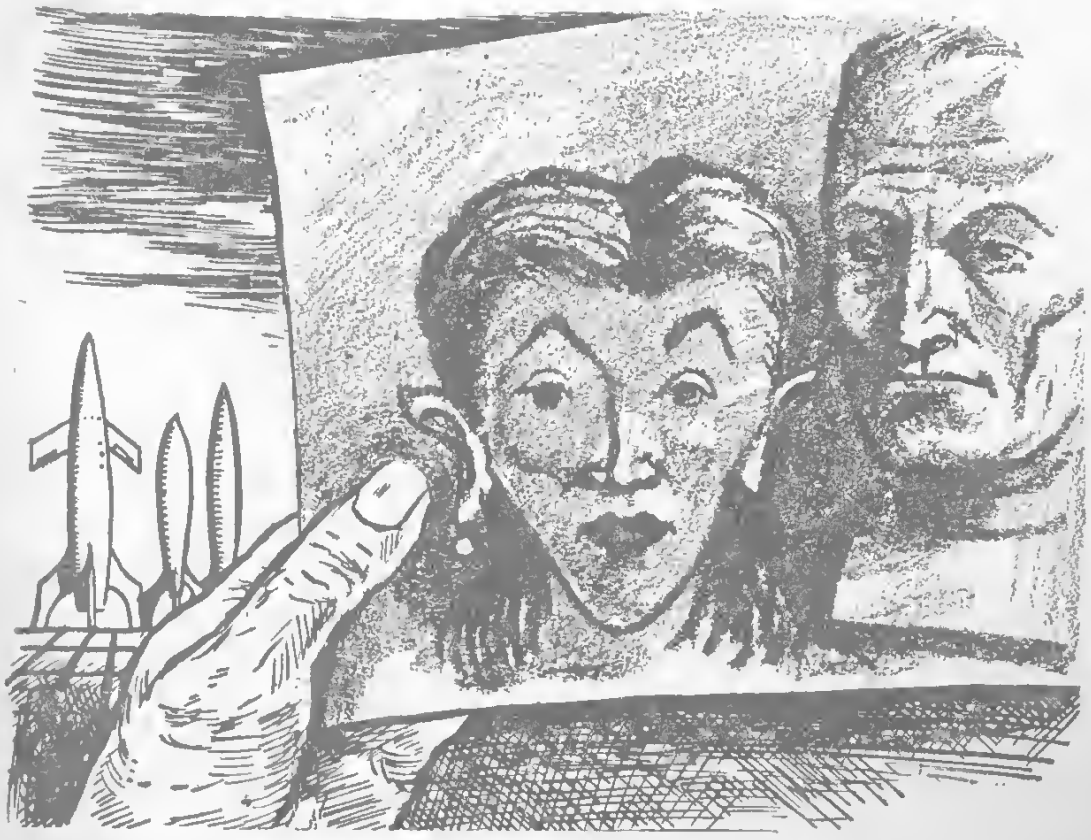
Dear Roger:

Your long letter greatly appreciated. It cheered me up immensely. It looks as though my reply will be quite as long, but certainly not as cheerful and as happy as yours.

Roger, you cannot imagine the mess the Stillons are in the midst of.

Despite my age, I like to think that I am a progressive person. In my opinion, therefore, the day of the rocket is at an end. The old tubs served us faithfully and well for two main so — unless by some stroke of good luck something drastic happens hundred years, but the time has come when they will be replaced. Mark my words, this new teleportation business — Immediate Transition, I believe they call it — is the coming thing. My great difficulty is that I am unable to make these idiotic nieces, nephews and grandchildren of mine see it.

Out in the Belt, Homer Gyron— he's Bertha's husband, you will recall — has gone in hock completely to corner the *stellarium* market. Except for myself, Stillon Company is behind him to the hilt. The fortune may be mine, but Homer is elected head of the corporation and will re- to the little pipsqueak — for the next eight years.



The damned Solar Federation is explicit in its corporation laws — unless a president's actions are incompetent or harmful to the Government he may not be removed from power for the decade for which he is elected.

While the stupid Stillons have gone to great expense to corner all existing *stellarium*, our only competitor — that upstart Kildraine's Rocket Enterprises — has quietly gone and manufactured a synthetic fuel, probably vastly superior to the natural stuff and the first major improvement in rocketry since the Frankhauser Convertor twenty-five years ago. Nothing is out in the open yet, but I know what is going on. Kildraine is planning to squeeze us out — probably he thinks that with an improved fuel he can get Rocket Enterprises subsidized by the Federation and create a rocket monopoly. He has powerful friends, and he can swing it.

My idea is for the Stillons to buy Irving Baum's Immediate Transition outfit, which as I said I believe to be the coming thing in transportation. Teleportation would outstrip rocket travel just as the mechanical age of the ancients put an end to animal transportation.

So you can see the three-way squeeze I'm in. I control the Stillon purse strings, but the rest of the family has outvoted me. Legally, there isn't a damned thing I can do except watch what happens. I'm aching to invest in I. T., but they have me at a standstill. Baum's company is still in the experimental stage — he needs financing badly — but if he ever puts it over, goodbye rockets. And goodbye Stillon Company.

I'm sorry to be such an old crybaby, Roger, especially when there is nothing you can do about the situation here. You are well out of it, my boy — God bless you for being a black sheep. I think the Stillons need more like you. Too bad you're the end of the one live branch on the decayed family tree.

Your letter about Centaurian customs and traditions was most interesting. I imagine you are having a wonderful time. I'm glad too that you get on so well with your wife's family — that alone is half the battle. More and more I am beginning to admire your courage in shedding yourself of the rest of us and striking out on your own.

By the way, you have not made it clear just what field you are in. I would enjoy hearing about your work.

All my love and good will,

Aunt Liz

VIA PRIVATE SPACEGRAM
12 SEPTEMBER 2160

AMAZED THAT I. T HAS FORMED SUCH A LARGE ORGANIZATION ON TARKO SIL, BUT UNDERSTAND THE NECESSITY OF CARRYING ON RESEARCH OUTSIDE THE JURISDICTION OF THE FED-

ERATION. CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR POSITION. YOU MAY WIND UP BEING THE RICHEST STILLON YET.

AUNT ELIZABETH

VIA PRIVATE SPACEGRAM
25 SEPTEMBER 2160

OF COURSE YOU AND KIA ARE WELCOME TO VISIT ME AT ANY TIME, BUT STICK TO THE ROCKETS FOR NOW. DO NOT RELISH THE THOUGHT OF YOU TWO BEING THE FIRST HUMANS SENT VIA I. T.

AUNT ELIZABETH

2 October 2160

Dearest Roger and Kia:

You cannot imagine how wonderful it was to see you, even for so short a time. As I told you, the fact that Immediate Transition has advanced to a point where it could actually transport human beings safely merely added to my assurance that the day of the rocket is finished.

I agree with you that teleportation will not find a warm welcome with the Federation at this time. I repeat that the Solar Council is as crooked as a Venusian *khanda* vine. I have investigated very closely since my talk with you and I have found that my fears are well founded. Kildraine has infiltrated his men everywhere. He is probably more aware of the danger that I. T. presents to rocketry than anyone else on Terra. In one fell swoop he is making certain by planting his own men in the right places that (1) Stillon Company is doomed and (2) Immediate Transition will die still-born.

I'm afraid, Roger, that there is nothing we can do except wait for the end. I hope you will understand why I do not take your well-meant advice. True, I could unload and salvage at least a small portion of the Stillon empire for myself, but you and I are Stillons of the old school, my boy — we'll meet the end fighting.

The day may well come when I will accept your invitation to come to Tarko Sil with you and Kia, but I'm afraid I'll be a broken old woman then — you probably won't want me.

Love to you both,

Aunt Liz

15 December 2160

Dear Roger:

I am aghast at your letter. To satisfy my own mind, I have made discreet inquiries here among the leading biologists. All of them repeat what I knew before — there is no possibility of a Terran male impregnating a Centaurian woman.

I can scarcely believe it of Kia, but there seems to be no other course but to accept what you fear is true. I think you are wise to continue as you are now — convince Kia that you believe the innocence she professes, in spite of the evidence. I

only hope your love is great enough to see the two of you through this crisis.

In the meantime, I have a few ideas of my own and if you do not resent an old woman being a busybody, I shall continue with them.

There is nothing new in the other situation as yet, but the handwriting is on the wall. With the new elections coming up, I have no doubt but what Kildraine will have his way and take over the Council entirely.

Courage, my boy.

As ever,

Aunt Liz

4 January 2161

Dear Roger:

In less than two weeks now, the elections will be upon us. Kildraine's men seem to be gaining in popularity and that only stabilizes my theory that this year will see the downfall of the Stillon empire.

But now for the big news. I have met and talked with that great man, Irving Baum. How I managed it is of no concern, but rest assured that this old woman still has her ways.

Ordinarily Baum and I would be the greatest rivals, but we are both threatened by the stronger Kildraine and that allies us. He is certainly a grand old man and he has terrific courage in spite of the odds against him. He is truly inspiring.

There's life in the old girl yet, to use an ancient and worn cliche.

Lovingly,

Aunt Liz

P.S.—Regards to Kia.

GREAT NEWS FOR US ALL. LETTER FOLLOWS.

15 March 2161

Dearest Roger and Kia:

Well, Kildraine has had his way and his Councilmen have taken over, but Stillon Company still has its own bag of tricks.

That offensive little Homer Gyron has been moved down to an unimportant post in Industrial Relations and we have a new head—your Aunt Elizabeth. In spite of the fact that most of our money is invested in *stellarium*, I will still be able to liquidate the firm quietly and invest the remainder where I think it will do the most good—and you, of course, know where that is.

As soon as Kildraine's men took over, one of their first actions was to announce that Homer was not acting in the best interests of the Federation. That little idiot had done a great thing for us by buying up all the *stellarium* holdings, even though he didn't know it. It seems that Kildraine's formula is synthetic in its other ingredients, but still uses a *stellarium* base. It is, of course, vastly superior to what we've been using, but he still needs the real article.

And in buying up *stellarium*, Homer Gyron had created a monopoly. It seems that it is all perfectly legal for Kildraine to create such a monopoly for himself by perfecting his secret synthetic fuel to the point where it will knock Stillon Company from its perch, but illegal for Stillon to control the *stellarium* market. It is all very involved and I don't fully understand it myself, but since it is Kildraine's idea, I say the hell with it.

Well, the dethroning of Homer left the rest of the family in a swivit, I can tell you. They were more than eager for an experienced hand to take over the company and since I controlled the money, it was simple for me to get myself elected. Kildraine isn't the only one who can control elections, even though he does think Stillon Company is frozen out.

But by keeping up the guise of continuing to operate a failing rocket line, all of the Stillon wealth is now swung over to research upon and perfecting of Immediate Transition. In a few years we'll have teleportation advanced to the point where it will entirely outmode rocketry, as I've always said it would.

Now, as for you kids. I told you that it was dangerous for you two to be the first humans to travel by I. T. In fact, Irving was furious about it until I quieted him down. Since I told him of your clandestine trip and the fact of Kia's later pregnancy, he's been doing a lot of research upon the animals they've sent through experimentally.

It took time for our biologists to accomplish, but finally they took a poor, helpless little female guinea pig—it's we women who suffer for the good of humanity, I've always maintained—and twisted up her hormones and genes and things to the point where she was a perfect animal duplicate of a Centaurian female.

Then they sent her through an I.T. transmitter, bred her — she seemed willing to accept both ordeals calmly, I'm assured — and in the course of time has become the mother of the finest, fattest little litter you ever saw. So my congratulations to you.

This provides I.T. with still another bug to work out, but as a sideline I suppose we can someday treat Centaurians who marry Terrans so that they can become parents.

I'll be arriving on Tarko Sil in about two months for a combination business and pleasure trip. Irving will be with me, of course. I hope for a good rest and a long visit with the Centaurian branch of my family, including the coming new arrival. Also I intend to groom you, Roger, to eventually take over the firm, but don't expect that for a long, long time. As I told you in my last letter, there's life in the old girl yet.

God bless you all.

Your loving aunt,

Elizabeth Demmara Stillon Baum

——Gene Hunter

The Farmer's Daughter & The Martian

By RICHARD TERZIAN

SELEM Karr, sole member of the First Expedition, stepped out of his space ship. He breathed deeply, looking about at the green hills and swaying trees. Here he was, the first member of his race to make a journey to another planet, to set foot on an alien world! Karr sighed and leaned against the side of his ship, enjoying the hot sunlight beating down on him. He fell to musing on what sort of beings he would find. His orders had been to make friends with, and gather information about, any sentient creatures he might find. Perhaps these creatures might have six heads, or purple horns, or . . .

Karr was startled out of his reverie by a noise a few feet from him. He looked up. Standing in front of him was a creature It was tall and white-haired. Held in its upper limbs was a slender rod-like object.

Karr stepped forward, raising one of his eight tentacles in a friendly gesture. "Hail man of the third planet, I bring you greetings from those of the fourth planet," he said in clear Martian.

Lem Kendall shifted a wad of tobacco to the other side of his mouth and spat it out. "Hold on critter, who ye be and whar ye come from?" he replied in clear Earthian. "I never seen a critter yet what could make noises like he was talking," he continued.

Karr looked puzzled at his belligerent tone. He took a step forward, and repeated his friendly greeting.

"Stand where ye are, critter! Don't come no closer," yelled Kendall, raising his shotgun.

Karr stopped, surprised. Apparently this creature was afraid of him. That rod was probably a weapon. The Martian smiled to himself. Did this foolish person think that he could be harmed? He, who was protected from all atomic blasts, ray

guns, and shock waves? Karr decided that reasoning with this creature would he impossihle. The hest thing to do was to find another creature; perhaps there were some who had more sense than this one.

The Martian turned, and hegan to slither away from Kendall.

"Hold on critter, whar ye think ye're goin?" cried Kendall.

Karr did not turn around.

"Well I'll he danged if a critter like that is goin' to get away from me!" Kendall raised the shotgun to his shoulder, and squeezed the trigger.

Boom!

The blast hit the Martian squarely in that section which would be occupied by the seat of the pants in a human. Karr howled, and fell down. Kendall walked gingerly up to where he lay writhing on the ground.

"Well critter, ye're lucky that was just rock salt, or ye would have had a real pain."

Karr looked up at him. He had thought this creature was stupid! A creature with such a terrible weapon! He groaned.

"Okay now critter, get up an' come along. I gotta show you to the family." Kendall motioned with his shotgun.

The Martian understood, and painfully stood up on his pseudopods. Kendall motioned again, starting to

walk. The Martian meekly followed him.

AFTER a short walk through the woods, they came to Kendall's palatial shack, a pine board affair with four rooms. A horde of ragged, dirty children raced out to meet them, screaming. "Whut's that, Pa? Whatcha got there?"

"Hold on!" roared Kendall in a terrible voice that quieted the noisy throng. "I caught this here critter in the woods. He's goin to stay with us awhile. That's all ye need to know. Now git!" With that, the mob of children ran off to play, yelling and shouting to one another.

Kendall motioned for Karr to follow him, and they went up the creaking porch stairs into the dark smelly house. It was then that the unfortunate Martian came face to face with Emmy Lou Kendall, who was not only Lem Kendall's eldest daughter but also the homeliest female for sixty miles around.

"Emmy Lou," began Kendall, "I caught this critter a little while ago. He's going to stay with us. Fix him up some grub and show him a place to sleep." Kendall turned to the Martian. "As fer you, don't make no trouble, or I'll give ye a dose of buckshot," he said with a glare, then he strode out of the room.

Emmy Lou Kendall looked doubtfully at the Martian with her crossed eyes. "Well come on critter, I'll get ye some food." Motioning to Karr, she led him into the home's tiny kitchen. "You kin sit down there," she said, pointing at the kitchen table, then went to work preparing a meal for the strange visitor.

Inside of twenty minutes a heaping plate of hog jowls and boiled potatoes was set before Karr. The Martian picked a jowl up, and tasted it cautiously. Finding the food to his liking he dug in with gusto. In less than five minutes the plate was licked clean, and Karr sat back, giving forth the Martian equivalent of a burp. However, he did not forget his manners, for he got up, wrapped three tentacles about himself, and bowed low. "Thank you, most kind Earthly female, for this wondrous repast," he intoned in his most flowery fashion.

"Well I declare," cried Emmy Lou in a surprised voice, "you sound just like you're talkin'." She looked at him strangely for a moment, then went on briskly, "Well, I guess I'd better show ye to yere room. Come along."

She led him down a short hallway into a small bedroom, lighted only by a tiny window set high in the wall. Karr glanced about the room for a moment, then turned to his hostess and bowed low. "Thank you most kindly for this luxurious abode."

"Tee hee," giggled Emmy Lou, "you may not talk English, but you shore have fine manners." Emmy Lou said tee hee again, and walked

out of the room, a strange look in her eyes.

After the novelty wore off the Kendall family accepted the Martian's presence as they would the presence of a new house pet. Karr began to pick up rudimentary English, and was soon able to engage in extremely simple conversations. He and Kendall had a system of pidgin-English worked out for more complicated conversations. All in all, Karr's first few weeks on the farm passed pleasantly.

One Sunday afternoon, Kendall decided to exhibit his prize catch to the neighbors at a picnic held on the farm of an Jeremiah Q. Potter. Loading his brood into his 1923 Chalmers sedan, he started down the road for the picnic.

Needless to say, when Lem Kendall trooped into the picnic grounds, trailed by his nine children and the Martian, he created quite a sensation among the local yokels. Dozens of curious souls gathered around Kendall and the Martian, poking, pointing, asking questions. Kendall managed to ward them off until he could get up on a tree stump and go through his carefully rehearsed little speech about his capture of the Martian.

After a little more poking and pointing, the picnic began in earnest. Everyone adjourned to the tables, where huge mounds of sandwiches, pickles, potato chips, hog jowls, and fried chicken lay waiting. Everyone ate like hogs, disposing of the food in short order.

As soon as everyone was comfortably stuffed, the young bucks of the community began their regular picnic activities, beginning with horse-shoes. One of these gentlemen had a brilliant idea, "Haw, haw, lets git the critter to pitch horseshoes with us," said he. The others hawed hawed too, and all of them went to the table at which Kendall sat with the Martian.

"Haw, haw, how about lettin' this critter pitch a game of horseshoes with us, Lem?" asked their leader.

"Ye're crazy, how can he pitch horseshoes?" replied the surprised Kendall.

'Haw, haw, ask 'im anyway. See what he says."

Kendall turned to the Martian, and conversed with him in their pidgin-English.

Karr thought a moment. Apparently these creatures wished to test his worth in a contest. Well, by Glugg, he'd show them a thing or two if that's what they wanted! Karr told Kendall that he agreed.

"Okay boys, he'll play," said Kendall, turning once again to the group, "but ye better show him how to play."

"Sure we'll show 'im. Come on critter." The group leader gestured for the Martian to follow him, and they started off.

A few minutes of demonstration were all that were needed for Karr

to make a gesture of understanding.

The game started, with Karr matched against the best player in the county. All those present at the picnic were watching when Karr's opponent, one Ezekiel Peabody, made his first two tosses, both landing a few inches from the post. Everybody cheered. "Get a ringer, critter!" yelled someone. They all laughed.

KARR stood calmly next to the backboard, calmly judging the situation. Within a few seconds, he calculated the air-resistance, wind, correct arc, and force necessary. He made his first throw. The horseshoe arced through the air, all eyes upon it. Clunk! a perfect ringer. The glassy-eyed spectators stared at the Martian wonderingly.

There is little point in discussing here how Selem Karr went on to beat the pants off the best horseshoe pitchers in Dade County. Suffice it to say that after he had made fifty-six ringers in a row, the boys decided to quit.

The Martian's final victory was a signal for the start of the celebration. Karr was carried off by the cheering throng to join in the celebration. One of the men produced some jugs of mountain dew, 100 proof, and the revelry began.

Karr was given his own jug, which, after an experimental sip, he drained dry, and motioned for more. The gaiety was still going on at midnight, when one of the revelers felt an impulse to sing. He did so, and everyone else joined in, to the plinking of somebody's banjo.

"Show me the way to go home."

Plink, plunk.

"I'm tired an' I wanna go to bed."

Plink, plank.

Karr did not understand the words, but he could sound them and he sung uproariously with the crowd, waving a half empty jug in one tentacle.

". . . on land, or sea, or foam.

You can always hear me singin' this song.

Show me the way to go home.

Plink, plink."

Selem Karr, the pride of his race, managed to stagger into bed by two o'clock in the morning.

After his triumph, Karr was respected throughout the county. Before, he had been a mere freak. Now, he was known far and wide as a person of accomplishment.

Gradually, however, the neighbors became used to his presence, as the Kendall family had, and he soon passed out of local gossip.

For Karr, the days passed quickly. He had many tasks on the farm. Tasks which he did much better than any human could.

It was quite a sight to see him arrange four cows in a square, then milk them all at once, his powerful tentacles squeezing the last drop from them. Hens had little chance to protect their newborn young from his depredations. One tentacle would lift the squawking mother from her

perch, while the other snatched the fat, white eggs. Karr could also pluck chickens faster than any farmer's wife, and could guzzle more corn whiskey than any five field hands. Kendall and his family became quite fond of the Martian, due to the fact that none of them had to work any more. Emmy Lou Kendall was especially fond of Karr, serving him with the best cuts of meat, fixing his bed, and following his movements with loving eyes.

Winter passed, and spring came.

Although Karr worked from dawn to dusk, plowing, planting, cultivating, he began to feel vague throbbings of discontent. He tried to work these thoughts off, but it was no use. More and more his thoughts turned toward his native planet.

He tantalized himself with visions of the fair maidens of Mars. Dreams of their graceful tentacles, their lovely pseudopods, and rich, full beaks haunted him. One day, while he was in this state of mind, he happened to glance at Emmy Lou Kendall. She smiled at him.

". . . and now I pronounce you . . . er . . . man and wife," the preacher intoned, "you may kiss the bride." Selem Karr turned wrapped four tentacles around Emmy Lou, and kissed her.

Elron Hubb, sole member of the Second Expedition, stepped out of his space ship. He did not pause to admire the scenery, as his predecessor had, for he had a definite mission to accomplish. Five years had gone by since Selem Karr had started on his voyage to the third planet. It was Hubb's duty to either find Karr, or accomplish Karr's original mission. Hubb stood uncertainly for a moment, then strode off in the direction of a patch of woods.

He had hardly gone a few yards when he stopped short, faced by the strangest collection of creatures he had ever seen. There were six of them. Four of them were small, with eight tentacles each, like a Martian but having two other limbs rather than pseudopods. Standing in front of them was another creature, obviously a native of the third planet, and next to her . . . Selem Karr! Hubb was overcome with joy; to find his good friend after all these years! He rushed forward, shouting. But the expression on Karr's face stopped him short, in front of his long lost friend. Hubb stared at him, confused. "What is wrong, old friend, don't you recognize me?" he asked in clear Martian.

Selem Karr shifted a wad of tobacco to the other side of his mouth, and, spat it out. "Hold on thar critter, who ye be, an whar ye come from?" he replied in clear Earthian.

—Richard Terzian

The Venus Gipsy

By C. M. WEBSTER

**There were things that Miga could do
For a man —
Strange, Venus Magic Things**

ANOTHER hour passed, and the thin, blond Earthman grew more restless. He called again to the Martian barmaid. "How soon will he come?"

"In just a little while," she answered. "Do you want another bottle?"

"Yes. And bring an extra glass. Sit and have a drink with me."

She brought the whiskey and a glass for herself. She was an attractive girl, her skin a warm red, not purple as some of them were, and her long, thick hair a rich auburn. "You are an amazing drinker," she said, as she joined him at the table. "Twelve bottles in three hours. I have never seen anyone drink that way." She spoke English quite well, with only a faint Martian accent.

"I can't get drunk," he said. "It's physically impossible."

"Every night," she said, "I watch men drink here at the cafe. Earthmen. Martians. Venusians. Just a few glasses, and they're staggering. They get sloppy, or fight, they cry about home planets, or they're at me with their hands. Just a few glasses, not twelve bottles in three hours."

The Earthman waved his hand impatiently. He was silent for a minute, then asked: "Are you sure you

never met her. Her name was Miga, a Venusian girl. She was a gipsy, no mistaking that. Her skin was very pale, only tinged with yellow, and her hair, well, very much like the color of the sun. Not the color from Earth, but from here on Mars. She was a singer. You know, those wild Venus gipsy songs. Think back. Are you positive?"

"I told you before. I'm new here. The proprietor is the one to ask." She glanced at the timepiece behind the bar. "He'll be here very soon. He's never late."

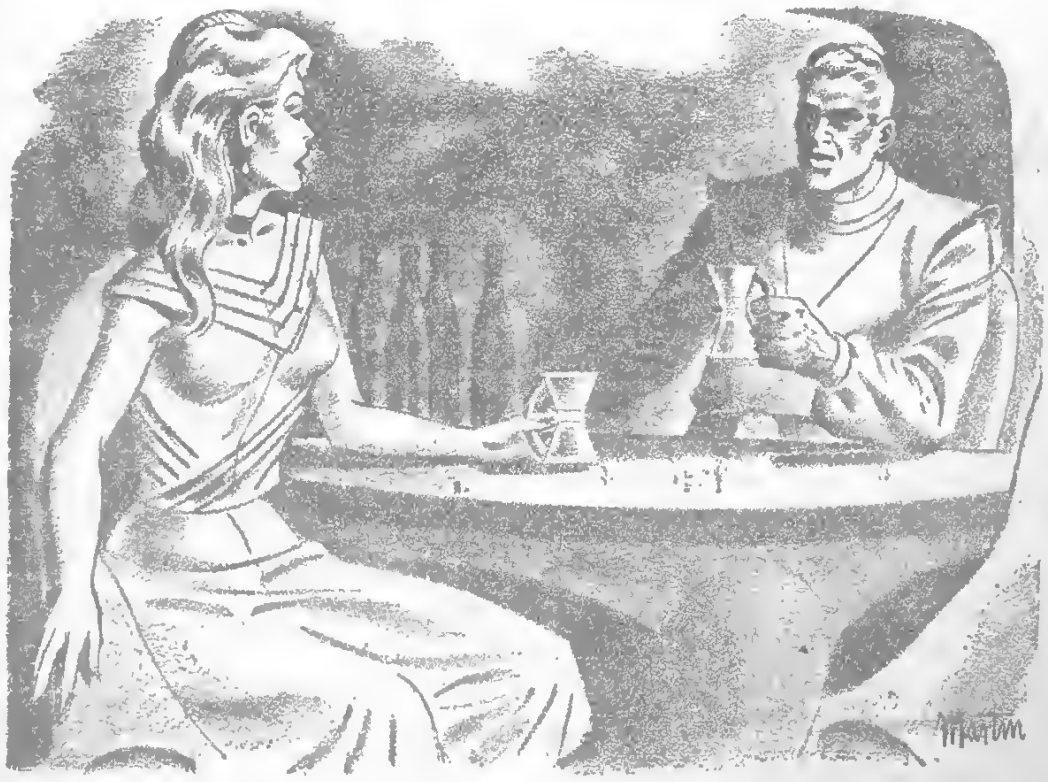
"She went from one cafe to the next," said the Earthman. "She would sing, and the patrons would throw money. You know how they are, those Venus gipsies. Especially the women. Something hypnotic, the way they move, and those strange voices. She could have stayed anywhere, worked anywhere and grown wealthy. But she had to keep moving. If I told you how long I've been looking for her, you wouldn't believe it. You would say I was lying if I told you the number of planets I've searched, the number of taverns like this one."

"Are you in love with her?"

He laughed. "I'm incapable of love. Totally incapable."

"You're not from the police?"

"The police? That's a laugh. You're dying of curiosity, aren't you. Well, why not tell you. I'm looking



for Miga because I want her to kill me."

"That's not a very funny joke," said the barmaid.

"It's not a joke at all," he answered. "Listen, I'll tell you a story. It will pass the time. You won't believe it, but that's not important." He filled both their glasses.

"I should go back to work," she said doubtfully.

"All right. Go."

She sat there waiting.

AFTER a long pause, he asked: "Tell me, what have you heard about Venus gipsies?"

"Many things. Strange things."

"About their magic?"

"Yes."

"That they can live forever, if they want to?"

"Yes. All the usual things. The stories are very mysterious, and they make good telling, but they're just myths, of course."

"That's where you're wrong," he said. "Do you know how old Miga is? More than two thousand years old. You would think her a young girl, everything about her, young. And she'll stay that way, as long as she likes. I know for a fact this is true."

"How would you know a thing like that?"

"Because she's my wife. My beautiful and always young wife." He drained his glass. "I met her in a tavern on Earth. It was a long time ago. A very long time." He smiled. "Eight hundred years ago, in fact."

The barmaid giggled. "Twelve bottles in three hours," she said.

"I said you wouldn't believe me. It's not important. Do you want to hear the rest?"

The Martian girl nodded, still giggling.

"I was a young man then," he said. "I played the piano for a living. Like Miga, I was something of a gipsy myself, moving from place to place. A week here, a couple of days there. You know. Anyway, that was how I met her. She turned up at the tavern one night.

"It was funny. I don't know what made her go for me. We used to sit and talk for hours, and she must have seen the way I was. A man at twenty-two, he's just a kid. He thinks he's got everything, and understands everything, and all the time he's just a stupid kid. That's the part I don't get. She kept coming around, night after night. It got so the owner of the place was kidding me about it. 'Boy, have you got something on the string,' he would say. Then he started to get cagey about it. He boosted my salary, and began treating me like a favorite son. As long as I was around, Miga stayed around. And where Miga sang, that's where the customers were. The owner was the one who made me realize what a good thing I had.

"She was really something, that girl. You asked me before if I loved

her. Maybe I would have, if I hadn't got thinking. Like you, I'd heard all the stories about Venus gipsies. About their living as long as they wanted. About the magic. About how they took only one mate all their lives, and would do anything for him. The more I thought about it, the craftier I got. I decided to marry her, if I could. The way I figured it, even if all the magic and living forever was untrue, I would still have a fine deal. When Miga sang, the money rolled in, and as her husband, I would see to it that I got my share. And if the other stuff actually was true, well, you've heard the stories. They could do things to a man to make him live forever. I kept imagining what that would be like.

"It was really something, the way I worked on her. I gave her the greatest line any man ever handed out. I didn't see her as a woman anymore, just a good proposition. The crazy thing was, I wouldn't have had to lift my little finger to get her. She'd already made up her mind about me, only I was so busy plotting, I couldn't see it. Anyway, no matter what planet she's from, there's no figuring a woman's taste. But to make a long story short, I finally married her. I'll tell you this, too, she was twelve-hundred years old, really that old, and still a virgin. Picture that."

The barmaid started to giggle again. The Earthman stared into the bottom of his glass, remembering.

"The first two years were a picnic," he said, "really a picnic. We opened a cafe of our own, and with Miga singing, the place was always crowded. For a while, I continued playing the piano, just mood music between her performances. But then I stopped playing altogether, and let Miga do all the entertaining. You never saw a place so jammed, night after night, the same faces, everyone hypnotized, the money pouring in. I believe every male in that area of Earth was in love with her. I was probably the only man who was not. While she was singing, and making me wealthy, I would usually be off somewhere with one female or another. If Miga ever knew this, she never said a word.

"Whenever we two were alone, I would talk to her about Venus gipsy magic. I was obsessed with the idea of living forever. I remember the night she finally admitted her age, and confessed that if she wanted to, she could give me the same living immortality. I argued in favor of this for hours, while Miga, without quarrelling at all, gently and quietly resisted. She made only one remark I could actually attack. 'Gipsy minds,' she said, 'are equipped for the endless centuries. Gipsy culture is ancient, and the emotions are without time. We are born without age, and therefor the passing of ages

means nothing. For you, it would be very different.' It was the only indication she ever gave of knowing my inadequacies. I immediately accused her of thinking herself superior. 'It is not superiority,' she answered, 'only a difference between us.'

"Anyway, the quarrel continued for months. It was Miga's idea that she wanted to make herself the same as I. She wanted us to live together, grow old and die together. Now that she had accepted a mate, you see, Miga was fulfilled and no longer desired to wander through the centuries. My answer to this was that I wanted to stay young with her for many years, so that I might enjoy her youth and beauty and love for longer than my normal time. She admitted that even if she changed me, when the pressure of too many years became more than I could bear, she alone in the Universe would be able to change me back. 'All right,' I said, 'then give me this small thing I ask. And when the time comes, we will still be able to grow old and die together.' In the end, of course, I prevailed."

The Earthman began to laugh. "In the end," he said, "I prevailed."

THE Martian barmaid watched him nervously. "She performed magic on you?"

"It wasn't exactly magic," he said. "I thought it would be, but it wasn't. One night, as I lay in bed, she began the change. First, she injected her blood into me. That part I remember most clearly. My body told me it was blood alien to mine. I could feel it move through my veins. A strange warmth came over me, and then a sensation of almost unbearable pleasure, the most exquisite pleasure I have ever experienced. And then I slept.

"When I awakened, my body was pocked and ugly with needle marks. Wherever I possessed a gland, some fluid or substance had been injected. I was very weak and unable to rise. Miga nursed me for a full month. She gave me no food, though I requested it, only some strange liquid which she had prepared. At the end of the month, I was strong again. She told me the change was complete, but I was no different from before."

"Her magic didn't work," said the barmaid.

"That was what I thought. Until one night, at the cafe, a fight developed between an Earthman and a Martian. When I tried to separate them, the Earth one turned on me. He was wild with drink and anger, and plunged a knife into my stomach. There was some slight pain, but nothing more. When I removed my shirt, there was not even a scar to indicate where the knife had entered me. In one brief instant, my tissues had repaired themselves."

"That sounds impossible." said the barmaid.

The Earthman drained his glass and then smashed it on the table. With one jagged piece, he cut great, gaping wounds on his wrist and forearm. The barmaid leaped up in alarm. There was a brief spurt of blood from the Earthman's arm, and then, as the barmaid watched in amazement, the human tissues knitted themselves. "I could cut off parts of myself," he said "I have done it. My cells immediately multiply and replace the part. It's a constant process of rebirth. I'm indestructible. I can't even get drunk. My body won't permit it."

"It's a triek," said the barmaid, no longer alarmed. rejoining him at the table. "Just a trick."

"The blood on the table is no trick. I apologize for that"

"If you can't get drunk," she said, "why do you bother drinking?"

"If I pour it down fast enough, it burns my throat, and that's enjoyable."

The barmaid giggled again. "You are a card," she said.

"Yes, I'm a card. Do you want to hear the rest of my story?"

"If it's not too long," she said. "The proprietor will be here any second, and he mustn't find me not working."

"It's eight-hundred years long," said the Earthman. "And, personally, I have all the time in the Universe. But for you I'll abreviate it."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said. "Now, let's see. Oh yes. Miga. Well, I stayed with her for three more years, until we had amassed a great fortune. And then I left her. I simply took every cent I could lay hands on, and walked out without a word. The way I figured it, as long as she could sing, Miga wouldn't need the money, while all I could do was play the piano.

"I booked passage on a liner to Mars. It was my first voyage, and very exciting. I planned a glorious future for myself. A thousand galaxies were ahead of me, and I would visit them all. I was a fantastic fool. How can you plan a future which is endless?

"Miga, of course, was correct about my mind. It's not adequate for a man who is going to live forever. I doubt that any mind would be. I have now visited every known and reachable star and planet. They all look alike. I've read libraries of books, and you can't imagine the boredom. Once, just to pass time, I memorized one of the ancient religious bibles; it took me only twelve years, an instant of time in my life. I have learned every known language, and many which are no longer spoken. I've studied a dozen sciences, but once again here my mind enters the picture. It's just not academically turned, and even if it were,

I would never master a science. It's a mediocre mind, and time will never change that."

As he spoke, the Earthman grew very sad. "I have no talent or genius to which I can devote myself. And even if I did, how long could the devotion last? A hundred, two hundred years? A mere snap of the fingers. I've tried every known drug, and combinations of them all. The harmful ones have no effect, and the others are effective only briefly. It would be wonderful to live in a perpetually drugged world of dreams, but these self-repairing cells of mine will not permit it. I have known a hundred thousand women, of every description, and they are even less than the drugs. I'm incapable of love, and if I were, how long could it last? Fifty or a hundred years, while the woman evolved into a hag and finally died. No, there is nothing for me in this perpetual life. I discovered that only three hundred years after I left Miga.

"I returned to Earth, to the site of the cafe we had owned. She was gone, of course, and there were no people old enough to remember her. That was the beginning of the search —five long centuries. I've gone to doctors and scientists, and even the gipsies themselves on Venus. No one but Miga can set me free. You might think that in five hundred years I would have found her. But she's a gipsy and a wanderer and there are a thousand galaxies to search. It's odd, but the search itself is all I have left in this infinite life of mine."

THE Earthman paused thoughtfully. "And that's the story," he said at last. "Now you know why I must find Miga. Not because I'm a policeman, or because of love. Only to have her kill me. It's funny, though. When I find her this time. I think perhaps I might actually love her. She'll change me back, and change herself, and we'll grow old and die together. She'll do it for me. I know she will. She's a Venus gipsy, and I'm her only man."

The barmaid leaped up suddenly from the table and started across the room. "The proprietor is here," she whispered nervously.

The Earthman glanced toward the tavern door. A fat, purple Martian was entering the cafe. The Earthman arose expectantly, and said in a loud voice: "Are you the proprietor? I've waited three hours for you to come."

The stout Martian approached. "I always come at this hour," he said. "May I help you, sir?" His accent was very bad.

Speaking a Martian language now, the Earthman invited the proprietor to drink with him. They sat together at the table, and the Earthman described Miga. The barmaid hovered nearby, listening.

"I remember her well," said the fat Martian, when the Earthman had finished speaking. "Yes, Miga was her name. It was, let's see, ten, per-

haps twelve years ago. A very sad story."

"Sad? What do you mean?"

"It was a night like this," said the Martian. "I remember it. She came here to the cafe to sing. A beautiful girl, gold as the Martian sun, but very unhappy. She sang those wild gipsy songs, and everyone in this little town came to hear her. She sang, and then left the cafe, as they always do. I thought that was the end, but the next night she returned. I was delighted. She returned here every night for a month. Can you imagine that?

"She was a strange girl, and very unhappy. One evening I asked her why she was so sad, and she did what no Venusian has ever done, confided in me. She was in love with an Earthman, she said, and he had deserted her. They only mate once, you know, those Venus gipsies. Anyway, she came night after night. She sang, and then sat alone at a table, drinking an unknown liquor which she brought here herself. One night, I noticed strange marks on her throat, needle marks, I thought. I decided she was taking drugs. She was a strange one. She stayed exactly a month, and then came to me and said goodbye. That, too, was odd, since no gipsy ever says farewell. She appeared wan and tired, and I asked her if she needed help. She said nothing to that, simply left the cafe. And the following morning we found her, lying dead on the street outside. There were knife wounds, inflicted by her own hand. And they say the Venus gipsies live forever. It's obviously just a myth."

The Earthman arose now, as though in a daze. "She didn't wait for me," he said. "She changed herself without me."

"She died for love of her Earthman," said the Martian proprietor. "Such a lovely girl, and so sad."

"What will I do?" said the Earthman. He looked at the fat Martian, and then the barmaid.

He started toward the door of the cafe. "What will I do?" he said again, this time as though to himself.

He left the tavern and disappeared in the infinitely black Martian night.

—— C. M. Webster

Dream Drink

By DON L. JOHNSON

I can see the bartender is from some planet I never land on, which must be very far away indeed. I visit every world in a dozen solar systems in my time but never before do I run into a centipede with twelve tentacles. I tell myself he is just the —uh man for this job as he only uses four of them to stand on while the other eight all mix drinks at the same time.

I watch him with some fascination at first but a dry feeling in my throat finally brings to mind the fact that I am still thirsty. I wait 'til I think the top eye is looking my way and then I beckon him over. He bows, I think, and waits for me to order. "Say, Mac," I ask in a half whisper, "You got anything special?"

For a second I think he does not hear me, then he spouts off the tourist drinks in alphabetical order. If I listen to all of them it takes me three days to get to my drinks. He even mentions aqua which I understand gives the Procyonites a large charge.

I stop him with a wave of my hand. "I try all of them when I am sixteen," I tell him. "Now I am a man, I want a man's drink, catch? I am in the merchant marine if you do not notice up to now."

He catches all right. First he looks over each shoulder, then back at me. He leans toward me and lays his two top tentacles on the bar. "I suppose you think that in your day you drink everything, hm? Do you ever try a poison known as visk?"

"You mean whiskey? Look, Bub, I am from Terra. I drink whiskey with every meal and I do not like it. The alcohol is too much like water."

He surveys me scornfully for a minute. "Who says anything about whiskey? Do I ask fifteen hundred greenies for a shot of whiskey? If I do I am out of business tomorrow. I refer to visk. It is outlawed from Mars to Arcturus. However, I can find you a snort for, say, twelve hundred greenies."

"Sounds good," I say, "Do I hear you mention the price as being eight hundred greenies?" This being a game you play with all bartenders.

"No, you do not," he answers coldly. "As I recall I say a thousand and I break absolutely even."

"Nine hundred?"

"Nine fifty and it is yours. I do not know how I can make enough to even bribe the customs on the next load."

"That is for you to worry about. Tell me about this visk. Why is it so high-priced?"

"Well," he tells me, "You have dreams, beautiful dreams. They are so real that a Martian, from your system I believe, even brings a female dream back with him."

"Who wants a female Martian," I ask. "They look like lizards."

"No, no, you misunderstand me. Anyone who takes visk dreams in terms of his own ideals. What are the females from earth? Wiman? Women? You dream of your favorite planet and beautiful women. Ready?"

I tell him I am and he leads me over to a little closet with only a chair and a light in it. The chair has straps to hold the victim while he "enjoys" his drink. It is quite a common set-up around this part of the system. I sit in the chair while he ties me down. When he finishes he reaches into my hip pocket and calmly extracts my wallet. "I have to have the geets in advance," he growls.

When he finishes with this little detail he hauls out an atomizer and gives me a quick squirt in the face. The stuff works fast. A little guy about a foot high appears in the air in front of me. He hands me a wicked grin and then bongs me with a sledge hammer. That is all I know for some time.

IT is hot, blistering hot. Am I a fly on some giant stove? No, the heat seems to come from above. I open my eyes and see that I am face down on a wooden raft. A scorching green sun burns down at me. How do I happen to be on a raft? I cannot recall my past. The word "amnesia" floats around in my mind but seems to have no significance. I look around for something to shield myself from the sun. The only things I see besides the raft and myself are a million miles of reddish water and, on the raft, a ten-foot pole. I can take a hint as well as the next guy. I shove the pole down into the water

and find it's only seven feet deep.

For months, it seems, I pole my raft around this landless ball. I am hungry when I first wake up and I get nothing but hungrier as time goes on, unless it is sunburned. I am burnt black. Oh, I have adventure all right. I am now an authority on storms, waves, water and such. But all this time I pole my raft, I wonder who am I?

This wonder finally pays off. I remember the visk, the bartender and all. I even remember he forgets to put my wallet back in my pocket. Oh, Arcus, if I ever see civilization again, tentacles or no tentacles, one bartender suffers for this.

I find it does no good to get mad right now. I go back to my pole. I must work like this for a couple hours when I hear a splash behind me. I look around just in time to see a mermaid sink into the waves with definitely a sneer on her face.

I know why she sneers. I am down to ninety-five pounds, covered with cracked skin from the sun, bloodshot eyes, etc. Briefly, I am a wreck. But on the other hand, in dreams the women don't care what you look like. This is no way for her to act. "Hey, come back," I croak. "You cannot let me suffer like this, can you?" Apparently she can, as she does not show up again.

Years (?) later, I look over my shoulder for some reason and see an island. Well, well. I go back to my pole. ISLAND? I go crazy. I even forget my pole for a minute to look at this little piece of land. It is beautiful. Red palm trees with yellow trunks. Purple sand. Of course, I am out in the South Pacific on earth. This is where the dream starts.

Never before does anything look so good. The hell with the women, just let me set foot on good old terra firma. "Easy boy," I tell myself, "You are insane. Why not set foot on both? I mean—." Oh well, you get the idea.

From here on, I think, I am in complete control of the situation. I am back in familiar territory. My arrival on a raft I attribute to eagerness to imbibe the visk. I leave out too many details when I plan this trip. I can't blame anybody, even myself. I am still a novice at this dream business.

Gradually the palm trees separate from a group to take the shape of individuals, but now that I have all my marbles again, I start to think of other shapes. Where is the reception committee? They must hide someplace and wait for me to land. I fairly fly as I wade through the shallow water and up onto the beach. "Yoo hoo, girls, here I am."

I do not have long to wait for my answer. I am paralyzed by a roar that shakes the ground. No woman I ever listen to sounds like that. I am still frozen as the voice rushes out to greet me. The welcome mat appears to be a row of large, vicious teeth in the face of the original

B. E. M. Six legs push the mat rapidly toward me. From somewhere I get the impression that he is hungry. Maybe it is the molten liquid that drips from his fangs. I think it over for a split second. How can he be anything else but hungry? The only food on the globe is a mermaid and myself.

But I do not intend to make a sacrifice of myself. Better to die on a raft than in a stomach, I always say. If he is so hungry let him hunt up the mermaid. With that I come to life and make a dash for the raft. I feel the monster's hot breath almost on my heels. And when I say hot breath, I do not mean figuratively. Blue flames shoot from his nostrils. I finally make it to the raft but I have no time to pat myself on the back. My little friend can swim almost as fast as he can run.

Instead, I grab my pole and pat him gently on the head a few times. This seems to slow him down a little. In between pats, I pole like I am in a race. Finally old Brutus gets tired and heads back to his island. I beat out the flames where he breathes on my raft and settle down for a very necessary rest.

THE next scene is very familiar. The same green sun still burns me to a crisp as I sit and think I am too young to die. I am only a hundred and ninety-four; just a youth.

It takes me some time to notice that the sun seems to grow somewhat dimmer. In fact, I can hardly see. The raft appears to turn gradually into rock. No doubt I am delirious. Maybe it is better if I move around a little. I sit up. Now that my eyes are more used to the darkness, I can see that something is different. I am not on my raft anymore. I sit in an alley. Although no rain falls, water drips from me in large quantities.

I go through this same thing many times in the past so I know the bartender dumps a bucket of water on me to wake me up. This act ends his obligation to me and, as his floor space is very valuable, he drags me out into the alley.

I expect any second to feel my head split open. I even try a short groan, but as minutes go by and nothing happens, I realize that for once I escape my just desserts. My wallet is still in my pocket which leads me to think the bartender is maybe just an apprentice.

Well, all is well that ends well. I stand up and head down the alley toward the bright lights. At first I do not notice that I carry what seems to be a piece of wood. It looks familiar somehow and I hold it up toward the light to examine it closer. It is a small round stick. One end is water-logged and the other has ten little notches as if some midget grabs it and gives a good squeeze. It is about six inches long.

— Don L. Johnson

Keyhole

By MARION Z. BRADLEY

**She wasn't just an ordinary pick-up —
She'd come back from the future to find him**

"TABLE for two, Doctor?"

Jim Landers started to rap out a surprised negative. What had gotten into the waiter? Jim ate six days a week in this restaurant, and always alone. But the waiter was already half-way down the row of little booths, and Jim felt the girl's soft hand close on his arm. She was walking beside him, confidently, just as if she'd been at his side all the way from the office, and had only hung back for a second to get something from her purse. Only she didn't have a purse. That was the first thing Jim noticed; no purse, none of the doodads women wore or carried. That —and a certain stray something in her voice as she said in an undertone, "Please—I want to talk to you." This wasn't a pick-up.

So Jim shrugged and slid into the seat of the booth, and watched the girl do the same; awkwardly, he thought, for all the world as if she'd never seen a booth bench before. A momentary annoyance touched his mind; he liked women who moved gracefully. Then he remembered that he didn't know this girl from Adam's mother-in-law, and how she moved was nothing to *him*. But if it was a confidence game of some sort, the girl had a new approach, all right. He admitted to himself that no con-woman in her right mind would approach a man while wearing a faded, baggy old pink sweater and a bundled-up hairnet.

The waiter brought icewater and menu sheets; Jim picked his up, watching the girl over the top. For the first time he noticed that she was wearing, under the old pink sweater, a uniform like—well—like the ones the lab assistants wore. There was something familiar, but he couldn't place it. She certainly wasn't one of his nurses, and if she'd ever been inside the place, he'd never

seen her. She acted half-witted, into the bargain. She gave the menu card a bare glance, then dropped it, helplessly, not bothering to study it.

"Western egg sandwich, french fries, black coffee," Jim said automatically, glancing sidewise at the girl. She gave her head a confused little shake. "Oh — the same, please—" and made a small puzzled gesture with her hands at the menu. The waiter repeated the order smoothly and moved away, and Jim Landers leaned across the table.

"Okay, young lady," he said crisply, "what's the idea?"

The girl across the table straightened up. The pink sweater seemed to fall into smoother lines, neat and shapely; she made a single swift tidying gesture that did strange things to the tangled hair. The empty, blank face suddenly had intelligence and driving personality behind it, wholly irreconcilable with his first impression of dismay and bewilderment. She smiled winningly.

"I'm very sorry, Doctor," she said, and her voice had a lovely resonance, less an accent than an intonation; not foreign, but very different from the normal girl's voice. "I suppose you will be thinking all kinds of bad things of me. But there was absolutely no other way to *contact* you. After all, I couldn't exactly speak to you at the laboratory."

Actually, it was the way she pro-

nounced laboratory—with a deep broad accent on the final "o" and a dark emphasis that gave her voice a resonance less contralto than baritone—that made Landers decide to listen. She didn't stop for him to decide, of course. She was talking steadily through his decision. "You *are* Dr. Landers, I hope?"

"I am Dr. James Thurman Landers, M.D.," Jim confirmed tartly, "If you wanted Dr. Roy Landers, he's out of town, and if you wanted Dr. Warner Landers, my father is in his office waiting for me to go back so he can go to lunch."

The girl frowned. "Don't be sarcasmic—*sarcastical!*" she snapped. "The book said Dr. James. That's you?"

"That's me. What book?" Jim stared. "What do you want?"

ANNOYANCE gave emphasis to the queer resonance in the girl's voice. "I am trying to tell you, if you will let me."

Jim leaned back automatically tugging a cigarette from his pocket. "Oh, go ahead. If it's a joke, I'll bite. But first, tell me who you are. You're wearing one of our uniforms, but I'll swear you don't work for us."

"Well, I do and I don't," said the girl with a sort of sly amusement. "*She*—this body I borrowed—is your father's assistant, Nancy Clarke. When I finish, she won't know what's happened—so don't ask her questions. I had to do a lot of figuring to find a body matched with a mind I could use." Her voice had recovered poise again, and she spoke carefully, choosing her words and pronouncing them accurately. "I did it all at long range, of course. I can only stay in this body for a short time, but I should get you straight. My name is Neva Corridi; I'm a—" the strange accent got into her voice again and she groped for a word. "Well, a scanner. A time-band scanner. I came here from what you probably call—" Neva smiled, a deprecating small smile, "the future. People in your epoch still call time a line, don't they? That's right; Hansen's ellipse wasn't discovered till 1973, was it. Oh, I forgot, you wouldn't know." Again the smile. "I really mustn't digress this way. As I say, it's important."

Well! thought Jim Landers in staring incredulity. Of all the fantastic, improbable yarns—this Nancy, or Neva, or whatever she called herself, certainly took the top prize! He slipped the forgotten cigarette between his lips, held out the pack toward the girl, too stunned by her improbable words to realize what he was doing. "Smoke?" he asked stupidly.

Her small nose wrinkled in fastidious disgust. "No, thank you," she said very primly, and as Jim touched his lighter, her eyes followed the movements with avid, fascinated curiosity. Jim frowned. He didn't believe a word the girl was saying,

and yet she certainly acted odd. It didn't seem to be acting, either. He'd swear that mixture of disgust, curiosity and fascination was genuine.

And so he said "Well, go on."

With an effort, Neva jerked her attention from the lighted cigarette between the man's lips. "I'm sorry," she said, "I really have a lot to say, and not much time."

The waiter dumped sandwiches, french fries and coffee in orderly confusion on the table, and departed to deal with the rest of the noon rush. Neva went on with barely a break "I have to make sure. This *is* August 12, 1952, isn't it?"

"It is," said Jim dryly, with a glance at his wrist watch, "And exactly twelve-thirteen, which gives me just seventeen minutes to gulp this lunch and get back to the lab. So if you want to talk, shoot. I'm going to eat." His voice would have turned litmus paper pink in record time. It had that effect on the girl's face. She stared resentfully at him while he picked up half a sandwich; then gave a minute shrug.

"Oh, very well. I'll be brief. I come from a year you'd call 3874 A.D. I hold a highly technical post in the Division of Advanced Temporifics. My job is to follow certain trends into the past, to discover their origin and—where necessary—to stimulate or eliminate them. Oh, not single-handed, of course. I'm just the—you'd call it a "leg man", I think. I try to make people alter the trends without my interference." She paused. "Dr. Landers; at approximately two-twenty post meridian this day, you will discover test tube protoplasm."

"Wha-a-t?"

A fragment of sandwich went chokingly down Jim Landers' Sunday throat. He gulped and spluttered black coffee on his collar and made futile, furious mopping-up motions with his napkin.

It wasn't possible! Even his father didn't know that he, Jim, was pursuing that wildest and most elusive of biochemical dreams. He kept his notes in a locked drawer; the chance of an assistant in the outer office seeing them was roughly one in ten thousand; the chances of her understanding them considerably less. It wasn't—his sandwich dropped, unneeded, into his immaculate lap.

"How in *hell,*" he demanded savagely, "did you find *that* out?"

"Because it happened," the girl said almost casually. "I read about it in the *Dhia Scientia*—and a few other places." There was not a shred of doubt in her voice. "It happened one thousand, nine hundred and twenty-nine years, four months, three days, four hours and seven minutes before the time I left. In approximately two hours from the time you are in, Dr. Landers, you will discover that secret. That's what I came about." She paused for an appreciable space. "I wish I knew how to tell you this—you've got to give up

the discovery. You mustn't discover it. When it happens, you must tear up your notes, destroy it, and forget it—forget, yourself, how and why you did it. That's my assignment; to make sure." Her resonant voice was silent.

JIM Landers gulped a swallow of scalding coffee. He set the cup down and stared blankly at the girl.

"It's nice to know that," he said in a carefully controlled voice, "nice to know I'll find it, and nice to know what I've got to do with it when I find it. It was sweet of you to tell me. Now will you tell me how the hell you got hold of—"

The girl bit her lip. "You don't believe me," she accused. "Well, I'm used to that. But when you find it, this afternoon, will you please believe that I know what I'm talking about?"

"When I find it, yes." Jim Landers took another sip of coffee; pushed it back. "As a matter of fact, I'm months or years away from that discovery. I couldn't conceivably find it this afternoon. But if and when I do, I'll keep you in mind. Now what's all this monkey business about not giving it out?"

The girl shook her head angrily. "I haven't much time," she snapped. "I came back on a short-span band, and if I don't have time to decontrol properly, I'll damage the host! Oh well—in a word, your discovery's being misused. It started out in—well, history. People with amputated limbs could have them regrown perfectly. Then they made simple life-forms and intelligence—oh, it was quite a discovery." She smiled a little ironic smile. "The Landers effect. But your biology laid the groundwork for more. And more. Mutated bacteria. Viruses. Even beasts. You wouldn't know my world, Dr. Landers. Biology's gone crazy. To put it simply, you've laid the groundwork for the ruin of the whole human race, and most of the nonhuman ones." She paused a long minute; then, meeting Jim's rising glance, she nodded. "You're right. I'm not human. Not—quite."

While Jim was trying to digest that, she asked sharply "What time is it?" He told her and she went on, talking fast. Landers had forgotten his lunch, in fascinated staring at the girl; at her quick lips forming the words, rapid words of those who are racing against inelastic time. As she spoke, a picture formed in his mind, a picture of a world where men fought an endless struggle against malignant death from the air, or rather, malignant *life;* A world where the cancer death-rate was one in three, a world overrun by life-forms incredible to his imagination. A world of strange mutations moving restlessly in unfamiliar protoplasm, of deathless dissolution and lifeless living—it convinced him, against his will. It was incredible

hogwash, of course. It could never happen. His well-trained mind revolted. Still—

"We are righting the world," the girl said. "But you have one of the major key-work developments. We've cleared enough debris—debris of time that is—time-circle locks—so we can get to you. Your ellipse isn't occluded."

"My which isn't what?"

"Oh, never mind." Neva made a depreciatory gesture. "I'm sorry. Layman's language—I know this is your first contact with time, Dr. Landers. But I know you, and it's hard to realize you can only remember one way." She smiled a little shyly. "Subjectively—on my own ellipse, that is — I worked with you almost three cycles ago, in 1964. But that's still twelve years in the—er—future for you. I shouldn't presume on—er—friendship." The girl actually seemed embarrassed.

"What the devil—"

Neva sighed impatiently. "I keep forgetting. In 1964 we worked together with some biochemical insecticides. It was my first assignment and I thought you were very nice. But then, you were older. Now you're still a stupid *young*—" she stopped, abruptly.

"It's a poor sort of memory that only 'works one way,'" quoted Jim Landers. "Unfortunately, that's the sort mine is."

"And this is all beside the point." Neva's resonant voice was sharp. "You've got to co-operate with us, or else."

The covert threat in her words made Jim Landers frown angrily. He lifted his cold coffee-cup. "Look here," he demanded, "Every discovery's been misused, from the discovery of fire right on down. Are you going to eliminate them all?"

"No, of course not." The girl sounded tired. "Some are necessary to human progress. Some are all right if discovered by the right people. Others are deadly—even if discovered by a genuine saint. So we expedite some—switch others from a dishonest to an honest research worker—and suppress the deadly ones. The regressive ones, that is. They—" the soft voice held gray iron, "*will* be eliminated."

Jim said shortly "If according to you I've given it out already, how can you stop me now?"

THE girl gave a short, sharp exclamation, the sense of which was lost on Landers. "I certainly don't have time to explain the whole network of elementary Temporifics!" she snapped. "If you don't take my word for it, and eliminate your discovery, we'll have to do it for you. But if you lived, you'd re-discover it, so it might—I say, might—mean eliminating you too. And even that is dangerous, because it would mean maximum interference. Anyhow, if you died mysteriously—" she spoke very calmly, "Someone would be sure

to find out what you'd been working on. We'd have it all to do over. Not to mention the fact that I'd disrupt my own ellipse." She reached out swiftly; lifted Jim's wrist; Jim made a move of protest, but she only glanced swiftly at the face of his watch. She said hurriedly "When you find it, you'll know I was telling the truth. Do as I say; destroy it. My time's up." She rose, precipitately, stumbling against the edge of the table. "Remember!" she said, "I've got to—"

"Hey " Landers half shouted, thrusting out his hand to arrest her. "You can't run off like that Not yet You've got to tell me—"

"I *can't*!" The girl's voice held desperate haste. She jerked her arm away, whirled, and literally fled from the restaurant, leaving Jim Landers staring, half-in and half-out of his seat. He took a step after the fleeing girl—

"Don't forget your check, Doctor," the waiter's acid voice cut across his pursuit. Landers gulped, turned back. He couldn't chase the girl down the street, anyhow, and they'd seen her struggling to free herself of his hands. He picked up the checks mechanically, shoved them, with a bill, through the cashier's window. The cashier's routine words about the weather fell on deaf ears. Jim Landers was not only puzzled, but very, very angry. To run off, like that, in the middle—"Which way did the girl go?" he demanded, glaring at the cashier, "the one in the pink sweater?"

The cashier glared back.

"I wouldn't, mister," she advised icily. "This time, she might call a cop."

Jim Landers swore impotently. Of course, what else *could* they think? Not the least annoying consequence of this baffling episode would be that he'd have to find another place to eat lunch. With a wrathful stare at the cashier, he stalked into the street.

Of course, the girl was gone.

At one-twenty that afternoon, Jim Landers was frowning over a series of protein cultures when the receptionist put her head through the door.

"Uh?" he said, raising his head in brief annoyance. Office hours didn't start till three. The lab assistants in the outer laboratory were finishing routine tests. They knew he wasn't to be bothered. He jerked his head around to the cubicle at the back. "Dad—"

"I'm sorry," the woman was apologetic, "but one of the girls out here—"

"I'll take it," Dr. Warner Landers shoved aside his charts and answered the summons. Jim picked up his notebook again, frowning over the batch of spoiled cultures. The brown specks—he lifted an infinitesimal globule and smeared it on a glass slide. Something was haywire here. A mold, maybe?

Warner Landers was back in ten minutes, grinning whimsically at his son. "Busy, Jim? You know the Clarke kid in the outer office—the one I hired last month to help Nurse Whitby? The contact with my psychotics seems to be catching! She's had a mental lapse."

"Uh?" Jim grunted, half listening. "Dad, you didn't touch these cultures or move them, did you?"

"Good lord, no. Why should I? The Clarke kid—Nancy or something—she says she brings her lunch from home, and always eats it in the basement, with the others. But today she finds herself standing on the front steps of the building next door, with an egg sandwich in her hand—and she never eats eggs." The elder Dr. Landers laughed, then stopped abruptly. "Jim, what's the matter, son! You look as if you've seen a ghost!"

Jim Landers swore. He used half the plain and fancy cusswords he knew until his father's amazement made him break the litany in two. "Dad, I'm sorry. I just—I thought—oh, hell. Sometime—listen. are you absolutely sure you didn't touch these cultures? By accident, maybe? Didn't let air get near them, or let one of the girls from the outer lab in here?"

"I said, *no,* Jim What's got into you?" his father demanded, justifiably annoyed. Jim's shoulders dropped.

"Let it go. I'm sorry."

But his hands shook as he sterilized another needle and brought it to the stained surface of the petri dish.

At two-twenty, Jim Landers uncovered his fourth dish and it—moved. A jellylike brown glob, amorphous and amoebic, it moved-wriggled—thrust out a tentative, half-formed pseudopod and lapsed into vegetable quiescence again. But it *had* moved—it lived!

By God, he'd *done* it!

Then that girl—

JIM Landers found that he was shaking. He thumbed the catch on his lighter, missed it again and again, and finally had to sit down, weakly, sweat running cold from his armpits. He looked confusedly at his watch. Two-twenty-three. He thought, idiotically, that the girl had been three minutes off on her time. And wondered what difference, if any, that made.

Now what was he going to do?

Jim had daydreamed of how he might find that biologist's Shangri-La. He thought that he should feel exultant. But he didn't. He hadn't the slightest impulse to shout "Eureka" and run down the street in his white coat.

In plain words, Jim Landers was scared.

He moved slowly to the table, stubbing out his cigarette, with infinite care lifting the precious dish to the workbench. His notes, lying near the microscope, caught his eye.

But the notes had been 'way off the beam. It had been an accident, the discovery; some unforeseen and unforeseeable condition, that he must test with that precious little hunk of living brown jelly in the petri dish. First, though, to insure himself against danger from Neva—

(But damn it, suppose the girl *had* been right?)

All discoveries were misused. Knowledge was knowledge, and should exist for its own sake, Jim thought sternly, realizing his own argument as the grossest rationalization. At the same time—he alone, could never decide. It was too much.

He rose and stumbled uncertainly toward the cubicle where his father was still working. And found, to his intense self-disgust, that he had to swallow before he could speak.

"Dad," he said finally, through dry lips, "will you come out here for a minute? I want to show you something."

Dr. Landers rose, his eyebrows lifted. "Sure, Jim. What's up?" He followed his son into the open space by the bench; then halted, looking up, Jim followed his glance.

The girl Nancy Clarke was standing in the door of the lab.

Dr. Warner Landers smiled agreeably at the girl. "What's the matter, Nancy? Not feeling any better? You can leave early if you want to. Just tell Nurse Whitby I said so."

"It is not that," said the girl softly, and the resonant tones made Jim look up sharply. It was not the Clarke girl — not the little college assistant — there in the doorway, but that unknown quantity, Neva.

"I came to see Doctor Jim," the voice said, and the girl from the future came into the room, moving inexorably and with something of menace toward the young doctor. She was talking rapidly, warily, as if afraid he would stop her.

"Listen to me. Did you make up your mind? I was sorry to run away, but you saw what happened to the girl. I know what you've done. I came back on a short ellipse to find out—you have to let me know—"

"Look here," said Jim, and started toward the girl purposefully. She dodged away from his out-thrust arms, grabbed up the petri dish, and over Jim's strangled cry, ran across the laboratory to the sink and twisted a faucet. A stream of scalding water gurgled forth — ran over the dish — flooded it, and the piece of wriggling brown jelly went with it, disintegrating under the heat and force of the water, falling in a thin brown stream — and was gone. Jim Landers let out a gasping, impotent sigh that was almost a sob.

"Miss Clarke!" his father shouted, starting for the girl angrily.

But Nancy Clarke's face had collapsed, turned dead white, and the purposeful, alive shining was gone. She looked sick and dazed and pitiful. "Oh, Doctor Jim," she wept incoherently, her face swollen and

terrified, "I don't know what I'm doing — I think I'm going crazy — I must be — that's the second time today — I can't remember—" her broken voice trailed off into heart-breaking sobs of fright and misery.

JIM Landers stared unbelieving at the empty petri dish, lying foolishly in the metal sink. Then, with a fatalistic shrug, he reached for his useless notes and shredded them carefully into the wastebasket. He went to the whimpering girl and put an arm consolingly around her shoulders.

"It's all right, Nancy," he said. "We all have funny spells. I think you'd better go on home, and don't come to work tomorrow unless you're feeling better. And don't worry about the petri dish. It was only some spoiled cultures that I was going to throw away."

When the girl, still sobbing and protesting that she'd never acted like this before, had gone, Dr. Warner Landers turned to Jim with a quizzical air of interrogation. "This is quite a day, isn't it? What was it you were going to show me, before this racket?"

"Nothing," said Jim Landers. "Nothing at all, Dad. I guess I had a funny spell on, too."

He carefully covered his microscope, setting it back on the shelf, and shrugged out of his lab coat. His patients were probably in the waiting room already, and he would have to curb the million questions on his tongue and in his mind. Besides, there was no one — now — who could explain his peep through the keyhole into the future.

But Neva had said she'd be around in 1964.

By then, he might have his questions in order.

— MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

Teacher's Pet

By J. T. OLIVER

GEORGE SIMMS, principal of Oakmont Grammar School, looked up in annoyance as Miss Jenkins, the sixth grade teacher, burst into his private office without knocking.

"Yes, Miss Jenkins?"

She fidgeted, playing with a stubby yellow pencil she carried. "I'm sorry to interrupt you like this, Mr. Simms, but I'm having trouble with that little Roberts boy who came in this morning. He's simply an *impossible* liar."

"Now Miss Jenkins, you know a child his age quite often tells those wild tales just for fun—they don't even realize it is wrong."

"I know, but this is *different*," she voluntarily, and then insists that they are true. He makes me nervous, Mr. protested. "He tells these lies quite Simms—I wish you'd move him out of my room."

Miss Jenkins had a habit of encountering a crisis of some kind nearly every day, but she never told him about it until she had heroicly solved the problem, laid down the law and established order. If she was too upset to take care of it herself, there must be something badly wrong.

Simms invited the teacher to be seated. He leaned back in his chair and said, soothingly, "Now just tell me what it's all about, and I'll see what I can do."

"Well," said Miss Jenkins, taking the chair and primly pulling down

her skirt, "he tells lies. Wild, unbelievable lies, without a shred of truth. He's got half the children believing him, and the other half scared.

"He claims he is a robot, and was built in a laboratory, where he lived until he came to Oakmont. Naturally, *I* don't believe him, but—"

"Is that all, Miss Jenkins? Sounds like he's been reading too many comic books."

The teacher shook her pretty head in protest. "That's what I thought, too, but he says he has never *seen* a comic book."

A twelve year old boy who has never seen a comic book is definitely a problem of some kind, Simms decided. Maybe there *was* something wrong with the boy! At any rate, it would be interesting to talk to him.

"Suppose you have him come in here," he said. "I'll have a talk with him."

Obviously relieved to shift the problem onto higher brass, Miss Jenkins hurriedly left the office, bubbling over with thanks.

Simms gazed appreciatively after her until she closed the office door behind her. Then, remembering his duties, he sat upright in his chair, picked up a book, and assumed what he thought was a properly schoolmasterish pose.

SHORTLY the door opened and in came Johnny Roberts; boldly, not at all like a guilty youngster who has been summoned to the ogre's den. "The teacher said you wanted to see me, Mr. Simms."

"Yes. Sit down there, Johnny. I'll take care of you in a minute."

Simms watched the boy sit down and then pretended to work on a scholastic record book he had finished checking the day before. Give 'em the old psychological treatment, was his belief. Get them scared and nervous and they'll come clean. But as he watched Johnny Roberts, Simms knew the treatment wasn't working. Johnny simply refused to behave like an ordinary child. He sat still and composed, not at all nervous.

Johnny looked okay, Simms reluctantly decided. Maybe a little small for his age, and a lot too clean, but otherwise he was no different from hundreds of other boys in the school. He was dressed exactly the same as ninety-percent of them, had the same crew-cut hair, and Simms got the uneasy impression that the boy was actually *trying* to appear normal.

"Well, Johnny," he said at last, "Miss Jenkins tells me she has been having some trouble with you."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Simms."

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing we can't straighten out, young man, if you'll just make up your mind to cooperate with us."

"Yes, sir."

Yes, sir—not yessir.

"Mmm," said Simms, hunting words. Then, finally, "Miss Jenkins says you've been telling some awful lies since you came in this morning. Now we don't want to be unreasonable about this thing, Johnny, but we can't let you tell such things. We've all got to be truthful, like little George Washington."

"George Washington?"

Simms ignored the question. "Johnny, let's cut out this nonsense. Why have you been telling the other children such wild tales?"

Johnny looked at him with wide, innocent eyes. "Because I really *am* a robot."

"That's enough, Johnny. I'm going to give you a good spanking and then you can go back to your room and tell the truth."

Johnny sat still and said nothing until Simms took the paddle from his desk and started toward him. Then he got up, backed toward the door, and looked the principal directly in the eye.

Simms returned his gaze for a moment, then paused and stared foolishly at the paddle. He put it back in the desk, turned to the boy and said, "Alright, Johnny—you can go back to your room now."

"Thank you, sir," said Johnny.

Ten minutes later George Simms sat stiffly upright in his swival chair. "The little brat! He hypnotized me!"

He jumped out of his chair, threw open the office door, and dashed down the hall. He stopped when he got to the door marked 6, and peered through the little observation window. Johnny Roberts was at his desk, glancing through a book. Miss Jenkins was seated at her own desk at the front of the room, conducting classes. Occasionally she would glance over at Johnny Roberts, frown worriedly, and return to her job.

Simms knocked lightly on the door. Miss Jenkins opened it at once. "Oh, Mr. Simms . . . I thought—"

"Never mind, Miss Jenkins. Just tell that Roberts boy to come out here."

The teacher went back into the buzzing classroom and whispered to Johnny. The boy nodded, closed his book, and came to the door.

Simms took Johnny by the arm, not looking directly at him, and led the boy out of the building, to the parking lot back of the school. He put his captive in the back seat of his car, climbed under the wheel, and drove off toward North Highland, where the boy lived, according to the information he had given when enrolling in school. For a while they traveled in silence, Simms busy with being a careful driver, and the boy simply thoughtful.

Finally Johnny spoke. "Why are you taking me home?"

Who *said* I was taking you home?"

"Miss Jenkins said so."

A strangely amateurish lie, thought Simms, for one so accomplished at the art.

"I'm going to see your parents,

and I want you to be there. What kind of home have you got, anyway—letting you learn hypnosis? Are they vaudville performers?"

"No," said Johnny, impatiently, "it's like I told you; I have no real parents. I was built in a laboratory. I'm capable of hypnosis, limited E. S. P., and I'm vastly superior to humans in intelligence."

"Nonsense," said George Simms, savagely.

Johnny laughed.

Simms turned all his attention back to his driving. The impudence of the brat! Well, he'd show him, but good. They drove in silence until they reached Johnny's house. Simms pulled up in the empty driveway and parked.

"Get out," he told the boy.

THEY cut across the lawn toward the house, Simms several steps ahead. He wasn't taking any chances on having the kid look directly into his eyes again. It was humiliating for a man in his position to be submitted to the indignity of hypnotism, especially by a twelve year old boy who told outrageous lies.

He knocked on the door. Mrs. Roberts, a homey looking lady of about forty, attired in apron and print dress, opened the door.

She saw Johnny and said, anxiously, "Is anything wrong?"

Simms identified himself. "May I come in for a minute?"

Mrs. Roberts stood back and held the door open. Simms entered, followed by the silent Johnny. The door opened directly into the living room. At an invitation from the woman, Simms sat down on a comfortable sofa and waited.

Mrs. Roberts said to Johnny, "Go upstairs to your room. I'll talk to you later."

Obviously, thought Simms, the Roberts' are doing their best to bring the boy up right. Probably don't even know how he acts away from home.

When Johnny was out of the room and Simms again felt safe, he told Mrs. Roberts about the trouble at school, including the hypnosis and the boy's contention that he was a genuine robot, with E. S. P. and a vastly superior intelligence.

Mrs. Roberts looked quite distressed when he finished. You mean he actually volunteered the information?"

"That's hardly the word for it, Mrs. Roberts—he *boasted* about it, and was quite antagonistic at times."

"Oh, I just *knew* it," wailed Mrs. Roberts, clutching her apron worriedly.

She started toward the stairs, hurriedly, but turned and called to Simms, "Wait just a minute till I get my husband—he'll want to talk to you."

Perplexed, Simms watched the woman hurry up the stairs and run down the hall, out of sight. What's going *on* here, he wondered. Is the

whole damn family nuts? Upstairs he could hear excited voices; one was Mrs. Roberts, and the other, a man, was probably Mr. Roberts.

Soon the talk ceased and Mrs. Roberts appeared at the head of the stairs, accompanied by a neatly dressed, dignified gentleman of about fifty years.

They came down the stairs and walked over to where Simms was seated. Mrs. Roberts introduced them. "Mr. Simms, this is my husband, Professor Roberts."

Simms rose and shook hands with the professor—taken slightly aback by the title, which he hadn't expected—and then sat down again at a motion from the other man, who pulled up a chair and sat facing him. Mrs. Roberts regarded them anxiously for a moment, then went back upstairs, muttering worriedly to herself.

"My wife told me you had some trouble with Johnny," said the professor. "Please tell me about it."

Simms repeated his story.

Professor Roberts sat quietly for a moment, thinking, then he sighed resignedly, and said, "Mr. Simms, can I trust you to keep an important secret?"

"I can't promise until I hear it, Professor, but I'll keep any secret within reason."

"That's good enough. Simms, did you notice anything strange about Johnny?"

"*Strange?* My God, Professor, it isn't every day you meet a twelve year old boy who can hypnotize you in one second flat, to say nothing of his robotic delusions."

Professor Roberts laughed, and Simms wondered rather angrily what was so funny. Then the professor grew serious again. He leaned forward and said earnestly, "What would you say if I told you Johnny really *is* a robot?"

Smms started to get up and walk out. "Goodbye, Professor—that's what I'd say."

Professor Roberts smiled and gently pushed him back onto the soft. "I know how that must sound, but let me explain."

JOHNNY, said the professor, was a real humanoid robot, the first of his kind. He had been built in secret, over the past ten years, in Professor Roberts' laboratory in Atlanta. When the robot was completed, they moved to Oakmont, where nobody knew them, and passed the robot off as a recently adopted son—just in case some of his friends should hear about the boy.

He was sending Johnny to school as a publicity stunt. He wanted to establish the robot as human, and then dramatically reveal him to the public, thus obtaining much sensational publicity. If he presented him outright the public wouldn't grasp the full import of his invention—only a few scientists would be really impressed.

There were several reasons for passing the robot off as a child, he explained. It conserved material and made the job easier, minor flaws would not be so noticible, and, most important, a child-robot would be more sensational, and would appeal to the masses— especially to childless couples, who would pay fantastic prices for a robot built to their specifications.

And that was it. Professor Roberts was a brilliant man, but like everyone else, he loved money.

" . . . well, what do you think of it?" finished the professor.

"It's the damndest thing I ever heard of!" Simms exclaimed, and the professor grinned, pleased.

"But what about that hypnosis, and the E. S. P.?" Simms asked, as an afterthought.

"Defense mechanism," Professor Roberts explained. "But I'm afraid I'll have to turn it off—that's a dead giveaway."

Simms nodded agreement. "And can you fix it so he'll have to obey orders? And not tell people he is a robot? Otherwise he'll have plenty of trouble at school."

"That's simple; all I have to do is set the controls inside his head. The brain, head muscle controls, and voice box are there, too. He doesn't require food, water, or anything, though normal eating habits can be furnished, too. I built this model rather simple, because of the expense."

"Marvelous," Simms, awed.

"Will you help me keep my secret?" asked the professor. "When Johnny is revealed to the world, it will mean much publicity and money for both of us. And more money for your school, too."

George Simms tried to think it over before answering, but he was too excited. Visions of fame and fortune danced in his mind. "Yes!"

Next day George Simms called Miss Jenkins into his office. "How is the Roberts boy doing today?"

"Why, I never saw a better student," she smiled. "You wouldn't know it was the same boy. I don't know what you did to him, Mr. Simms, but it certainly helped."

Simms did not enlighten her.

The teachers were delighted with Johnny Roberts, so it was natural that the male students were not. He was too smart to suit them; he never missed a question, and he always had his homework ready. He was very quiet and obedient. He was immediately defined as a 'teacher's pet', which was about the worst insult they knew.

Despite the fact that Johnny was generally disliked by the other boys, he was a new boy, and the female members of the sixth grade were interested in him, as such. At recess one day a precocious little red-headed girl cornered him and, with much self-conscious giggling, relayed an off-color joke that was circulating among thte students. Johnny listened

attentively, but when she finished he didn't laugh.

"Whassamatter?" demanded the girl, disappointed, "Didn't you get it? Boy, you sure are dumb."

Having read a couple of books on the subject, Johnny understood perfectly, but being a machine, the joke did not sound funny at all. It was completely illogical, highly improbable, and very nearly impossible.

"I'm sorry," he said politely, "but I just don't see the point."

The little red-head, cute and innocent-looking, ran off to report the incident to her friends, whose dare she had accepted.

This caused a substantial increase in the number of students who did not care for the robot.

In the classroom it was completely different. Miss Jenkins quickly realized that Johnny Roberts was quite brilliant. She often used him as an example to the other children. "Why can't you all be as good as Johnny?" She asked that so often the phrase became an insult.

AT first Johnny did not join in the school sports. Nobody ordered him to, and Johnny did not volunteer, of course. He watched, however, and learned the games. One day, about three weeks after Johnny entered Oakmont, Simms decided to put him on the basket-ball team, just to see what would happen. The scrubs, naturally.

So the robot donned a suit and played. He was magnificent. With machine-like precision—which was only logical—he scored basket after basket. For the first time in Oakmont's history, the second team defeated the first, and Johnny scored most of the points.

The other boys wouldn't have minded that too much, except that they already hated him. So they chose to regard his playing skill as just another way of 'showing-off'—nothing more.

In the dressing room after the game some of the boys were engaged in their usual innocent pastime of peeking through a tiny crack in the wall into the next dressing room, where the girls were preparing for practice. There was much good-natured pushing to see who would get to the coveted position. first. Johnny watched them, curiously.

Finally one of the boys suggested, "Hey, let Johnny have a look—might make him human!"

They all laughed, and Johnny Roberts, the machine, wondered why. "No, thank you," he said.

Someone lewdly speculated on the possibility that Johnny was not really of the masculine gender, and they all sniggered, because it was so funny.

When they stripped for the showers they all obeyed their natural human impulses and sneaked curious looks, but whatever their fine little imaginations expected they were at once surprised, disappointed, and

somewhat envious. Inspired, perhaps, by an ironic sense of humor, Professor Roberts had generously endowed his impotent child-sized creation with lower abdomenial features of adult porportions.

The effect was quite ridiculous.

Next day during study period Miss Jenkins had to leave the room for a few minutes, but before going she gave the class her usual lecture on please-behave-while-I'm-out-of-the-room. And it had the usual effect.

When she returned unexpectedly several minutes later she found herself in the midst of an enthusiastic chalk-throwing war.

"Children!" she cried, distressed.

Her twenty-four children immediately terminated their misbehavior and tried hard to look innocent.

"I'm ashamed of you," Miss Jenkins continued. "I can't leave the room five minutes without . . . oh, I just don't know *what* to do with you."

No suggestions were volunterred.

"*Why can't you behave as well as Johnny Roberts?*"

They had expected that question, but only Johnny Roberts, who had studied a history assignment during the commotion, could have answered it. And he wasn't allowed to do so, unless asked directly. Miss Jenkins began a fruitless interrogation to determine the ringleaders in the disturbance. Finally she asked Johnny.

He told her.

Miss Jenkins was triumphant. She praised Johnny for his honesty and again held him up as an example of what all children ought to be. And she naturally meted out punishment as she, the jury, saw fit.

DON SHELDON was an intelligent boy, nice looking, easy to get along with, and fairly well behaved. He was one of the leading students in the sixth grade, but he wasn't disliked because of it—he was one of the gang. It was natural that Don should resent Johnny's presence, and feel a bit jealous, whether he admitted it to himself or not. But being a pretty good kid, it never occured to him to do anything drastic about it. He even made an effort to be especially nice to Johnny, hoping the boy would loosen up and be friends.

But after being punished, as a result of Johnny's testimony, for his part in the chalk-throwing escapade, Don did not view the situation so objectively. He had been wronged, and Johnny Roberts was going to pay for it.

On the way to school the next morning he mentioned that fact to his friend, Pete Huston. "Pete, I'm gonna beat the stuffin' out of that no-good sissy."

"Yeah," said Pete, angry because Don was angry. He was nearly fourteen, and big for his age. This was his second year in the sixth grade; Oakmont did not believe in social promotion.

They walked a little farther. Kids from their section of town walked to school, taking a short-cut through one of the city parks. Don sat down on one of the benches. Pete sat down beside him.

"What we waitin' for?" asked Pete.

"I'm gonna get that Johnny Roberts when he comes by."

"We'll get him, we sure will," echoed Pete, cheerfully.

"I'll do it," Don corrected. "You can watch."

Pete did not argue. He had great confidence in his friend.

Several minutes and several students passed.

Finally Johnny came into view, alone.

"Hey, you," Don called, getting up.

"HeHo," said Johnny. He kept walking.

"C'mere."

Johnny had to obey the order. He walked over to the other boy and said, "what do you want?"

Irked by Johnny's cool indifferent manner, Don suddenly struck out with a hard right fist and smashed Johnny in the face. The robot staggered back, lost his balance, and fell.

Pete jumped up and down, cheering.

"Get up, damn you," Don ordered, triumphantly. "Get up, and I'll kill you!"

Johnny got up. Lacking his protective hypnotic ability, he could only fight; fortunately the professor had provided him with a normal self-preservation instinct.

But the robot's rule-book boxing was no match for Don's angry assault. Once more, Don Sheldon landed a hard blow that sent Johnny reeling. He fell against a sharp corner of the park bench, ripping his shirt, and tearing open the artificial flesh of his chest. Control wires snapped, and levers were bent. The robot was helpless.

Pete knelt down to examine Johnny. He rose to his feet at once, his dumb, good-natured face excited and frightened. "He's got *works* in him!"

Don strode over and looked, still breathless from the fight.

"Lend me your knife a minute, Pete," he said calmly.

LATER that morning Professor Roberts appeared in Simms' office, with a reporter in tow. They shook hands warmly assured each other that everything was fine, and the professor introduced the reporter, Clyde Burton. Simms immediately decided that Burton did not look like a newspaperman.

"Well, today's the day," said the professor, rubbing his hands together cheerfully.

"Yep," Simms agreed, his imagination busily counting his soon-to-be-acqured fortunes. He looked at his watch. The sixth grade was having a study period at this time, followed by a history exam. "I think this will

be a good time, Professor Roberts."

Simms led them down the hall to the sixth grade room. Miss Jenkins came to the door and, in response to their request to see Johnny Roberts, said, "He didn't come to school this morning, Mr. Simms. I was about to call and see if he's sick."

Professor Roberts turned pale with anxiety. "Why, I can't understand it— I *told* him to come to school."

Miss Jenkins frowned, turned and asked her students, "Did any of you see Johnny Roberts this morning?"

Nobody had.

"Maybe he played hookey," suggested Don Sheldon, straight-faced. The other children had to giggle at the idea of Johnny Roberts, teacher's pet, doing anything so human.

Professor Roberts ran off down the hall, mumbling incoherently about calling the police, because somebody had stolen his priceless invention, and what in the world was he going to do now?

Simms, almost as anxious, followed.

The reporter said dammit and went back to the newspaper office, to report a morning wasted on a couple of crackpots.

Study period was over and the history questions were written on the blackboard. The classroom was as quiet as it ever got. Miss Jenkins sat at her desk in the front of the room, absorbed in a magazine article on child-psychology.

Pete Huston, dumbest boy in the class, thought with comradely affection of Don Sheldon, the smartest boy in the sixth grade. Not everybody would help him like Don had. Now he, Pete, would get good grades and pass every year, like the other boys. Yes, sir—Don was a fine friend.

After making sure that nobody was watching, Pete put his mouth close to the book compartment of his desk and whispered, "The first question is: Who invented the adding machine, and in what year?"

Johnny Roberts' wonderful head, standing upright on its raggedly severed neck, replied, in a pre-instructed whisper, from its dark hiding place behind the text-books, "Burroughs, 1888."

Pete wrote down the answer and casually repeated the procedure.

Don Sheldon watched, and felt justly proud of what he had done.

——J. T. Oliver

The Closet

By GAREN DRUSSAI

IT began when Polk, known as Essie, is dressed for going to gathering of people, called party. If you can call it dressed she being all wrapped around in various cloths, somewhat like pre-ancient mummies. Except, her cloths being bright color, and gathered in bunch here and there. Biggest of bunch being where she sat, makes one wonder at sanity of ancients!

Essie walk up and back in sleeproom, making great noise with dress, especially with bunch in back which shift sideways as she walk.

She call.

"Alhert! Whenever are you going to finish dressing?"

She walked to the window and carefully parted the stiff lace curtains to make sure the carriage was still there. Even the horses looked as though they were getting tired of waiting. She sniffed impatiently as she watched them stamp their hooves in the lightly falling snow.

"It won't take me long. There's plenty of time," a muffled voice protested from the hathroom. "Besides," he added, "you've been dressed all afternoon. You ought to allow me a little time!"

"But, there isn't plenty of time," she moaned. "The carriage is already waiting. And I do so hate to be late for Sophie's party!" She turned peevishly, and began again her route between the window and the closet door, her steps punctuated hy the swish of the striped taffeta bustle.

Essie turned to him as her husband entered the hedroom. Being only a bride of six months her sweet, round face turned pink when she noticed that Albert wasn't wearing a thing, not even his long knitted underwear! He seemed to be carrying those slung over his arm.

Smiling bashfully, Albert walked quickly to the closet-dressing room. "Be dressed in just a minute," he mumbled, as he opened the door and went in, shutting it behind him.

Essie reluctantly sat down in a frilly boudoir chair opposite the door, and leaned her head back, closing her eyes. After what seemed like a few minutes she glanced at the small gilt clock on a table near her chair.

She started with surprise! "Why, Albert!" sbe wailed, "I must have dozed. Good lord, Albert; why did you let me fall asleep! Now we'll never make it in time."

Running to the closet door, Essie knocked, half timidly and half outraged. "Albert, answer me! We've got to leave right this minute or we'll never get there!"

Hearing nothing, she opened the door and stalked in.

Albert wasn't there!

It was only a little room, about five feet square; clothes hung on one side, and on the other was a table, a chair, and a small window high up on the wall. It was open, but he couldn't bave got up there, she reasoned. Besides, what would have possessed him to do a silly thing like that?

With a start, she noticed his clothes, the suit he intended to wear that afternoon neatly draped over the back of the chair. And none of his other suits were missing either,

she noticed as she flipped through them. But, of course, she thought, he must be in the house. He might be down in the kitchen—. She left the thought unfinished in her mind as she scurried out of the closet, and searched every room in the house.

She found no Albert!

Then she opened the front door and ran down the steps to the still-waiting carriage. The driver insisted that he'd seen no one leave the house.

Slowly Essie walked back up the steps, went to the bedroom and stood in front of the open closet door, wondering.

POLK known as Essie have plenty of time to wonder in days and years as come. Polk known as Albert not come out of closet room! Friends of both think Albert go way—maybe to woman other than Essie. But Essie know, even though she not know how, that he be in closet; and think if she wait enough, he come out. She do strange things as years pass.

Such as she go to place called Station of Police because helpful friends insist. Description of Albert she give them be real funny. Like she say Albert be tall. Why, Albert he not tall —he only come up six feet! And she say he good looking. How you say in your slang? "He a wart!"

Then one time she go to strange female who wear more odd cloths than even Essie wear. She has even cloth wrapped round head! This person has spherical, semi-transparent object she look into with amusing intensity. She give Essie description of where Albert be. But I make laugh with myself. I know he not there. How could he be?

Yes, Essie do many confused activities. But they not get her Albert out of closet room. So she wait. Time change many things. Woman hair go from long to short. Woman attire go from long to short. But Essie, she not change much, except she get older and older, waiting.

"Excuse me, Miss?" the voice inquired timidly.

Grace parked her chewing gum in the corner of her mouth and looked up to stare at the little old lady. Good gosh, she thought, I didn't think there were any more like you around, dearie! She finally remembered to say, "Can I help you, Ma'am?"

Essie Polk twisted her hands. "Why yes, Miss," she answered chokingly. "Mr. Simmons! Do you know why he wrote to me? He wants to tear our house down!"

Grace averted her face and mumbled to herself, "Oh, another one of those!" She disdainfully flipped the switch on the inter-com, spoke a few hurried words to Mr. Simmons, and motioned for Essie to go right in.

Gathering her purse and gloves in her hand Essie minced daintily past Grace, her black taffeta dress, being old and quite worn, making

soft, mewlng sounds as she walked.

O. L. Simmons walked hack and forth across the room, his hands clasped behind him. "And now, Mrs. Polk, you do understand," he purred, "why your house must be demolished?"

"Yes," she nodded, "hut you can't, you can't—"

"Nonsense, nonsense! You'll be given the value of your house, so you can buy or huild another one." He held up his hand imperiously. "You wouldn't want to stand in the way of progress, now would you? Room has to be made foı the splendid new freeway, which," he paused, and rocked forward on his toes, "will further enhance our glorious city!"

Desperately, Essie cried out, "But I told you ahout Alhert! If you tear down the house he won't ever have a chance to come out of the closet.

"I know it's unreasonahle, when all our neighbors have signed. But, it's unreasonable that Albert disappeared in the first place, too. Don't you understand that?"

Simmons walked hehind his desk, becoming hrusque and impersonal now.

"Mrs. Polk, I am really sorry. But no city official can do a thing for you. Your ohjections wouldn't carry any weight with the board, so I'm afraid that that's all there is to it. Your case is unusual, to say the least. But, that doesn't alter the situation."

Noticing that she was on the verge of tears again, he added, "Now, when you feel a little better, I suggest you go to the Bureau of Missing Persons. I'm sure you'll find them very cooperative."

When she had closed the door behind her, Simmons fell into his chair, mopped his forehead and snorted, "Closet door, indeed!"

ESSIE unpinned her hat and laid it on the hed. It was as old and shabby as the entire house was now. She wearily sat down in the creaky chair that had once been so frilly and bright, and leaned back to close her eyes over the hrimming tears. Suddenly she gasped and leaned forward, staring!

When Albert closed the closet door he looked at the underwear over his arm. "Mmmm," he mused, "might as well get a fresh suit." He turned back to the door and opened it, only to stand there for a hrief second, too stunned to move! Then he slammed the door shut as fast as he could.

Golly, he whistled, he hadn't seen her there a minute ago. But, just now, there was an old woman sitting in the hedroom! He hurriedly dove into his underwear, trousers and shirt, getting angrier every second. Essie certainly had her nerve, letting someone into the hedroom, unexpectedly, when he was getting dressed.

When he opened the door the second time, he was fuming. But the old lady was no longer there!

There was no one but Essie, all dressed for the party, sitting in her chair, dozing.

Indignantly he tapped her on the shoulder. "Well, where is she?" he demanded, even before she had time to wake.

Essie opened her eyes and looked at him strangely. "What, Albert? Where is who?"

"You know who I mean. That old woman that was here just a minute ago! I opened the door before I got dressed, and who should be staring at me, but this old lady. Essie, I'm amazed at you—letting someone in the bedroom while I'm getting dressed!"

Essie's pretty face puckered into a frown. "But there's been no one here but me; you can see that yourself, Albert honey!"

Suddenly a crafty look crept into her eyes. She stood up and faced him. "Yes, I believe there was an old lady here, Albert Polk," she snapped. "However, I wouldn't expect you to recognize me. You're just like all the other men, after all."

"Essie! What on earth has gotten into you? What are you talking about?"

Her eyes blazed with anger now that the disturbing thoughts fitted themselves into a pattern. "Where have you been for the last fifty years?" She breathed deeply. "Yes, for fifty long years!"

Albert took a step backward, bewildered at this sudden change in Essie. "But Essie darling," he flung a hand toward the closet, "I was just in there for a minute or so. You must have been dreaming! You must have had a bad dream, and now you're all wrought up about it!"

She forced a blank composure over her face. "Yes, I was just dreaming, I guess," she answered. "Let's forget it." She smiled misleadingly to him, as she walked over to the mirror and unpinned the large plumed hat from her head.

"How about you waiting for me in the carriage, Albert dear, while I tidy my hair a bit. I won't be more than a minute. And please hurry," she urged. "I'll be right down!"

She stood there, smiling, until she heard the front door close behind Albert. Then her face resumed its earlier strange look. She turned from the mirror, and without hesitation, opened the closet door, and went in, shutting it firmly behind her.

AH! Essie make fool with Albert, but she not make fool with me! I know how she remember she wait and wait for Albert. And she think to self, "Shall I wonder when Albert someday go in closet again and not come out? Then I grow old, and wait and wait! No! I go into closet, and if someone wait—it be Albert!

Essie stood in the closet, excited, but not at all afraid, now that she knew what she was going to do. She looked around thoughtfully. Some-

thing told her that if Albert had been telling her the truth, and he had been nowhere but in the closet, it had been his own fault. He must have overlooked something!

And then she saw it! A thin steel bar in the corner, just floating there in the air. She grabbed it and yanked, holding on with all her strength as it tried to tear itself loose from her grasp!

Albert and the carriage driver were getting impatient. At last, out of exasperation, he jumped from the carriage and stamped back into the house. From downstairs he called, "Essie! Essie! Come on down, it's late!"

All was quiet—much too quiet! He ran up the stairs two at a time and threw the bedroom door open.

She turned langorously from the mirror as he entered; an extremely tall, and extremely well-built girl, dressed in chartreuse shorts and flaming red hair.

Albert leaned weakly against the door. Two shocks in the same day, and in the same room, was too much.

She smiled disarmingly at him. *"Pleased to acquaintance make, Albert. As result of accident, your Essie being more resourceful and more strongful than I give credit for, I be your guest for short time; I hope! You not mind too much, little Albert, yes?"*

She turned and picked up Essie's large, plumed hat which had been laying on the dressing table. *"See I try to dress as your Essie, while I here in your time."* She put it on her head and turned to him for approval.

Albert stared fiercely at the hat, as though if his eyes left it, he would lose his sanity. She was remarkably disturbing.

Suddenly he giggled idiotically.

The girl looked puzzled.

"The hat," he gasped weakly, between giggles. "You've got it on backwards!"

—Garen Drussai

Mercer's Machine

By JOSEPH SLOTKIN

(A Satire)

A moment after Mercer Mainwaring slammed shut his Modern Library edition of the Bard of Avon's immortal words concerning being or not being, he began to speculate that he, too, was something like the unhappy Dane.

"I'm a procrastinator," he proclaimed to the leaping gas flames in his imitation fireplace.

Then immediately glanced guiltily toward the bedroom, into which his weary wife, Teresa, had retired.

Mercer padded into his small study to reinsert the copy of *Hamlet* between Homer and Hemingway, and subconsciously winced as he flicked the light switch.

For there, fluttering in the brief wind of his passage, were the 359 editorial rejection slips he had accumulated during the past eighteen months; then with blithe bravado, had Scotch-taped onto the wall.

The unpainted wall — of their two-bedroom tract home, newly purchased, escrowed and easmented on the outside — but unpainted inside.

So what more logical action for an aspiring author than to cover the naked plaster of his den of hopes with the multi-colored verbiage and blue-pencillings of that distinguished company — the editors who had rejected the children of his brain.

"Hamlet had two strikes on him. I got three," Mercer muttered over the clenched stem of his pipe. He mouthed the hard words that met his feverish eye as it roamed the Joseph-coated walls:

"We regret that we are unable to use . . ."

"I would like to be able to tell you that we found it suitable, but . . ." "After careful consideration . . ."; "Unfortunately it doesn't quite suit . . ."; "This, alas, is a rejection slip . . ."

He was just born to get rejection slips, that's all.

"We are obliged to decline thousands. . ."—What an obligation! And what a display 359 of them made.

Chromosomes . . . "Some men are born great."

"I wasn't," Mercer moped, feeling more malevolent than Malvolio.

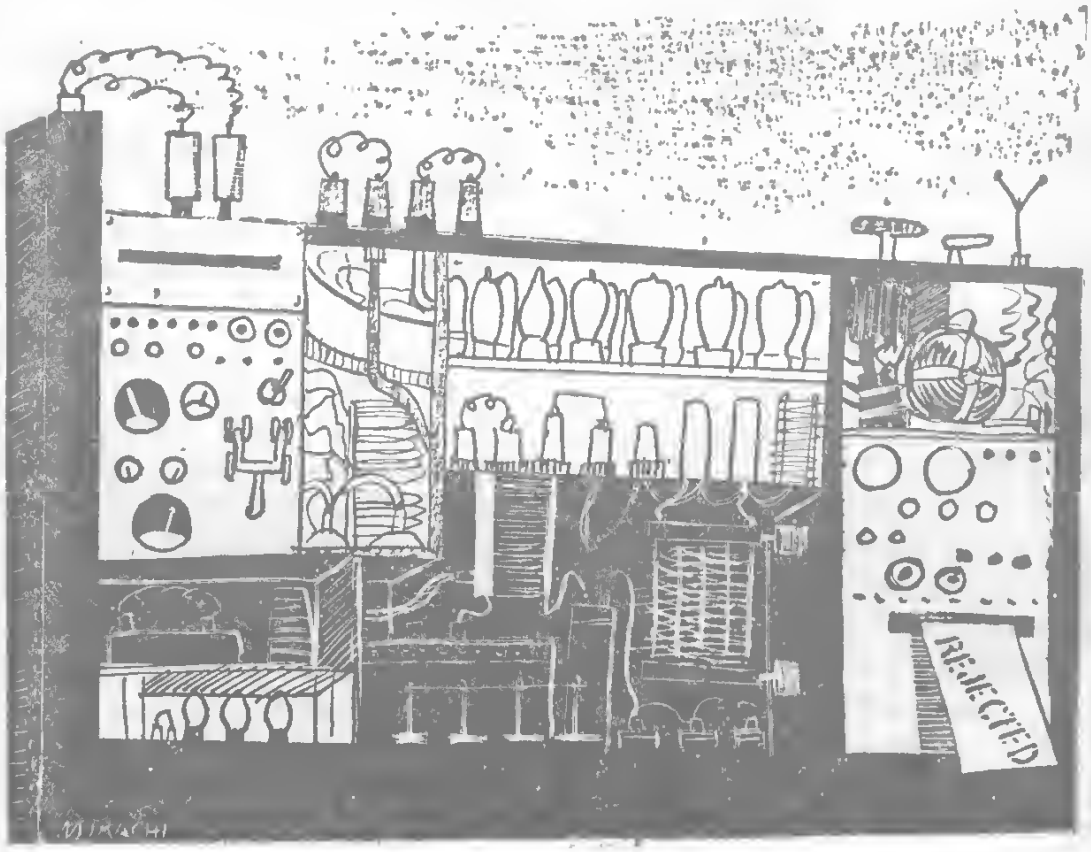
"But I'll be damned if I'll be like Hamlet! Okay, so I've wasted a couple of years — and a lot of postage stamps! I'm finished, through! Not another word will I write!"

A feeling of freedom permeated Mercer Mainwaring. Release! Now he could take the time to do all the things he'd always wanted! Paint the house! Go fishing! Really work at his job at the aircraft factory! An electronics technician had no right to try to be a writer anyhow!

As Mercer strode manfully from the room he stopped in mid-stride. One of those damnable germs of a story-idea had struck his flaccid brain. Helplessly, he felt it burgeon carcinomatously within the walls of his skull.

"This fellow wants to marry this girl, see, but he can't, because he's bound himself by a secret bargain to the gnomes who live in the wood for—" the insidious little demon in his frontal lobe percolated.

"Another one! Another stinker to sweat and slave over, to spend time and postage stamps on — for what? To be fed into the machine, to come



out a little square or rectangle of rejection!"

Surely, Mercer reflected, there must be a machine to counter-act this monster which I was willy-nilly forced to feed for two years. No, for I would have to feed all the editors in the world into it!

"Well, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em," he philosophized.

"I'll make my own machine! I'll fool 'em."

He left his den of horrors, and headed toward the bedroom but paused again. The electronic training of his brain was registering wiring diagrams, cathodes, voltages, scanners, switches, and automatically he turned toward the basement.

"If 'twere done, 'twere well it were done quickly," he borrowed from Lady Macbeth, and holding his pipe like a dagger in his hand, he descended upon his toolshed, where, in the stillness of the night he worked furiously.

Worked with solder and flux, and discarded parts of old radios, with relays and an old cathode tube, and bits of wire and metal until it was completed.

Mercer's bodkin! He could not change the tide in the affairs of men, but he could modify it for himself. And now, to try for quietus!

Feverishly, he inserted a 3x5 file card, upon which he had hastily typed his latest brain-torment in synopsis form, into a slot at the top of his device.

"This fellow wants to marry this girl, see, but he can't, because he's bound by a secret bargain to the gnomes in the wood . . ." It was so much easier, and more economical than using typing paper, envelopes and postage.

Mercer Mainwaring's index finger hovered over the labelled banks of keys, and paused at the one bearing the legend "Feverish Fantasies Magazine." He might as well select a reasonable market.

He pressed the key.

An ominous humming told him the circuits were activated. A mild clicking, like the sound of an editor gnashing his teeth in cybernetic frenzy rose from the depths of the machine.

In a matter of seconds, the file card had vanished, lights had blinked and winked, and from the wide, toothless mouth at the base of the bodkin emerged Mercer's file card.

With a neat little rectangle handily clipped to it — a white bit of paper upon which was printed, "The editors regret to inform you. . . ."

The familiar words could not but help make Mercer wince. But the sensation was short-lived. For this editorial slip had come, not from the offices of Frenzied Publications, Inc., owners of Feverish Fantasies Magazine; it had not been delivered by an astigmatic, phlegmatic messenger of doom in the guise of a government servant. It had come from Mercer's own machine, not in days,

weeks or months, but in a matter of seconds.

Mercer had rejected himself!

In the weeks that followed, Mercer was delighted with the new-found freedom his knowledge of electronics had given him. He painted the house. He experienced several pangs of creation, but his rejection machine made short shrift of his literary transgressions. He went fishing, and came back with a small stack of file cards which he summarily turned over to his personal bodkin.

Mercer's wife waxed wonderfully, for it was like a second honeymoon since he had refused his muse. And he helped her run the electric buffer over the glistening floors so that their protective coating shone like the eager eye of the new-liberated mailman, shorn of *his* chief burden, delivered from his delivery of the daily duplicated Damoclean sword that had formerly flattened his feet and Mercer's ego.

That was why the gray-clad Mercury of the middle-class couldn't understand the troubled brow of the man in the newly-painted house as he handed him a small envelope covered with childish scrawling one summer's day. Here was no crumpled Manila 9x12, before which Mr. Mainwaring used to blanche in the old, burdensome days.

Here was just a little letter. But the mailman little knew that it bore the news Mercer had long dreaded. A visit from his precocious, obnoxious, but unbearable little nephew Yarborough Darb, his sister's only son, come to spend the holidays.

MERCER recalled with a shudder the period of his sister's pregnancy, when the ordinarily quiet, undemonstrative girl had gone about jotting queer, encapsulated anagrams and strange verses on the backs of envelopes. Almost as though she were possessed.

And it was rumored that upon his birth, young Yar, as he was soon called, disdained the usual infantile greeting of a shrill cry, but broke into an atonal wail which the obstretician attending, who had minored in English, swore scanned perfect iambic pentameter.

It wasn't the fact that young Yar became a permanent Quiz Kids fixture at three; nor that he developed the habit at five of reading the first sentence of magazine serials at newsstands, then writing the editor a ten-page critique of the story's denouement. It was just that he was so damned smart, and knew it.

And, Mercer's chief objection was the fact that young Yar was an editor. Yes, although Mercer would never have deigned to submit anything to the magazine, which was published by the advanced grammar school which young Yar attended, he knew full well that, elementary publication though it was, it had a really formidable reputation, thanks to its editor.

Young Yar.

Who followed his letter so closely he might have heen treading on the mailman's heels — or so it seemed to Mercer, who eyed the youngster warily to see if he had grown his horns yet.

"Ah, uncle, and how's the literary career," young Yar lisped, as he withdrew his tentacle delicately from the paw of the uncouth heast which had heen seeking to crush it.

"Have you heen receiving any rejection slips from the editors?"

Mercer's eye took on a malicious gleam, as he shook his head, but the young demon only seemed to he listening for the attendant rattle of an empty gourd.

"I've been toying with the notion of suhmitting some original material to the better publications myself," young Yar unburdened himself.

The gleam in Mercer's eye focussed.

"In that case, let me tell you about my latest invention," Mercer responded, eagerly propelling the son of his sister down the cellar steps.

It was but the work of a moment to explain to young Yar that this machine was an indefatigahle, incorrigihle, ultimate judge of all literary material.

"In that case," young Yar commented, gazing loftily up at the mouth of the rejection machine, "I could experiment with one of my lesser things."

Affably, so affably, Mercer helped the tyke type his synopsis on a file card. Unmercifully, Mercer aided this creature, with chromosomes not unlike his own, to deposit the offering in the slot at the top of the machine.

The ten seconds that followed, during which Mercer's machine clicked, flashed, putted and ground to a stop, were the happiest he had spent in many a day.

For anticipation is often greater than realization.

Before young Yar could pull the slip from the mouth of the machine, Mercer intercepted it, tore it joyfully from the metal monster's maw, and with a flourish handed it to the son of his sister.

Young Yar's voice was strangely suhdued as he read:

"The editors regret that your story does not suit this magazine."

The slip fell from the tyke's nerveless fingers. Stooping to retrieve it, Mercer was hit in the face hy a flapping bit of white that suddenly emerged from the machine's mouth. Of course, that would be the file card. Attached to it was a bit of yellow paper.

It was a check for $27.32.

Worldessly, Mercer completed the reading of the slip young Yar had dropped.

". . . and so we are changing our magazine to suit your story."

— JOSEPH SLOTKIN

The Question

By LUCIUS DANIEL

It's wrong to think that cybernetic machines have no feelings

THE young boy and girl hesitated before the squat, stone building. His squared shoulders and uplifted jaw dominated his uneasy feeling of being out of place, but she hung back timidly.

"Aren't you afraid, Jon?" she asked.

"Nah. Not me. I was just looking." His hand brought her forward, even with him.

On every side towered great office buildings, banks and hotels, each striving to outdo the others by returning a greater profit per square foot of ground space.

Only the squat building in all that business district was ostentatiously without a second floor.

It wasn't dwarfed by its neighbors. It sucked a superior eminence from them by being different. It seemed to say, "Look, I don't have to share my lot with anyone."

"I may have come from the wrong side of the spaceport, but I'm going to be somebody," he said almost truculantly. "Don't you believe me?"

She looked incredibly fair and lovely as she patted his arm. "Of course I do, darling. And I said we'd get married just as soon as you bought your first class citizenship papers."

He snorted. "We'd be middle-aged by the time I saved that much money. I want you now."

"Oh Jon." She blushed nicely. "Mother says . . ."

"I know your mother." He was properly scornful. "All she talks about is social position and security. Citizenship with its pitiful pension is a poor investment."

"But it is secure."

"Bah. I tell you I'm going to be someone. I'm going out on my own and when I buy in, it'll be a governorship. Then I'll drive a purple cloud hopper. And the cybernetic machine will prove it."

"Suppose the machine doesn't give the right answer," she said.

"The machine never makes a mistake."

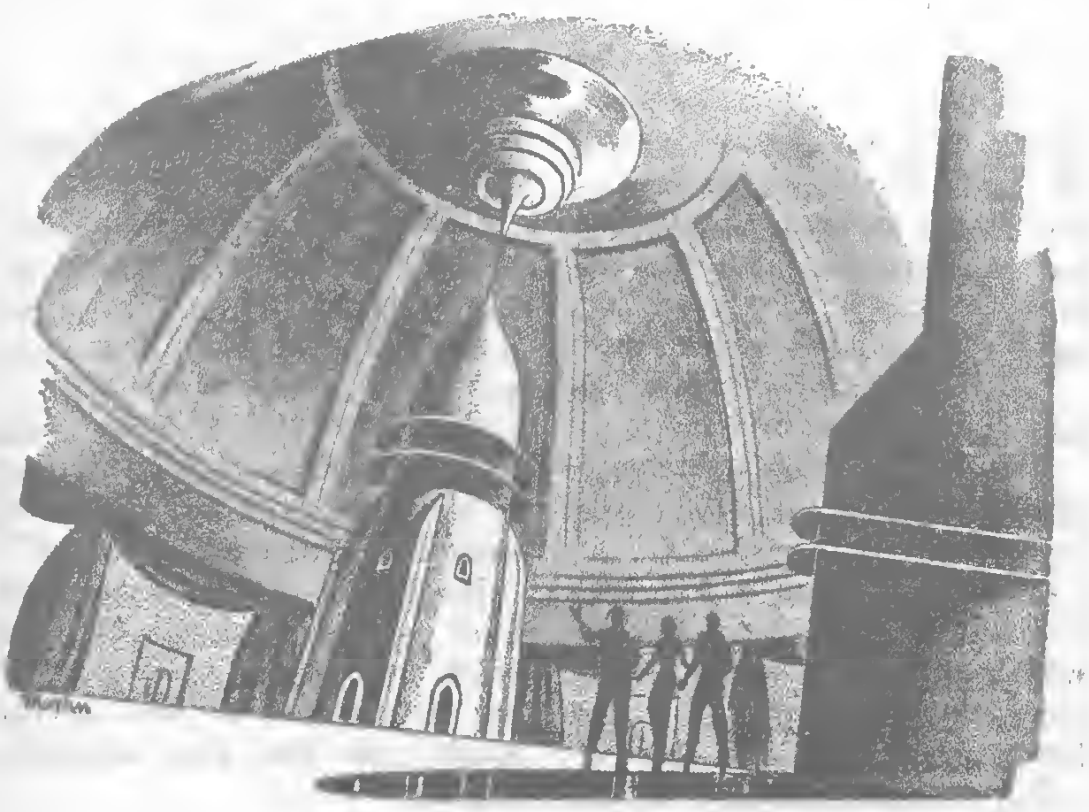
"How can you go on your own?" she asked. "Everything is planned now."

"I'll go into real estate."

She looked alarmed. "That's . . . that's speculative."

"Exactly," he said triumphantly. "And your mother can't do a thing about it. I have her written promise right here."

He patted his pocket and guided her into the building. The great, brass door swung open at their approach revealing a large room which almost filled the entire building. Around the walls were small, curtained recesses and in the middle of



the room was a gigantic block of brass, smoothly machined and without a break.

"Can I help you?" a uniformed attendant asked.

IT seemed odd that the great municipal cybernetic should be served by an ordinary man. Surely a post-graduate from the Corporate University, a Ph.D., no less, should officiate.

"How do you ask it a question?" Jon asked looking at the brass block.

The guard smiled. "What is your question?"

"I thought all questions were confidential."

"You can have it that way if you want. Just take one of those booths, put your credits in one slot and spell out your question on the teleper. However, if the question isn't definite enough, you may get an answer which doesn't tell you what you really want to know. There aren't any refunds."

"We only want to know how much Jon will be making when he's middle-aged," Alis interposed hastily.

"Well, that's an illustration of what I mean," the guard said. "You should phrase your question better."

"What do you mean, better?" asked Jon.

"It's early yet and maybe I'll have time to help you," the guard said looking around. "It's after the first of the month and the large companies already have their approved plans."

Jon looked doubtful.

"Well, to begin with you don't specify what Jon will be making when he's middle-aged. Suppose he's working in a doll factory and you get back the answer, 'Six thousand arms a day'. Would that help you?"

"We'll say credits."

"Then, the machine might say, 'Nothing' since you wouldn't be really making credits unless you worked in the mint. Perhaps you mean 'Earn'?"

"Yes," Alis said. "That's it."

The guard coughed to cover his feeling of superiority over these simple kids. "You should select a specific time. Otherwise the machine might give your total earnings during what it considered to be your middle-age."

"We'll pick out a particular year," said Jon.

"Well, write out your question first and then take a booth."

"That might be best," Jon conceded rather grudgingly.

"Oh, yes," said Alis. "You don't have money enough to ask another question, Jon."

They walked toward one of the marble desks fitted into the walls between the curtained booths.

"No, I don't," said Jon. "This is an unnecessary waste of money. It would buy a yellow cloud hopper."

"Or third class citizenship," Alis said.

"That doesn't pay anything at all

in pension and who wants to wear a III in a lapel buttonhole?'

"Then, why spend it?" I'll wait for you."

"We've started around the familiar circle again," said Jon. "I know I'm going to be a governor, but your mother doesn't. She wants our engagement to drag on until you fall in love with someone else — someone she selects. But she made a written promise to permit our marriage if this machine says I'll be making a governor's income when I'm forty-two."

"Well," said Alis somewhat defensively. "Mother just wants to be sure our children have the usual advantages, like a cybernetic governess. You didn't have one and you know it's been a handicap to you."

"I've got ahead of some that had them. Anyway, your mother can't question the machine. It's always right. Let's get our question written up now."

JON wrote now. fully aware that it must be right the first time. Alis watched him over his shoulder without suggestions or criticism.

That was one thing he loved about Alis, she accepted his leadership without question. She liked to lean on an authority, he knew. and after their marriage that would be a great advantage. But it was an immediate handicap for until then she would accept her mother's authority.

Jon finished and walked back to the guard who had first spoken to them. Several more people had come in. Some of them were talking to the guards, others were going directly to the booths.

Fortunately their guard wasn't busy at the moment and Jon walked to him with a determined stride. Alis followed indecisively, as if she weren't sure that Jon wanted her with them.

Jon showed the question to their guard. "How much will I earn in Security Year 1253?"

The guard studied the question for a while. "You don't name your currency. Future money may be different and if you get your answers in pilasters or careens you'll only be confused."

"I'll change it to 'How many credits'," said Jon readily.

"You won't be sure, then, about the inflationary spiral," the guard said. "With a conservative government we may have more deflation and it could amount up in twenty years."

"We can say, 'In terms of our present currency'."

"The machine understands *real value* if you want to use the term. Now you have 'earn'. Of course, you understand that doesn't show your net income after taxes. Or someone might bring a successful lawsuit against you. On the other hand you might win a large bet or first prize in the government lottery."

"Oh, no, we wouldn't want to know

about anything like that," Alis said. "We just want to know what we can be sure of."

"Will it include dividends from stocks and bonds and rent from real estate?" asked Jon.

"Yes," said the guard. "That money would be earned from an investment just as much as a salary would be earned from your labor."

"O.K. then," said Jon.

The guard felt he might stretch regulations to the breaking point. Ordinarily he was allowed to advise, not suggest. "Why don't you just ask whether or not your marriage is justified financially. if that is what you want to know?"

Alis colored as usual in such moments.

"Would your mother accept that?" Jon asked Alis.

Alis shook her head. "She wants that agreement she signed followed out."

Jon made a face. "Sometimes I think she doesn't doubt my getting along. She wants to brag to the neighbors about how much I'll be making later on."

"Jon Wilobi! You have no right to say such a thing. Now say you're sorry."

"All right, then I'm sorry. Now how about this: 'Give total number of credits in real value I will earn in S. Y. 1253'."

"That seems to be about it," said the guard with a worried look at the crowding lobby. "You'd better hurry or you'll be standing in line for a booth."

He moved off to a new customer who wore the new whipweave in his shorts and combination shirt-coat.

JON and Alis quickly selected one of the few remaining unoccupied booths. They sat in front of the glistening metal sheet that looked like a mirror and reflected nothing. In front of them was a teleper. In addition to the ordinary letters and figures it carried a vast array of mathematical and logical symbols.

Jon was in the questioner's seat. Neither of them felt much at ease. In spite of his self confidence Jon wondered vaguely if anything could go wrong.

Slowly he typed out his message and then they waited. They didn't feel the invisible ray come from behind them and flash their characteristics on the steel screen. They couldn't hear the clucking deep in the basement of electronic machinery which not only calculated but esped with a high degree of accuracy.

They waited tense and uncomfortable.

There was a whir and a three by five card dropped into the slot near Alis. She smiled at Jon and picked it up.

The smile was erased from her face and she dropped the message on the table shelf. She dabbed at

her eyes, reached for the card and read it again.

She gave it to Jon. "Goodbye," she whispered and ran from the booth.

Jon read the card with unbelieving eyes. It said, "One hundred credits real value will be earned by you in the Year of Security 1253."

Slowly he tore up the card and dropped the pieces in the waste receptacle.

He walked into the lobby feeling the world was unreal. But his mind was all ready made up. Unencumbered by possible in-laws he could resign his job and enter real estate immediately.

It's wrong to think that cybernetic machines have no feelings, especially the ones able to esp. Through long dealings with humans they have learned the latter's limitations and sympathise with them.

So deep in the basement the machine whirred and clucked again.

Another man stepped inside the booth and made himself comfortable in the chair Jon had just quitted. He looked to see if all were clear.

"Hello," he said to himself. "Last guy left his message."

He picked up the second card the machine had dropped and read, "Addition. One and a half million credits real value realized on sale of real estate. This represents unearned increment."

In the Year of Security 1253, however, only Alis' mother was unhappy.

—— LUCIUS DANIEL

EDITOR'S NOTE

HERE THEN, with a sigh of relief, and a measure of satisfaction, is the second issue of VORTEX.

It comes very close to being a magazine now.

Its nature is that of an anthology, a cross section of American science fiction in the shorter length. It contains more short stories than any magazine of its kind in the world, and its contributors were gathered, literally, from the four corners of the United States.

Since this is exactly as VORTEX was planned, you might wonder at the sigh of relief. You weren't in on the editorial conferences. You didn't listen to the many predictions of well meaning but rather morbid critics. You weren't told that it had no more chance of survival than the proverbial snowball in hell.

"What, no novels or novelets? Short stories only? That just isn't the way it's done, old boy."

And: "Vortex? What sort of title is that? No one will understand it."

And: "You'll never find enough *good* short pieces to fill 160 pages. There just aren't that many around. There just isn't the talent there used to be. The field is too crowded with magazines. Production costs are too high. Look at your break-even point on sales. Man, are you in trouble!"

And: "What, all fiction? No articles, fillers, editorials, letter columns? Just all the fiction you can pack into a single issue? Well, see you on the bread line."

Not the chance of a snowball in hell.

Well, the first issue of VORTEX hit the stands, and, thanks a lot, good people, for all the letters. Your response to the magazine has been more than encouraging. If anything can be concluded from your letters, it would seem that the many dour predictions will not come true.

The few requests for novels or novelets were greatly outnumbered by those asking for still more and shorter stories. Requests for letter columns, editorials and articles were similarly swamped under. Our proofreading was vehemently attacked (and improved as a result), and some of our art work was equally lambasted (and this, too, is slowly improving). There were no comments, one way or the other, about the title "VORTEX", but there were scores of orchids for our attempt to present in magazine form an extensive anthology of new and original American science fiction.

Thanks again, good people, for all the letters.

And here, with a sigh of relief, is the second issue of VORTEX.

— CHESTER WHITEHORN