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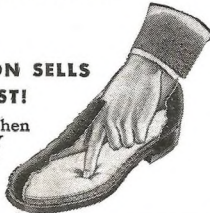
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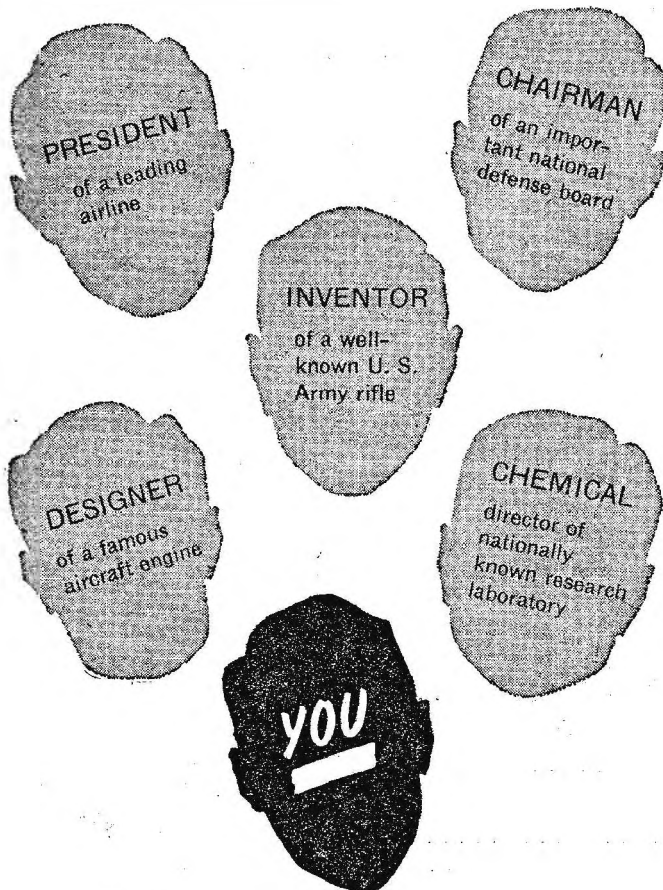
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Vol. 23, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

May, 1951

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From a star in the infinite came the Avna Overmind, subtle and patient—implacably reducing mankind to servitude and plunging Willard Slater into a desperate battle against a mystic threat

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- BIRTHPLACE OF CREATION** **Edmond Hamilton 120**
Curt Newton and the Futuremen are called on to protect the cosmos from the destructive activity of a dangerous madman

Short Stories

- AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN** **John Wyndham 67**
Here is what a silicon being reported about our own Planet
- TAME ME THIS BEAST** **Robert Moore Williams 111**
Professor Shaler thought his experiment would free humanity
- A TAXABLE DIMENSION** **Samuel Mines 139**
If you want to make money, look for that old tweed jacket!

Features

- THE ETHER VIBRATES** **The Editor 6**
A science fiction department featuring letters from readers
- CURRENT FAN PUBLICATIONS** **A Review 157**
- SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF** **A Department 159**
- LOOKING AHEAD** **Coming Features 161**

SAM MERWIN, JR., *Editor*

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IN THE June, 1950, issue of our companion magazine, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, we ran a novelet (COFFINS TO MARS by Raymond Z. Gallun) which was concerned largely with the feelings and reactions of the very old folk of this planet. Thanks to the scientific prolongation of life they found themselves unwanted, even after physical rejuvenation, and shunted off to Mars as pioneers to help relieve hopeless overcrowding on Earth.

This story, judging by letters received at the time, drew some very odd reactions from our younger readers. A number of them actively disliked it, not because it was a poor story (it wasn't) but because it dealt with insight into the feelings and viewpoint of the aged. Apparently they had no desire to be reminded in any way of the fact that they too would some day (A-bombs permitting) be sharing somewhat similar problems and emotions.

Such ostrich-eye viewing may have a certain human reason for being—but this does not make it any the less imbecilic. Science fiction, if it is to grow at all in the months and years to come, must not and cannot remain the property of the Robert Sox set. We seriously doubt that it ever was, although it is the young who, to date, have done much of the shouting about it.

Accent on Youth

Gilbert Seldes, in his recent thoughtful study of the state of the so-called "popular arts" in the United States of America, cites the present ebttide of the movies as resulting not so much from the competition of radio and television as from Hollywood's deliberate and excessive accent on youth.

To bear out Mr. Seldes' theory we have only to look at the two pictures of 1950 which attained the greatest success not only artistically but at the box office—ALL ABOUT EVE and SUNSET BOULEVARD. In both of these pictures maturity was dominant and youth was

put on display with all of the callowness and desperation-based ruthlessness that are its too-frequent concomitants.

Mind you, we are not anti-youth—far from it. Youth is always the potential upon which man may have the opportunity to build a better world. These two motion pictures succeeded, not because they showed the young in a sorry light but because they offered the welcome relief of maturity in the foreground and thus drew back into the theaters the thirty-and-over audience, the bulk of which had long since sickened of the antics of the Donald O'Connors and Janie Powells as horridly precocious.

It is our thoroughly considered opinion that the elements of speculative thought upon which all interest in science fiction is based have been more or less forcibly injected into the lives and dreams of all age groups of our population by the events of recent history. And to preclude the participation of this vaster audience in stf by publishing only stories whose appeal is to the immediate post-Buck Rogers and Captain Video graduates would be not only unfair but idiotic.

Guiding the Mature

The mature must be guided gently, for the well-adjusted tend to recoil from shock far more heavily than those who have yet to find and step into their niches in society. But they want in—and badly. The recent huge success of Max Ehrlich's THE BIG EYE and of the late George Orwell's 1984 prove this. Both were close to primitive as science fiction stories—yet both were written from adult viewpoints and with adult philosophies, dialogue and characterization.

It is our hope in the future to run stories not with basic ideas so simple that the veteran stf reader will leave them unfinished because he already knows all possible outcomes, but to run stories based on ideas as advanced as we can

(Continued on page 147)

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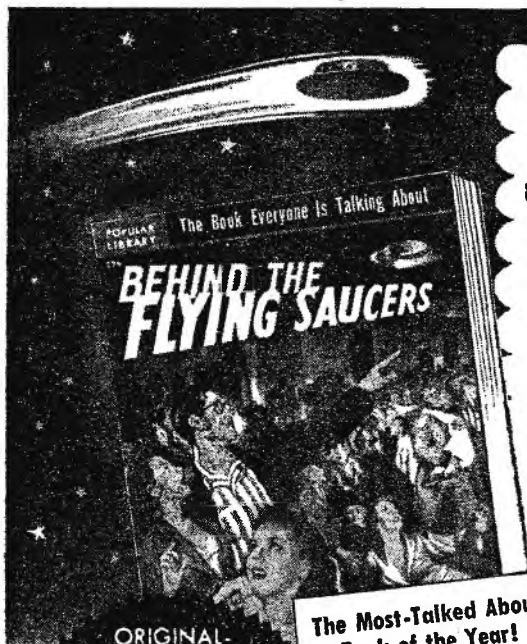
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The Seed from Space



I

AS A MATTER of fact," said Director Candini, "the reason I sent for you was to tell you that we are extending the project. Do you know Theodore Wright of Gallaudet?"

"Can't say that I do," said Dr.

A Novel by FLETCHER PRATT

*From a star in the infinite came the subtle and patient
Avna Overmind—implacably reducing mankind to servitude!*

Willard Slater. "But if he likes elm trees I'm against him on general principles."

"He's a microscopist," said Candini without appearing to notice Slater's remark. "Been working with one of those new super-electron microscopes that go down small enough to show the molecule.

"Quite by accident he was examining some seeds of the wych elm and with that microscope of his he found he could pick up the genes. This is the startling thing, Will. The genes of the wych-elm are not only wholly different from those of any other species, but they bear a close resemblance to human genes."

Slater brought mobile lips into a soundless whistle. He said, "You think the answer may go down as far as the genes?"

"I intend to find out," said Candini. "We're diverting an additional twenty-

five thousand of the Department of Agriculture's funds to you at Selfridge and I've offered Wright a post as full researcher with you. You see why you can't give up the project now."

"All the same I don't like it," said Slater, shaking his head. "I want to get back to working on food plants where I belong. I can't understand all this tenderness over a few senseless baulks of timber. What the devil! Other shade trees will replace the elms if it's shade you want—and now that they don't build wooden ships any more the only thing the wood is good for is coffins."

Director Candini gazed out the window past the tops of the plane-trees that lined the Washington street. "Yes, I'd rather have some of those myself." He pointed. "But you know how it is with the Secretary. He's not only as obstinate

Galactic Catastrophes

WE HAVE for many moons been roused to growls, gnashing of teeth, beating of breast and other symptoms of displeasure by a type of science fiction story whose vogue—a considerable one—dates way back to antediluvian days. This is the story, sometimes short but more often horribly distended to novel length, in which the ingenious hero and his friends are called upon interminably to face pseudo-scientific problems that would scare the toupee off a Nobel Prize winner.

The ancestry of such yarns, be they ever so cleverly jacketed and ballyhooed as science fiction, is straight Tom Swift—and if science fiction is ever going to fill any purpose at all in the literary scene it must leave such days behind it.

It is not so much the lacks of characterization and credible dialogue that invariably are built into or out of these fables which annoys us. It is the fact that the problems, the galactic catastrophes that the author sets up with utterly boring repetition in front of his little band of heroes, are nothing but straw men. The reader **knows** on very brief experience with the genre, that these appalling problems are going to be solved with more ease than our hero can remove the dandruff from his blue-serge space-jacket.

In other words they are not only incredible—they are dull through repetition. Some of you, on reading this half-gill Jeremiad, will doubtless ask: "Well, what do you want the author to do? He can't just let his heroes die."

To which we can only reply, "Read **THE SEED FROM SPACE**, this new novel by Fletcher Pratt. It may give you some idea." Now go ahead and read it.

—THE EDITOR.

as a bull moose, but he's got a mystical streak in him—from his Celtic ancestors, I suppose. He seems to feel that the spiritual fate of the nation somehow depends upon saving its elm trees."

Slater laughed, exhibiting a set of remarkably even teeth. "They used to worship them in ancient Britain, didn't they?" he said. "But somehow I can't quite picture Secretary of Agriculture Kenneth Jones, former United States Senator, going out in a Washington park, dressed as a Druid, to burn a few victims in wicker baskets in propitiation to the gods of the elm trees."

CANDINI also emitted a polite cackle. "No more can I. Well then, I can take it as settled? You'll carry on with the elm research for the present at least. If Wright shapes up as well as he appears likely to you'll probably be able to turn the whole business over to him and go back to your cabbages. You should find him at Selfridge by the time you get back. He seemed very enthusiastic when I talked to him on long distance this morning."

He stood up and the two shook hands. Just as Slater reached the door a secretary came hurrying from the anteroom with, "Oh, are you Dr. Slater? A letter came for you this morning and I tried to reach you at the Willard but they said you had checked out and the only place where they knew you were going to call was on Mr. Candini."

Slater accepted the proffered envelope and frowned at the superscription. "Old 'Renzo on the loose again," he said as he tore it open.

Then to Candini, "Lorenzo Abercrombie, the bright particular star of the Selfridge Institute. Brain man. Not in our field of course but since he's sent it care of you and marked 'Urgent, open at once' he may have hit on something that would be worth taking up here. Excuse me."

His eye ran rapidly down the page, he smiled and turned to the next and then



DR. WILLARD SLATER
—who fights a desperate battle against
an age-old mystic threat in this
novel of today!

on, his forehead wrinkling to premature age. "Look here," he said. "This is a crackpot as anything I ever heard but Abercrombie's a good man and he says you ought to hear about it. Do you have time?"

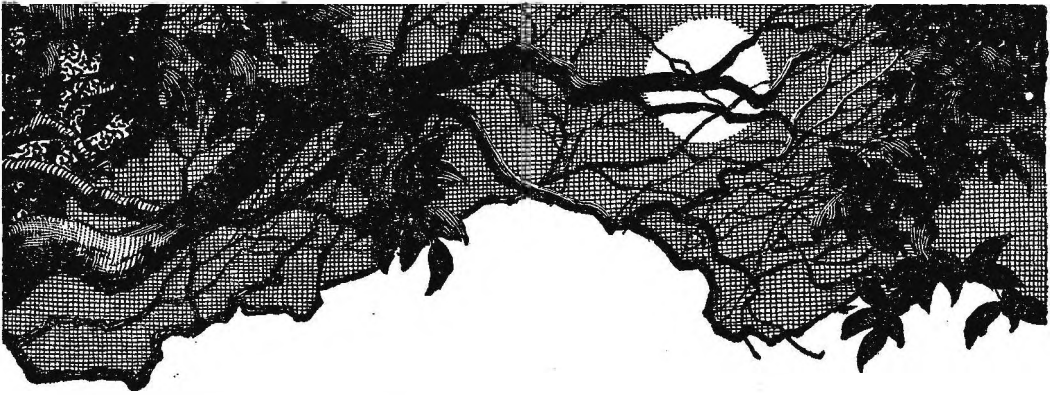
"As a matter of fact I have," said Candini. "There's an appropriations hearing at three but the papers are all ready and I don't dare start on anything else. Come on back and read it to me. Cigarette?"

When Slater had seated himself once more in the leather chair beside Candini's desk, he began to read.

"Dear Will—Since I saw you last one more crocodile from the whirling dervish has turned the Klein bottle inside out and . . .' No, wait, I'd better tell you.



Belle said, "Look up. This is really the sacred wood."



'Renzo's style gets a bit cryptic at times."

"I can believe that," said Candini.

"All right. Lorenzo Abercrombie operates at the Institute under a special bequest from some defunct millionaire, not under government grant like most of us. The old guy who left the money was interested in psychical research and—"

"Oh, come, Will, don't tell me this chap's a spook-chaser."

"That's exactly what he isn't. When the bequest came to the Institute Abercrombie was doing work on brain surgery and wanted to keep on but there wasn't much money. The Institute was going to refuse this bequest but Abercrombie got together with a lawyer friend of his and they figured out that if the research were done into the nature of thought the terms of the old psychic nut's will would be satisfied. So that's what Abercrombie's been doing—with more money at his disposal than you and I have together."

Candini sighed. "In other words, nice work if you can get it."

"He got it and he deserves it," said Slater. "I've known 'Renzo Abercrombie ever since we were in prep school together and you never saw such a guy. He'll sit up till four in the morning, drinking beer and singing 'The Bastard King of England,' then go home from the party and work on quantum mechanics until six the next evening—and turn up with something pretty new and bright too."

"Big guy with a long nose and a smile that never goes down. Treats the whole world as the biggest joke he was ever part of. That's why this letter may turn out to be a spoof even if it isn't crackpot—but he wants you to hear about it."

Candini stirred in his chair. "Did you say quantum mechanics? I thought you told me he was a brain surgeon."

"He was. He still is. But he got to working on this business of the nature of thought and found he had to have some quantum mechanics to do it. You know thought is primarily a matter of extremely small electrical vibrations in the brain, small enough to be way down near the quantum level."

SLATER stopped for a moment. Candini said, "Okay, I'm with you. Drop the other shoe."

"Well, he did measure the quanta of electrical vibration in thought. Did you ever hear of the Abercrombie cyclotron, the highest-speed one ever built? I bet not. I probably wouldn't have heard of it either, except that it happened to be set up at Selfridge."

"'Renzo had pretty much a free hand about what to do with the money under the bequest and he didn't want anyone else interfering, so he just went ahead and ordered this cyclotron to his own design. You see, he got pretty dissatisfied with the ordinary technique of the electro-encephalograph—"

"Whatever that is," murmured Candini.

"I don't know much about it myself," said Slater, "but the main point appears to be that it isn't precise. Only gives a general pattern, not what a person is thinking about precisely. So 'Renzo conceived the idea of doing the job by what might be called photography. Running a stream of extremely high-speed electrons through a person's brain in a kind of super-cosmic-ray bombardment.

"Where the electron stream encountered the quanta involved in the thought process it would be changed into an electromagnetic wave—and when you record the result there's a pattern."

"I'm not sure that I understand," said Candini, "but if I do how would you interpret these patterns?"

"That's just the catch," said Slater. "Abercrombie has an assistant named Paul Angelus—French refugee and a very brilliant chap though I've never liked him. He used to say that 'Renzo had only produced a more complicated way of getting an encephalograph that didn't mean anything.

"But 'Renzo kept after it, asking his subjects to think about one specific thing while under the machine and comparing one pattern with another to make up a kind of dictionary of thought-patterns. I've been under it myself."

"What did he get out of you?"

Slater grinned, a trifle sheepishly. "He had me working on the thought of blondes mostly if you want to know. But that isn't the point. What he has really been after is to get at the subconscious and this letter of his says that with the aid of his dictionary he's done it."

Candini moved in his chair again. "That's very interesting but what has it got to do with our line of research? Unless he has discovered that somebody's subconscious mind held a method of preserving elm trees that his conscious mind didn't even know about."

"That's just the point. He says they're dangerous and shouldn't be preserved—or rather the reading he got from the subconscious of his subject does." Slater glanced at the letter.

"She's a woman named Inez Hutchinson. I know her well—fortyish, used to be an interpretive dancer, kept her figure and now she teaches dancing, especially outdoors in groves and so on. You might think she'd be a nut but she's really very decent. Well, here's the first reading Abercrombie dug out of her subconscious, out of anybody's subconscious for that matter:

"If I can only remain indoors tonight I can avoid the sacrifice of the elms and the Avnan will have less of me. Oh, to escape the tyranny of the elms! Cut them down, cut them down, the Avnans are coming through them.

"They wish to rule a world of night and have gone far. Now they have found how to eliminate the Earthborn idiot strain whose blood keeps them from their fullest powers. Oh, if men would only cut down the Druid elms of Avna!"

Candini snorted. "I would say the lady needs to see a psychiatrist. What are the Druid elms of Avna?"

"I don't know about Avna," said Slater. "Never heard the word before. The Druids used to worship the wych-elm though, the kind you were just saying had human-type genes. Maybe she's hit on something there in a rather vague way."

"More likely your friend Abercrombie has hit on a way to spoof you, as you say. Funny coincidence that he should pick on the wych-elm though. Ted Wright hasn't announced his findings yet. Let me know how he works out at Selfridge, will you? Not that I have any doubts."

II

AS DR. WILLARD SLATER climbed sleepily from the Pullman onto the Selfridge station platform he saw a figure hurrying toward him past groups of owl taxi-drivers and early morning milkcans. He frowned.

He had not expected anyone to meet him. In fact he did not remember having

told anyone just what train he would be back on—but if anyone did meet him, he would have preferred another member of the Institute staff to Paul Angelus, Abercrombie's assistant.

'Renzo said the fellow was a brilliantly intuitive research worker, especially along lines involving psychology, but Slater had never been able to rid himself of a feeling that Angelus carried his psychological studies over into social contacts and treated everyone as a specimen. And being French he never gave way to such minor vices as an evening of poker or an afternoon of tennis.

Too late to pretend he had not seen the man and grab a taxi—Angelus was hurrying forward, his hand out, his dark, sallow face wearing an expression of anxiety, his winglike eyebrows vibrating.

"Weel-ard, I think to myself I am so sorry, I will hurry to the train to meet you."

"What do you mean?" demanded Slater.

"It is possible you have not heard? About our friend and my chief, Abercrombie?"

Slater shook his head as the other produced a newspaper from his pocket. The story was on page one.

SCIENTIST SUICIDE RECORDS BURNED

Dr. Lorenzo Abercrombie, brain specialist of the Selfridge Institute, was found in his laboratory last night, dead of a bullet-wound in the head and surrounded by a pile of smashed apparatus and the burning records of his experiments. Police say there is no doubt that the injury was self-inflicted.

A night watchman, attracted by the glare, gave the alarm after breaking a window to gain entry on finding the doors locked. Institute authorities could assign no reason

Slater let the paper drop and turned toward Angelus. "I don't believe it!" he said, distress fighting incredulity in his voice. "I've known Lorenzo Abercrombie all my life and he's the last man in the world to commit suicide.

Why, he's just succeeded in his big experiment!"

Angelus laid a hand on his arm. "Unfortunately it is but too true. As for success—ah, you mean the letter he addressed to you in Washington? He announced success in it? I fear it was a jest against life. For behold, it was a failure, the effort to recover the subconscious."

He was guiding Slater along toward his car, an English Hillman that stood at the end of the station platform. "I still don't believe it," said the botanist doggedly.

"We will proceed there at once if you wish," said Angelus. "It is too early for other employments—and in any case, I now have no other employments." He smiled sadly. "It is possible that among the remains there is something he left to enable you, his friend, to interpret this melancholy occurrence."

Slater forced himself to speak calmly. "He spoke in the letter of an experiment with Miss Hutchinson."

"Ah, the dancer?" Angelus paused as the car went round a corner and avoided a clash with a couple of commuters hurrying to the station. "A hysteric type. One meets with it frequently among women who give so much of their emotional energy in public at an early age. It came to nothing."

It occurred to Slater that "hysteric" was about the last word he would have applied to Inez Hutchinson—but he wouldn't have suspected 'Renzo Abercrombie of harboring suicidal tendencies, either. He said, "Was there any note or message?"

"None was discovered. But the event speaks for itself—an act of despair. He did not interfere with the cyclotron but he destroyed the recording device and most of the reproduced patterns. Here."

The Hillman slowed to a halt at the curb before the Institute building that had housed Abercrombie's laboratory and, in a wing, his living quarters. The smashed window was plainly visible with a fragment of burned curtain flapping

from it. At the front door was posted a bored policeman, who straightened up as the two approached.

ANGELUS introduced Slater as Abercrombie's best friend, who wished to look over the premises. The policeman said he guessed it would be all right but not to move anything as the coroner had not made his inquest yet. He swung the door open.

The early morning light showed the place where Lorenzo Abercrombie had worked to be a perfect shambles. Only the wall at the back, through which the outlet of the Abercrombie cyclotron peered, was unaltered.

In the center of the floor the chair in which subjects had sat lay on its side and there was a char-mark on one leg. Beyond it on the floor was the chalked outline of an automatic pistol. Slater knew enough about police technique to realize that this was where the weapon must have been found.

To his right the recording device Abercrombie had invented and used was a jumble of smashed tubes and wrecked connections with little shards of glass gleaming in the heap. Between it and the outlet of the cyclotron a burned spot about three feet across disfigured the floor and was in turn disfigured by the battered shapes of film-holders.

At the back stood the cabinet that had held Abercrombie's dictionary of thought-patterns. The two upper drawers were pulled out to hang at an angle and the front of one of them was deeply bent.

Slater said, "Looks as though there had been an explosion."

"It is probable," said Angelus. "There was much film—all gone now, a tragedy. I reproach myself as a psychologist, alas, that I did not recognize the signs of this madness before it developed."

"I still can't understand it," said Slater, walking over to the cabinet and peering into the ravaged drawers. "Even if he didn't succeed in getting at the subconscious those thought-pattern rec-

ords were worth all the money and effort that had been spent."

"Ah, who shall unlock the mysteries of personality?" said Angelus. "I fear my science is not a science truly."

"Can the recorder be rebuilt?"

Angelus stepped over and stirred a fragment with his toe. "Not by myself, of a surety. It was a thing our friend kept to himself, a secret. Moreover I do not have the skill in electronics. My work was that of interpretation."

Slater sighed. "Well, I guess there's nothing we can do here at present. What time is it? Quarter past eight? I suppose I ought to get some coffee and get cleaned up. There's a new man joining my division of the Institute today if he isn't here already and I ought to meet him."

As he started for the door behind Angelus, something caught his eye where the latter's foot had moved the fragments of the wrecked recorder. He stooped. It had once been a little black notebook, about three inches by four, now with one cover burned away, the edges of the pages brown with fire and soaked with the chemicals that had been used to extinguish it.

On impulse he slipped it into his pocket. At the door Angelus turned. "You have found something of significance?" he said.

On another impulse Slater replied, "No, nothing at all. I was just looking at one of those busted tubes. It had a different shape than any I've ever seen before. I wonder where Abercrombie got the idea for it."

Angelus gave him a long look of frowning puzzlement as they went out into the sunshine.

III

THEODORE WRIGHT," said the tall young man with curly hair who got up from the chair and offered his hand. "You're Dr. Slater, aren't you?"

"Willard Slater. We try to take things easy here at Selfridge and check the

titles at the door."

The tall young man grinned. "I've already checked mine along with most of my fixed ideas." It was going to be easy to work with this guy. His grip was firm and he promised to have a sense of wit.

"I suppose you want to get settled before you take up anything serious," said Slater.

"I'm already settled. Drove in from Hamptonport last night and as they said you were away I foraged around for myself and finally found a chap who looked like the ancient mariner but who said that as long as I was a member of the research staff I could have one of those bungalows on—what is it?—Rutherford Row."

"Oh, yes. That would be old Yumpin' Yiminy. His real name's Berquist or something like that but everyone uses the nickname around here. He's certainly placed you conveniently for the work you'll be doing."

"I should say so. Wych elms all along the street and that big grove of them at the back. I say—you'll have to give me a lot of briefing. I'm no arborealist."

"No more am I," said Slater. "In fact I've come to regard the damned elms as pests but I suppose the guys that pay the bills have a right to say what they want for their money. What is it, precisely, you found out about them? Candini gave me an outline but no details."

"You mean the wych elms? Well, it's like this—I've been working with one of those new Reichert super-microscopes, the kind that will show up even a simple molecule and some of the bigger atoms.

"I got to fooling around with it one day and split open one of these wych elm-seeds. I found the genes were not like those of any tree I'd ever examined before but more like those in animals and most of all like the human. That's all—perhaps you can tell me if it's surprising."

Slater rubbed his chin. "It certainly is. I never heard of such a thing in all

botany. And it's especially peculiar that it should be the wych elm, which some of the primitive peoples regarded as a magic tree. They were so fanatic about offering human sacrifices to it that after the Romans conquered western Europe they had to cut down all the wych elm groves. They drove the tree back to Scotland and Wales. Looks like they had something."

Wright grinned. "Who, the Romans or the elms?"

The telephone rang.

"Excuse me," said Slater and answered it. "Slater speaking . . . Three o'clock, at Michaels' Funeral Parlors?" He made a note. "Thank you, I'll be there."

He turned a grave face to Wright. "I suppose you heard about our local tragedy—and mystery—last night."

"There were a good many alarms and excursions about the place, now that you mention it. But I didn't know the central theme."

"My best friend shot himself and destroyed his work. Set fire to the place."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Wright looked as though he really was. "Look here, if I'm being a nuisance I can easily go roll my hoop for the rest of the day."

"No, I want to talk about it." Slater rubbed his chin again and frowned. "Maybe it will help me to understand—or maybe you'll see a hole in the story that I don't just now."

HE GAVE Wright a rapid account of Abercrombie's work under the bequest, his efforts to plumb the human subconscious and the sudden, appalling tragedy that had struck him down.

"What makes it all the harder to take is that, in a letter that reached me in Washington, he said he had succeeded in recording the subconscious of an especially sensitive woman named Inez Hutchinson. But his assistant, Paul Angelus, says that he really had failed and the letter was a hoax."

Wright's eyebrows went up. "Look here," he said. "I'm no psychologist.

My line is microscopy. But it doesn't seem very reasonable to me that a man's last act just before he commits suicide over a matter of life-and-death importance to him, would be to hoax his best friend over that same subject."

"By God, I believe you're right! I knew there was something wrong with the picture somewhere but I couldn't put my finger on it. But—that makes it funny. Because Paul Angelus is a psychologist and a good one. That's why he was on Abercrombie's staff."

Wright raised his eyebrows again but didn't say anything.

Slater stirred. "I see. Angelus may be lying, you suggest." He began to tick off points on his fingers. "And if he is lying about the failure and the hoax, then he is lying for a reason because a psychologist wouldn't do it unnecessarily.

"And the reason must be that he knows something about Abercrombie's death that he doesn't want to tell. But that's silly. I admit I don't like the man but what could he stand to gain? Not taking over the research because the records are destroyed, the machine is smashed and he doesn't know how to put humpty-dumpty together again.

"All this does is throw him out of a soft job at a good salary under the bequest. Besides, there's the physical set-up. Abercrombie was found in a room with the doors and windows locked. They had to smash their way in."

"The doors and windows are frequently locked in detective stories but I agree that in real life there isn't often any trick solution. You could check with the police."

"I'm going to if it's the last thing I ever do. They've already said it was suicide but I just don't believe it and I'm going to goose those blue bloods into action. There was even less reason for Abercrombie to commit suicide than for Angelus to lie about it."

Wright said, "Look here, you mentioned this woman he was working on. What was her name—Inez Hutchinson?"

Wouldn't she give you a good check for getting at the bottom of it? She could tell you about the experiment and what kind of results your friend got."

"If she will. You don't know Inez Hutchinson. She's a very remarkable and rather secretive person. Used to dance in one of the big ballet troupes. You'll be talking to her right along about something when all of a sudden her face will go blank as though she weren't listening to you at all but to someone else and you can't get anything more out of her. However, I'll try it. Let's go see the plant."

He heaved himself out of the chair and, followed by Wright, began to make the rounds of the arboreal research division of the Selfridge Institute. It was not a large division, but there were slides and specimens to be examined and laboratory technicians to meet, so that it was approaching noon when the two men emerged from the back of the building. Slater waved his hand toward the separate structure that had housed Abercrombie and his work.

A light truck with a black body marked S.I. stood in front. "Somebody over there now," he said. "Let's go over and see what gives."

The door stood open and a workman was removing fragments of glass from the shattered window. Inside an extremely tall man with thin cadaverous cheeks was packing the remains of Abercrombie's recording device into a wooden box.

"Hello, Yumpin' Yiminy," said Slater. "Thanks for taking care of Dr. Wright last night. What are you going to do with those?"

THE tall man straightened up. "President Niederhofer says maybe they should go by Chicago," he said. "Here we have no one who tells what they mean. Mr. Slater . . ."

"What is it?"

"You think Mr. Abercrombie was killing himself?"

"I don't know, Yumpin' Yiminy, but

I don't think so."

"I don't think so neither. Mr. Abercrombie is not being that kind of man. Three nights ago he is so glad he asks me in and gives me a drink of schnapps."

Wright had been looking at the debris packed into the box. Now he said, "Dr. Slater."

"I thought I told you we checked the titles at the door," said Slater.

"I know—excuse me. This is something interesting and perhaps none of my business. But I'm an electronic microscopist and I think I know something about it. Do you suppose you could get permission from your president to leave these parts here for a couple of weeks? I'm not sure but I think I can figure out how most of the thing goes together. Anyway I'd like to try."

Slater said, "I'll ask. Of course, Angelus is technically the head of the division and President Niederhofer will give his requests considerable weight. But I don't see how anyone can object to your trying—now that Abercrombie's dead."

Wright bent over the box again. "There are some of these pieces of equipment that puzzle me though. This tube here—what's left of it—is shaped differently than any I've seen. It's—"

He checked as Slater gave an exclamation and clapped his hand to his pocket. He had forgotten the half-destroyed notebook until Wright's repetition of his own remark to Angelus reminded him of it. Now he turned to

Yumpin' Yiminy.

"Don't ship that stuff away until I've talked to the president, will you?" he said. "Wright, I wonder if you'd come back to my office? I want to show you something."

When they were alone and the door closed Slater said, "I found something over there this morning and while I don't know what's in it it occurred to me that I'd like to have the benefit of an extra opinion." He produced the book. "I found this among the ruins of Abercrombie's recording machine."

Wright pulled his chair around. The upper pages, showing only parts of words here and there, with the ink blotted by fire-extinguisher chemicals, crumbled under his fingers. "You probably ought to take this to the police," he offered.

"Not after the way they made the announcement about the suicide," said Slater. "Their minds are made up now. Anything they get will only help them confirm what they've already said."

"Hello," said Wright. "This seems to be something." He pointed to a page.

Slater read aloud, "... not intend to produce a diary, a for . . . vanity of which only Will . . . would be capable."

"That's one for you," said Wright.

"By no means," said Slater. "Look what comes next. 'capable of . . . understanding.' He means understanding."

"Okay," said Wright, "let's try the next page. It's more legible anyway. What do you make out of this?"

[Turn page]

RELIEVES • HEADACHE • NEURALGIA • NEURITIS PAIN *FAST*

Here's Why...

Anacin® is like a doctor's prescription. That is, Anacin contains not one but a combination of medically proved

active ingredients. Anacin is specially compounded to give FAST, LONG LASTING relief. Don't wait. Buy Anacin today.



SLATER said, "Part of the date is gone and his handwriting's hard to make out here. But as I get it it goes something like this—. . . twenty. The pressure continues to grow. I fear that . . . Clinical note—the present form is a series of peremptory orders to do this or that, continually repeated . . . dawn. They are rather absurd . . . like sleeping outdoors under the trees, something I have not done since . . .' Can you make out that last word?"

"No but it probably isn't important," said Wright. "Turn the page."

"All right, here we are again. Ah, the month is April. 'April twenty-fourth. Paul is an excellent psychologist but I doubt whether he has . . . as a psychiatrist and I dare consult no one else. The idea of turning the research over to someone else when I am on the verge . . . is intolerable I can afford no rest. Beneath the commands there seems to be a warning that . . .'"

Wright said, "Slater, this isn't a picture of a man going insane. A person genuinely off his rocker regards his own behavior as perfectly normal. It's the world that's getting out of joint."

"I agree with you. Here's the next entry. 'April twenty-eighth. Very bad tonight. Always worse at night and now that I try to remember I think it began the night I was walking home with Inez Hutchinson after her recital . . . as a vertigo and kind of blindness, so pronounced that I had to stop right there in Rutherford Row and clutch one of the trees. She seemed singularly . . .' I wish we had the rest of that line."

"So do I. Go on."

"'May third. The command is something about letting someone in now, accompanied by the meaningless word Avna and a picture of a dark forest. I wish I could train someone else to . . . recorder and make plates from my own subconscious. But the electron-stream might itself alter . . . conscious thought pattern and I should thus defeat . . . purpose. It will have to be another subject first."

"'My seventh. Took a recording on Inez Hutchinson today. Her conscious thought, Paul agrees, was concerned with . . . and the new recital. But there was a broad shifting band in the two thousand one hundred and twenty region, . . . not previously recorded. It seems to border on the concepts of both fear and hope."

"'What makes it worth noting in this private . . . that for the first time I experienced the pressure in daylight as I was taking a nap after lunch . . . command was unmistakably to destroy the Hutchinson record, which of course I shall not . . . If I can persuade Inez to permit . . .' That's the end of it."

Wright turned the little book over. "Something was eating at him, all right," he said, "and it was pretty serious or he wouldn't have put it in a private diary instead of talking about it. It's almost as though he were being intermittently hypnotized except that these attacks, or seizures seem to have come on him while he was alone."

"And mostly while he was asleep," added Slater. "By the way there's a peculiar coincidence. In the letter that reached me in Washington he mentioned the word 'Avna' as turning up in the recording of Inez Hutchinson's subconscious."

"He did! Of course it could have been a transference from his own but it would seem to me that a conference with that lady is in order."

"Yes," agreed Slater. "I'll try her tonight. In the meanwhile we have a few fish of our own to fry."

IV

INEZ Hutchinson's, "Yes, of course. About eight-thirty?" coming out of the telephone sounded curiously dull, Slater thought.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can understand you feel rather badly about Lorenzo, and I don't mean to intrude, but it was just that I wanted to talk about."

There was a short silence at the end

of the wire. Then Inez said in the same flat voice, "We weren't engaged—or anything."

Curse all women, thought Slater. They always have to take everything you say as a personal reference. "I didn't mean that," he said. "It was something else."

"Very well. Eight-thirty." Now the voice was more bored than merely dull.

He was punctual. The colored maid took his hat and showed him into the living-room, where Inez slid with snake-like grace from her position under the lamp to extend a hand. "Dear Willard," she said, "so glad you could come."

Her hair lay in careful coils and she was wearing a pair of long pendant earrings. Slater smiled, both outwardly and inwardly. Inez had apparently decided to abandon the bored mood with which she had greeted his six-o'clock call for the old-friends attitude she often adopted when she wished to avoid discussing something by covering it with a blanket of gush. He was familiar with the technique.

"I'm sorry I've been neglecting you," he began, "but—"

"Do sit down here." She indicated a place on the sofa in which Slater knew from experience he would sink until her eye-level was slightly above his. It was another of her methods of keeping things under control, like using blue shades on all the lamps except the one by which she sat. It made any other woman in the room look like a fried ghost in contrast to Inez' own brilliant coloring.

"What will you have to drink? Oh, I remember—you take Scotch and soda, not too strong. Matilda!"

Slater lit a cigarette and waited till the order had been given. Then he said; "Inez, do you think 'Renzo Abercrombie killed himself?"

She made a quick convulsive movement as though about to lift both hands to her face. "Don't let's talk about it now, please," she said. "It was like—like having someone you trusted let you down. He always seemed so sane and

well-balanced."

"But I want to—" began Slater.

"Did you know I had a new pupil?" she said hastily. "Just your type—you'll enjoy meeting her so much. Her father was Ruskevicz, the violinist, and she's so good already that I think I'm going to give her the premiere ballerina's part in the fall recital."

She was evidently determined. But so was he. "Look, Inez," he said, "I don't want to disturb you about this but while I was in Washington I got a letter—"

The doorbell rang and Inez was on her feet again. "That must be Belle now. I asked her over this evening when you called up because I knew you'd want to meet her."

Suppressing his annoyance Slater himself stood up, turned toward the door—and gasped. The girl coming through it was tall, almost as tall as himself, and stepped with an easy grace that was as much a glide as a walk.

An aureole of the purest gold-blond hair swept back from a high forehead. The face beneath had the perfect triangular beauty that only Polish girls can sometimes attain. The expression was at once grave and happy as though she were delighted to be alive.

"Belle, this is the most eligible bachelor of Selfridge Institute," Inez was saying, "Dr. Willard Slater. Will, this is my new pupil, Belle Ruskevicz."

Slater felt a cool hand within his own. For lack of anything better, he said, "Inez was just telling me that you do very well. Have you had some dance training before?"

A shadow seemed to flick momentarily across her face. "Oh, yes. My father was determined that since I had no voice and couldn't seem to learn to play any stringed instrument, I should get as near to what he called real music as possible by taking ballet. Do you play?"

"Only on the test-tubes, I'm afraid. I'm a botanist." Slater was feeling a good deal less annoyed at Inez Hutchinson than he had earlier, even though he had to admit that she had slipped one

over on him. She was playing it straight too—not trying to monopolize this girl's conversation or even to make her own presence too obvious, letting him carry the ball.

AND Bell Ruskevich herself seemed as bright as she was beautiful. They talked about existentialism and she seemed to know all about it, then explained that Albert Camus had called on her father when he was on concert tour in Paris.

They talked about baseball and she knew something about that.

In the back of his mind Slater forgot all about Lorenzo Abercrombie for the time being and began to wonder if there were any other eligible bachelors wandering around in her background. He must remember to call up Inez and ask. Belle certainly seemed to know a lot of people.

At last the girl looked at the little ivory clock on Inez' mantel. "Good heavens!" she said. "Eleven-thirty. I really must go. Will"—under Inez' guidance they had reached the first-name stage early in the evening—"you'd never believe the amount of training we dancers have to go through. It's worse than being an athlete. Regular hours and a high-protein diet."

"I'll drop you off," he said, rising.

"It isn't far enough for a taxi. Only about eight blocks and it's a nice night. I'm staying on Chester Street in an apartment I sublet from some people named Harmon."

"Then I'll walk that far with you if I may," said Slater. "That's in my direction too."

When they were outside the girl said, "Inez Hutchinson is a rather remarkable person, isn't she? I looked over all the advanced teachers I could find out anything about and everyone who is anything in ballet said that since she put on that 'Night and the Dryads' she was the best in the country. She arranged her own choreography for it too, didn't she?"

"Yes and danced the part of Evoë as well," said Slater. "We had music and dancing critics all the way from New York and Boston for it. That was how I got to know her, by the way, and it shows how thorough she is. She came to Selfridge and asked for a botanist who knew trees, just so she could work out the characteristic motion of each tree and apply it to the dance."

"I know. She rather gives the impression that if she wants to do something, it would take just a little more than human power to stop her. I saw her once with a certain man who was named Angelus—"

"Paul Angelus of the Institute?" said Slater. "I know him."

The tone of his voice made her look up sharply. "Perhaps I shouldn't say it," she said, "but I'd guess from the way you say it that you don't like him very well either."

"Why? Have you—"

"Oh, it's nothing definite. I've met him three or four times and he's always been very French and polite and correct. Only I always feel as though he were looking me over very carefully for some purpose—not as though I were a girl, you know, but a pork chop, or something else he might be having for dinner."

NOW Slater was remembering Angelus' story of the failure of Abercrombie's experiment and the reason he had gone to see Inez Hutchinson that evening.

"Paul isn't always an easy person to get along with," he said gravely. "Trouble is that he knows almost too much about psychology."

"Yes," agreed the girl, "that's what I mean. He makes one feel like a specimen."

They had reached the corner where Rutherford Row ran off, with its neat range of academic residences behind tall alleys of elms. A little ground mist had risen around the street lamps from the nearby river and now lay in long

banks, seeming to give the trees a ghostly and alien life of their own. Belle Ruskevicz gave a little shiver.

"I hate elm trees," she said as though the subject of Angelus were exhausted.

"Do you, indeed? Then you wouldn't approve of my present job, which is to keep them alive. I'm on research with a government grant to try to eliminate the elm blight which somehow got here from Europe and is taking off our native species."

"Those along there seem healthy enough."

"Oh, those aren't the native species. They're wych elms from Scotland or Wales, I don't know which. They're immune to the blight—or very nearly, because you occasionally get a cross-breeding with the American elm and that seems subject to the blight, just like our own trees."

"Have you found out why?"

"Not yet. They've just sent on a new assistant for me though, who seems to be on the track. He seems to think that it may have something to do with the genes in the seed. The wych elm is the only species that reproduces from seed, you know."

"In all the rest the seed doesn't ripen in time to be fertile and the new trees have to come up by root suckers from the old. That's why the blight is so serious. You can't just raise trees that are free of it from seed in a nursery somewhere."

"Oh! Then why don't you just stick to these wych elms and let it go at that?"

"We may have to. That's what the Secretary of Agriculture, who forked up the grant for this research, wants us to do. But you have to try everything."

"Here's the place. Good night."

She held out her hand. It was evident that she did not wish to kiss him good night and he did not try.

But he had her telephone number and the promise of another date before he started home.

V

THE telephone rang brassily, and Morgan, who answered it, put down the receiver. "It's for you, Will," he said. "There's some dame out at the receiving desk wants to see you."

"Is she a blonde?" said Hurtado from the other laboratory table. "Because if she is you can say that Dr. Slater is busy but I'm temporarily handling his affairs."

"Never mind about that," said Slater, lifting his head from the eyepiece through which he had been contemplating one of Ted Wright's slides. "I'll be right out."

When he reached the reception room, however, it was not Belle Ruskevicz but Inez Hutchinson who was sitting in one of the chairs, looking like a very carefully preserved piece of China. She smiled at him but her eyes were troubled.

"Dear Willard," she said, "did I not tell you that my new pupil was so-o precisely your ideal?" She shook a finger at him.

"Very impressive." He smiled. "But I'm not sure I'll be able to get anywhere with her. I'm on this elm tree research project and she hates elms."

"O-o-oh! Didn't you know? The poor child's parents are dead, you know. They were burned to death in their own home and it was called The Elms. A big tall place outside Chicago, all surrounded with elm trees that they brought from Europe themselves. It was tragic."

"I see. No wonder she doesn't like them. I suppose I'll have to manage an apology somehow—I'm afraid I talked out of turn about the work I'm doing to save elm trees."

"She will not care. You are the type for her as she is for you. I am perhaps the instrument of fate." Inez made her eyes big and stared at him.

He remembered that this was not the first time she had tried to pair him off with one of her pupils. The last one had been a dark-haired girl from somewhere

in Nebraska, who gave him the old come-on and then slapped when he made a pass at her.

"Okay," he said, "so you've found the right soul-mate for me. Is that what you came to tell me?"

Inez Hutchinson's face appeared to narrow a trifle and the tip of her tongue came out between bright red lips. "No—is there some place we can talk?" She glanced across at the receptionist. "About Lorenzo."

The change from her manner of the previous night was startling. Slater said, "I'm rather busy in the lab right now but I'll buy you a good dinner if you're free this evening."

"No, no. Dearest Willard, let me implore you. It must be before tonight or it is perhaps too late." She reached up from where she sat and put a hand on his arm. The amount of excitement she had generated seemed a little more than adequate to the subject—but then it always did with Inez.

"All right," said Slater. "Wait a minute till I put someone in charge of the lab though."

He gave Morgan the necessary instructions and returned to find her waiting by the door, her face somber in comparison with its usual vivacity.

When they were outside, "I must be sure no one overhears us," she said. "Where can we go?"

"The park?"

Her hand gripped his arm almost convulsively. "No. Not there under the trees. There is a something—"

Slater said, "Take it easy, will you, Inez? I'm not going to bite you today and I don't believe anybody else is either. Let's go to Kamerer's and have a drink."

"Thank you. You are so understanding, dear Willard."

IT WAS early enough in the afternoon so they were the only people in the little bar except for the bored bartender, who served them and then went back to the kitchen to continue some

argument with the cook which only came through the door as a dim murmur of voices. Slater sipped and then said, "Well?"

Inez caught her breath. "Would you think me a very foolish and immoral woman if I told you I was in love with Lorenzo?" she said, in a low voice.

"No," said Slater, "on the contrary I'd say you had a lot of sense. Good picker. But what has that got to do with his—death? You weren't responsible, were you?"

Her hand clenched on her glass. "No, no, *no!* You must never think such things! But you asked me last night—Willard, I do not believe he killed himself."

Slater played with his drink for perhaps ten seconds, mentally debating how much he should tell her, what he should ask. Finally he said, "The police are very positive. Do you—well, just between you and me, who do you think did it?"

"I do not know. It is impossible. I have read the newspapers. But I am sure—in my heart I am sure."

This wasn't going to lead anywhere. "Was 'Renzo experimenting with you on his machine?" Slater asked.

"Yes. He asked me and I could not refuse."

"Mmm. Did he show you the records he made from your subconscious?"

"He showed me one. I do not understand it except one thing. There is something about elms and night. I was walking with him one night under the elms when he suddenly stopped and put his arms around the tree. Dear Willard, there was something so strange—it touched the heart. It was almost as though he had put his arms around me."

Slater said, "This isn't getting us very far toward the problem of 'Renzo's death. How well do you know Paul Angelus?"

Now her eyes expressed amazement. "The little Paul? He is so sweet. Surely you do not think he is in these troubles?"

He was Lorenzo's helper and friend."

Slater thought of Angelus' story that Abercrombie had failed. "All right, Paul Angelus is a gilded angel. But what are you trying to tell me?"

"I hardly know, my friend. If I could really tell you—I would have told Lorenzo. There is something wrong with me. I think I may be going mad. That was why I went to him—and the machine."

Slater was remembering Abercrombie's diary. He said, "Tell me about it. What makes you think so?"

"There are things I cannot remember. Mostly at night—whole hours I do not remember or if I do remember it is of doing something I had not thought of. My friend, shall I make another confession? The choreography for my 'Night and the Dryads' was of this nature. It was as though I had not thought of it at all. It came to me. And there are other things."

"I see," said Slater. "You know, Inez, I can't quite believe that you didn't do all of 'Night and the Dryads' by yourself. It was too good and too much like you." You liar, he thought to himself as he said it—you just couldn't believe she'd do anything so good.

"No, do not interrupt me. I must tell you. I think Lorenzo felt something of the same."

Slater said, "Inez, let's get at this systematically. When did you begin to notice this?"

"How strange! Lorenzo asked me the same thing."

The bartender stuck his head in the door and to pacify him Slater ordered another set of drinks. When they had been delivered he said, "Well, when did it begin?"

"I do not know. I am not sure. Three years ago about, I think—just after Paul Angelus came here to be Lorenzo's assistant. I was walking with him in the grove one night and we were talking about the French ballet—he was so lonely for someone who could speak French, poor thing—when it seemed to

me a voice was speaking inside my head. It was telling me to do something."

This was the diary again. "What did it tell you to do?" said Slater.

She reached out a hand and gripped his wrist on the table. "Willard, I do not know. I cannot remember. Lorenzo was the only one who believed me. You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "I rather think I do. What about Angelus? He's a psychologist and ought to know."

"Oh, he was most sympathetic. Paul is so sweet. But he only said it was the common experience of people in arts, that it was just my inspiration."

YES, thought Slater, the kind of inspiration that drove my best friend to suicide—if it was suicide. He said, "And this—this something as you call it—always comes to you as a command to do this or that?"

"Willard, I do not know that either. I only know there is somewhere something that is not me, that takes hold of me. I am afraid, Willard. C-c-could it be that without knowing it I was somehow responsible for—Lorenzo?"

Two big tears appeared at the corner of her eyes and she was so intent that she let them roll undisturbed down her makeup.

"I doubt it. But have you asked Paul Angelus?"

"Yes. He was so-o nice about it and told me not to worry, that I had nothing to do with it. But in my—feeling for..."

She was on the edge of collapse. Slater said hurriedly, "Inez, listen—this is absurd. Lorenzo Abercrombie was found in a room so tightly closed that they had to break into it. Besides, you must know yourself where you were that evening."

Now she had a handkerchief out and was crying openly while he felt utterly helpless. Through the muted sobs she said, "That's just the trouble. I'm not sure. I saw him that evening. We were walking along Rutherford Row and I just don't remember."

The idea that this charming and intelligent if somewhat emotional woman had anything to do with the death of the man she said she had loved was fantastic.

"You probably don't remember what happened after the third scotch and soda," he said brutally, hoping to snap her out of it.

He succeeded. The tears stopped. "This is not kind of you, Willard," she said, "to speak to me in this manner after you have come to me for help and I give it."

"All right, give me some more. Did Renzo ever mention something pressing at him the way you experienced it?"

SHE shook her head.

"No. Was he troubled too? Oh, the poor Lorenzo!"

Another rainstorm was threatening. "Does the word 'Avna' mean anything to you, Inez?"

Now the rainstorm dissolved in a frown of genuine puzzlement. "No. It was in the record Lorenzo made from—my mind. I never heard it before and don't know what it means. It's a beautiful name and it seems to me that somehow I ought to know about it, but I don't . . .

"And, Willard—I can't understand that about the elms in Lorenzo's record. Why, I love elm trees! They're the most graceful of all. Don't you remember, I placed the elm dryad in the leading part in 'Night and the Dryads'? And in the new ballet I'm using the motif of swaying elms again. Somehow it seems easier that way."

"I wonder if Belle Ruskevich will like that," mused Slater. "Well, thanks, Inez, but let's go now. I'll have to get back to the lab."

"Oh, she is an artist. I have confidence in her. She will not mind even if she does not like the elms," said Inez, gliding to her feet, now fully recovered. "Willard—if there is anything else I can do—*anything*—be sure to call me."

LOOK here," said Ted Wright, brushing back his hair with one hand in the gesture Slater had already learned to associate with his moments of excitement. "If she really knows anything, it's below the level of consciousness. I take it we're agreed on that.

"Well then, isn't the most important thing to find some way of releasing that subconscious level? Hand me that soldering iron again, will you, Yumpin' Yiminy?"

"Yes," said Slater, "but the way I understand it you have to have the subject's full cooperation if you expect to get any results by dredging around in the subconscious. And that's just what we haven't got. When she came to me at the lab there on Tuesday she was almost pitifully eager to do anything on earth to help out.

"But when I was over there last night to pick up Belle after the rehearsal and mentioned that you were getting results with rebuilding Abercrombie's recorder—all I got was a shudder and some crack about nobody having the right to enter another personality."

"I wish I knew exactly where this tube hooked in," said Wright. "A lot of this setup is going to have to be by the trial and error method. Do you remember what she said exactly? A lot of times the wording is just as important as what they're trying to say in cases like that."

Slater frowned at the assembly of tubes, connections and plates that was growing under Wright's hands. "I wish I did. If it happens again I'll try to write it down. But her tone was almost one of resentment that anyone so insignificant as I would dare to wish to intrude on her thoughts. That's a very unusual attitude for Inez to take, by the way. Even Belle commented on it afterward."

"Hmm. You still think that the key to what happened is somewhere in these memories she can't quite bring to the

conscious level?"

"I couldn't think so harder, Ted. After all she was probably the last person to see Abercrombie alive. Wait a minute though—maybe she just didn't mind letting Abercrombie know anything he wanted about the inside of her mind. After all she was in love with him. But when she got to thinking it over she decided that with you and me it was different."

Wright laid down his tool. "If she can't really remember what happened that night couldn't it be that she's afraid to remember—afraid that she'll discover she was here in the laboratory with him that night, for instance?"

Yumpin' Yiminy cleared his throat and said, "Mr. Slater, excuse it please, but I am seeing Miss Hutchinson that night and she does not coming in here."

"You *did!*" said Slater. "Why didn't you tell anybody?"

The Swede shrugged a pair of massive shoulders. "Nobody asks me so I am minding my own business."

"Well I'm asking you right now. Tell us what you saw."

"It is nothing but what happens when a he and a she are out walking. They are coming out of Rutherford Row together into the park and sitting on the big green bench, yust under the elm trees, when I go my rounds. I am not interrupting them because Mr. Slater, he knows it is not my business to interrupt a he and a she—"

"Never mind about that," said Slater sharply and Wright snickered.

"But then I see they are not acting like a he and a she, only sitting on this bench, a meter apart, not saying anything to each other. So I think maybe they are not feeling so good with each other and maybe if I say something to them they will have time to think maybe it is better not to be mad, like you know how it is."

"Sound psychology," observed Wright. "Go on."

"So I am going up to Mr. Abercrombie and asking him maybe he wants me to

lock up the building. But he does not answer and she gets up and is walking away down Rutherford Row, yust like that. So then I think maybe it is worse than I think and next day, he is dead."

THERE was a momentary silence in the laboratory as Wright fitted a piece of wire into a connection. Then he said, "That's a very queer story, Yumpin' Yiminy."

As the Swede started to protest Slater waved a hand. "We aren't doubting you. Have you any idea—did you hear anything—to show what they might be quarreling about?"

Yumpin' Yiminy rubbed the back of his head. "I am thinking about that and you know what I think? I think now I have made a mistake and they are not mad on each other at all. I think they are yust so sad from sitting under the elm-trees by night. In the old country we call them coffin-trees and when a he and a she go out walking they will not go by them."

"Inez seems to be affected in somewhat the same way," said Slater. "But I can't imagine Lorenzo Abercrombie—" He broke off as the door clicked open, framing the figure of Paul Angelus in the light. His dark, striking features bore a smile.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. "I perceived the light and came to see what happened."

"Just trying to restore Dr. Abercrombie's recording machine," said Wright. "I have some experience in electronics, and thought I might be able to do something with it. If we do have to go to Chicago I don't think there'll be any particular harm done. Slater's keeping a record of each part so they can re-assemble them as they see fit."

"But I thought it would be a good idea to try it out here, where we have the special Abercrombie cyclotron to furnish the electron-stream. Not to mention that we'll have the benefit of your experience in analyzing the results." He smiled.

Angelus did not return the smile. "I am perfectly at your disposal," he said, walking over and gazing at the device that was growing under Wright's fingers. "During the hours that remain to me at Selfridge, that is to say, I regard Dr. Abercrombie's work as of infinite importance and believe that the only just memorial to him would be to complete it."

Slater made a noise in his throat. "I thought you said he flopped on it."

"Ah, my friend, but he was so near success! Think on it—truly to unlock the mazes of the subconscious and discover the secret springs of the soul! It may be that men are not intended to have such knowledge on this earth. They might possess too much power over each other and whatever beings rule us from the background." He shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know. But it is worth the effort."

"Did you know that Inez Hutchinson, the dancer, saw Abercrombie the night he—died?" asked Slater. "All right, Ted, I've got that one down—a two twenty-three tube, wasn't it?"

"I have learned it recently," said the Frenchman. "I consider it would be dangerous to use her as experimental material in your reconstruction of the recorder."

"Why?" asked Slater and Wright together.

"Because she is a very sensitive but somewhat dangerously unstable type. The danger is to her—the stream of electrons employed could easily upset her normal balance. Also I do not conceive that results of value can be obtained from her subconscious.

"She is so emotional that the subconscious mind is subject to inventions, perhaps from some source more deeply buried. For example, she has a singular fixation toward elm trees. I would choose a more stable type."

"All right," said Slater, "I'll tell you what we'll do to start with anyway. We'll try the machine on Yumpin' Yiminy here and you can see whether

it's functioning right. You can tell from the records, can't you?"

"I believe so. Let me see them. Good fortune with your experiment. I beg you will excuse me." He made a movement with his head that was not quite a bow and sauntered toward the door.

WHEN he was safely through it Slater turned to Wright. "That guy is so polite that he sometimes gives me the shivers," he said. "And even if he is the pro-tem head of the project I don't know that I like him telling us whom we should put under the machine and whom we shouldn't. After all I've tried it myself and survived. But what did you have to tell him we were planning to experiment with Inez Hutchinson for?"

Wright looked at him in amazement. "Why, I didn't tell him anything of the kind! You were right here all the time, listening to everything I said. We didn't even decide to use Inez as a subject until after we were talking things over tonight and made up our minds that she undoubtedly had something in her subconscious that would help explain Abercrombie's death."

"Perhaps she said something about it herself," said Slater, "after I reported progress last night. She's pretty thick with Angelus. But it's funny all the same. How are you coming, by the way? It's getting pretty late."

"I've got about two more of these connections to make before we're ready for a trial run. But I don't suppose you know how to operate the cyclotron anyway, so we'd better wait for tomorrow and get one of the technicians from the psychology project.

"Look here, Will, if you're so anxious to probe Inez Hutchinson's subconscious, why can't you persuade her to be hypnotized or something like that?"

"The way I understand it Abercrombie's little toy here produces approximately the same effect, only far more certainly, because the subject is conscious all the time and there aren't any

orders from the conscious to the subconscious. The stuff is just recorded."

"Then won't you have to depend on Angelus anyway to interpret the results?"

"I suppose so. But I don't see that as a fatal drawback. The guy's an honest enough scientist, even though I don't happen to like his manner and I'll say this for him—he can see his way through a stone wall quicker than anyone I know. He may be perfectly right about Inez as a dangerous subject, at that. Turn off the lights when you go, will you, Yumpin' Yiminy?"

VII

HE WON'T feel anything," said Slater, "but if you've got the right hookup, Ted, there will be a wavy white line along that plate, parallel with the scale. We can photograph later." He turned to Angelus. "How long an exposure do you think we should give? I had about fifteen seconds the first time, if I remember."

"But that was in the controlled research of the conscious reaction," said the psychologist. "I propose you commence with a five-second exposure—at least until the validity of Dr. Wright's admirable reconstruction is established."

"That's sound," said Wright. "We aren't looking for real results this time, only a test of the apparatus. Ready, Yumpin' Yiminy? Watch that picture on the wall there and think about anything you want to. Sure you're willing to take the chance?"

The Swede grinned and settled back under the headpiece of the device. "You don't mind me," he said. "I'm yust an old Swedish man."

"Okay then," said Wright to one of the technicians. "If we're only going to give it five seconds you'd better put in the automatic cutoff. Got it?" He lifted one hand. "Go!"

The hand came down, and the three scientists bent eagerly over the hooded

screen plate while the lights in the room flickered briefly as power was applied to the cyclotron.

Nothing happened.

With a click the power went off again. Wright lifted a disappointed face. "Has it behaved like that before?" he asked.

"Assuredly not," said Angelus. "Always there is the leaping white line on the plate. But perhaps it is the machine itself which is inexperienced?"

"You mean not warmed up enough?" said Wright. "It could be but I doubt it. However, let's try again with a fifteen-second exposure this time. You didn't feel anything, did you, Yumpin' Yiminy? By the way, what were you thinking about?"

"I am thinking how my father teaches me to swim with a rope around my middle on Lake Bolmen."

"That's definite enough to have produced some result if I had the hookup right. All right, go!"

The hand rose and fell once more. The clicking on and off of power was repeated but for the second time the observers were staring at a blank black screen. Angelus heaved a sigh.

"Alas!" he said. "That such genius as that of Abercrombie should be canceled by his secretiveness. It is clear that while such things occur the race of man cannot attain perfection, is it not?"

"It is clear that I made a mistake in the hookup somewhere, that's all," said Wright, a trifle grimly. "All right, Yumpin' Yiminy, we won't try any more today."

Angelus said, "Without doubt Dr. Abercrombie made many communications regarding his work to Dr. Slater and Miss Hutchinson. But I do not think that any of them will prove of decisive importance."

"As a matter of fact, I was just wondering whether he hadn't said something inadvertently at some time that might give us a clue. Want to walk back with me, Will, and have a drink?"

The walk was made in gloomy silence. As they turned into Rutherford Row

Wright kicked savagely at a little pile of dead leaves on the sidewalk. "It's just my own stupidity somewhere along the line," he said.

"The circuits are all new to me but the general type isn't and I didn't have any parts left over. Only nothing is recorded. I suppose I'll just have to give up and let Chicago take over. Have you any more leads from the fair Inez?"

"No but she's doing so much work on this new dance recital that—say, I just remembered something."

"What, Will?"

"About what you asked—whether Abercrombie had said anything that might be a clue. I remember now—in that letter he wrote to me in Washington there was something that I didn't understand that might mean something to you.

"He always made his letters as obscure as possible so it may not mean anything at all. But as I remember it it was something about turning a Klein bottle inside out with one more crocodile. Does that make sense?"

"No-o . . . Wait, my God, yes it does! Come in and get that drink and let's argue this out. I forgot the name of the street I was living on and that's the clue."

WHEN they were seated Wright said, "Do you have any idea what a Klein bottle is? No? Well, it's a kind of projection into three dimensions of the Moebius strip. A Klein bottle can't be turned inside out, because it doesn't have any inside or outside. It's all one continuous surface."

"You think he was trying to convey some information with that crack?"

Wright nodded vigorously. "I certainly do. Remember the last pages of that diary—the last ones we could read. He was under pressure of some kind—we don't know what yet—to destroy the Hutchinson record and he was afraid it would get him, just as it did. Tell me, did he often write about his experiments?"

Slater rubbed his chin. "Now that you mention it, hardly ever. And I hadn't been gone long either. I just made a two-week swing up into New England to check up on the progress of the elm blight there and then went on to Washington."

"All right. Then I think he hit on something so dangerous he didn't even dare to tell you plainly about it and was trying to give you a lead as to what it was. The Klein bottle—neither inside nor outside—he's trying to say that when you get deep enough in all these lines of research there's one continuous surface. The Hutchinson record and the pressure he was undergoing and your research on elms."

Slater said, "It's true that in the Hutchinson record 'Renzo has her subconscious making a lot of high-powered unfriendly comments about elm trees. That bothered me a little, I admit. Because Inez in her conscious mood reacts in the opposite direction.

"In 'Night and the Dryads' she gave the leading role to the elm-dryad and she's doing something like it again in the new ballet, which is something about Druids."

"Never mind Hutchinson for a minute. Let's concentrate on Abercrombie. I think he was not only warning you but telling you how to go ahead if you really had nerve enough to push things."

"He knew I was trying to get off this elm blight research project," said Slater. "That's why I went to Washington. But I don't see what you mean by telling me how to go ahead."

"The crocodile."

"Meaning what?"

"You wouldn't know unless you'd been mixed up with electronics and atomic energy. Crocodiles seldom bite botanists. But when Rutherford was working at Cavendish on nuclear energy the students used to call him 'the crocodile'—because he had such a loud laugh they were always warned of his arrival, like the crocodile in 'Peter Pan'

that had swallowed an alarm clock that ticked. So they adopted 'crocodile' as the word for the million-electron-volt unit that Rutherford discovered."

"I still don't—"

"I do. He turned the Klein bottle inside out with one more crocodile—that is, he added one more million electron volts to the machine and got—the Hutchinson record. I think I see now—the technical side, that is. He must have hooked in an amplifier of some kind, though I didn't find any spare parts of one in the box of junk you gave me from Abercrombie's lab."

Slater thoughtfully sipped his drink and took three long pulls on his cigarette. "You know," he said at last, "that brings up a couple of points. The first one is that when 'Renzo Abercrombie blew up he was digging into the subconscious. Presumably the machine was altered to pick that up—not conscious thoughts of anyone in it—and it still is as you've reconstructed it."

"Well, what of it?" said Wright. "All the better. I'll work out an amplifier and attach it and we'll get right to the heart of this something dangerous, whatever it is, without ever monkeying with conscious thoughts."

"You're forgetting something. Who's going to make the interpretations? They come out in the recording plate in the form of wavy lines across a scale and somebody has to interpret. Remember that Abercrombie's 'dictionary' went with the rest of the records."

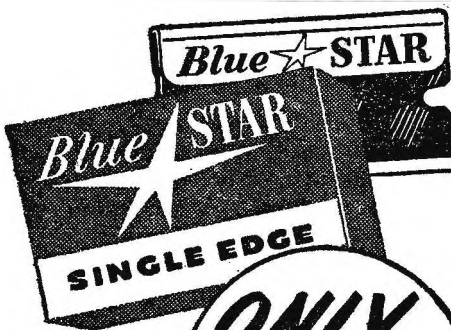
"Why. I suppose your friend Paul Angelus can take care of that end if anybody can."

Slater grinned wryly. "Not my friend and he's going to be still less so if he doesn't keep away from Belle. But there's a good reason why we shouldn't having him fooling around the investigation of this—whatever it is."

"We're agreed, I think, that our only chance of really getting to the bottom

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of things is to get Inez Hutchinson under the machine again and find out whatever it was Abercrombie had started to find out when he died. And you heard what Angelus said about that. He called her dangerous and unstable and as good as told us to go chase ourselves if we were following that line."

Wright considered. "I think maybe we could smoke him out," he said. "How would it be if I built the amplifier—by the way it's damn strange the parts of one weren't there—and proved that the machine worked by trying it on Yumpin' Yiminy or somebody? With the proof in his hands Angelus could hardly refuse to cooperate on taking a recording from Inez."

VIII

IUTSIDE it was a distinctly hot night and the sawing of cicadas accompanied Slater and Wright to the door. Some of the heat remained as a memory, even in the air-conditioned lab. Yumpin' Yiminy's face was troubled.

"It is not good to go against regulations," he said. "The regulations, they say I am not letting anyone into the laboratory without department permission."

"It's all right," said Slater. "I'm head of a department, too, and for tonight you're my assistant. All the same, don't put on all the lights. Can you hook in your amplifier with just this one, Ted?"

"Shouldn't be too much trouble," said Wright. "Here, hold this for a minute while I try to find an outlet."

"There's one right at the back behind that desk. Sure you can handle the controls of the cyclotron yourself?"

"Yep. I can put it on automatic in any case. Be sure to keep your eye on that plate now. If it works I want to have the whole board of trustees down for the next try."

He worked in silence for a couple of minutes. Then, "All right, Yumpin' Yiminy, if you're still ready, willing and

able to try it again," said Wright.

"I am yust an old Swedish man, yust like before," said the caretaker, moving to his place in what vaguely resembled a dentist's chair, "and I do not like it that my friend Abercrombie is dead."

Wright adjusted the device to his head. "I'm going to step up the power this time," he said, "and it may bother you. If it gives you a headache or anything, tap with your fingers. You watch that, will you, Will? I've cut in an emergency switch on the amplifier circuit right here—and all you have to do is squeeze."

He disappeared through the door of the cyclotron control room and a moment later his voice came, muffled by the distance. "Ready?"

"Okay," called Slater. The lights flicked, the cyclotron hummed. He glanced momentarily at Yumpin' Yiminy's hands on the chair-arm to be certain that there was no signal for help, then bent over the plate.

It was blank.

"How's it going?" called Wright's voice from the door. "I left it on to make sure this time."

Slater lifted his head to give a regretful negative—but just as he did so there was a kind of gurking sound from Yumpin' Yiminy. Under the headclamp of the machine his eyes were closed and his mouth had come open.

"*Titte om alla denne älskvärdige Avnar,*" he said slowly with an accent of amazement. Then his face suddenly contorted. "*Nej!*" he shouted. "*Nej! Jag vil icke göra det! Aldrig!*" His shoulder twisted as though he were about to ward off a blow. Slater hastily cut the switch and Wright helped take the apparatus from the old Swede's head.

"I hope it didn't hurt you," he said.

Yumpin' Yiminy rubbed one ear and then the other. "No, it is hard to hurt an old squarehead like me," he said. "But it was so fonny. I was like in a dream, only young again, in a forest,

and all ring-around with beautiful girls dancing."

Slater gave a slight laugh. "I can imagine that was a fairly pleasant dream," he said. "But toward the end you seemed disturbed about something."

Yumpin' Yiminy's frosty eyebrows went up and down. "That is not being so good," he said. "The big boss was telling me if I want to stay there I have to put one of those beautiful girls in a basket and burn her all up."

"The Druid sacrifice!" said Slater. "Tell me, Yumpin' Yiminy, who was the big boss that told you to do this?"

A frown of puzzlement appeared in the Swede's brow. "I am not knowing. Yust the big boss. He is all around, everywhere."

"What kind of trees were in this forest?" Wright put in.

Yumpin' Yiminy looked at him as though the answer was so obvious it didn't need to be made. "Elm-trees like in the grove," he said. "Coffin trees."

SLATER and Wright exchanged glances. The former said; "Have you ever heard of the Druids, Yumpin' Yiminy?"

"No. I don't think I am knowing them. Maybe a long time ago when I am in school."

"Did you get what he said when he was in the machine?" Wright said to Slater.

"No. I don't know Swedish and it came too fast for me to try to take down. All except one word. Yumpin' Yiminy, is there a Swedish word 'Avna' or 'Avnar'?"

The old man shook his head. "That is not a word in Swedish. I think maybe there is something like that in Danish. They have a fony language."

"All right. We'll lock up. Thanks a lot for helping us. I think we've made a good deal of progress." Slater turned to Wright when the old man had said good-night and passed through the door. "Well, what do you think?"

Wright was frowning. "I think we got to the subconscious all right but I'm not at all satisfied and I'm not even sure whose subconscious it was. Where did he pick up this fairly accurate picture of a Druid sacrifice? And that word 'Avna' again, the one that showed up both in the Hutchinson record and Abercrombie's diary. You're sure nothing showed up on the plate?"

"Not a line, not a mark. I was watching it so carefully that I didn't even notice Yumpin' Yiminy's eyes had closed until he began to speak."

"Then I certainly haven't reproduced Abercrombie's hookup exactly because you say he got reaction on the plate every time. But it occurs to me, Will, that I may accidentally have hit something better. Do you realize that this jerry-built hookup of mine seems to stimulate the speech-centers?"

"By God, I believe you're right! And if it's true it would be a much more direct means of analysis than a photo of a wiggly line running across a plate, and which has to be interpreted. Look here, Ted, why can't you try it on me for once? If I burst into words at least they won't be in Swedish—and I'll have a fairly accurate picture of what I go through."

"If you want to take the chance?"

"I wouldn't think of putting Inez Hutchinson in the machine unless I had tried it myself. And we've got to get her into it if we're ever going to get to the bottom of this business."

Slater was already climbing into the chair. "Leave the door open so you can hear anything I say," he said. "You can use the main control instead of the cutoff on the amplifier. Let's go."

He heard the click as Wright threw in the cyclotron. For a long moment nothing at all happened. Then came a tingling sensation at the base of his skull as though his scalp were being massaged with one of the rubber-tired vibrators barbers use.

A big irregular black spot edged with white floated slowly past his eyes to the

limit of vision, turned and spread till it cut off the view of the dimly-lighted laboratory and the picture on the wall in a welling tide of darkness.

ABRUPTLY he was in another world—or another part of this one. Even the sensation of the headpiece vanished and the feel of the chair-arms under his hands. He was no longer in the laboratory at night but in brilliant daylight in a wood he did not recognize, where tall birches threw spotted shadows across the edge of a woodland pool. He could hear the murmur of insects and suddenly thrilled to the knowledge that the touch on his arm was Belle Ruskevicz, sitting beside him.

"Isn't it lovely?" she said. "Something we've always wanted."

She turned toward him, her blond hair framing the lovely face and as though drawn by some irresistible magnetism their lips met in a long deep kiss.

Suddenly she was out of the circle of his arm, panting a little and on her feet. "Let's swim," she said and began to fumble with the buttons of her dress—
Pop!

Slater was back in the laboratory again, looking at the door through which Wright was coming with a grin a yard wide on his face.

"It seems to be a success," he said, "and even if we did get some queer results with Yumpin' Yiminy I would describe your subconscious as distinctly normal. Boy, are you a wolf when you get the chance!"

Slater was a little shamefaced as he took off the headpiece. "Well, I'm not making any secret of thinking a good deal of Belle," he said defensively.

"It wouldn't be much use after your conversation—which I won't repeat," said Wright. "But the main point seems to be proved. This gadget does tickle up the subconscious and simultaneously excites the speech-centers so that anyone in it has to tell about it. I think we're about ready to tackle Miss Hutch-

inson and really learn something."

"I wonder," said Slater, sliding out of the chair. "I wonder. You remember how I told you the last time I saw her she was pretty strong about nobody having the right to enter another personality.

"It seems to me that this machine would be a pretty dead giveaway to what's going on in anyone's mind and Inez might not care too much for the idea of laying herself open that far. It would be a perfectly lovely instrument for a blackmailer to own."

"I daresay it would," said Wright, "but they manage to keep atomic energy under responsible scientific control, don't they? And look here, Will, we seem to be engaged in a battle of some sort against something fairly big and dangerous.

"It killed your friend Abercrombie and would have wiped out everything he did if I hadn't happened to come along and make a couple of lucky mistakes in the hookup. It seems to me that we haven't any more right to lay off Hutchinson than a general in a war has to avoid using troops in an attack because some of them may get killed."

"All right. I'll try to persuade her to make the experiment. I think about five-thirty or six o'clock would be a good time when the regular activities have closed down for the day and she'll be free. Got your amplifier?"

IX

SLATER said, "Cocktails? And tell me how the rehearsals for the new ballet are going."

"Only sherry at noon," said Inez in her bell-like voice.

"I'll have one though," said Belle. "A Manhattan, please. And the rehearsals are perfectly frightful. The first cello didn't show up yesterday and the Chief Druid tore his costume trying to do an *entrechat*. I don't know how Inez stands any of us."

"You do look a bit wan now that you

mention it," said Slater and observed that the handkerchief that lay beside Inez' gloves was crumpled as though she had been twisting it. "Shall I order the lunch now?"

"Yes, they don't have to bring it right away. Paul Angelus has been a lot of help, though. He's a Breton, you know, so I suppose his ancestors were Druids and he seems to have inherited a lot of their knowledge. Anyway he knows a good deal about it and has straightened us out a dozen times. We're taking the afternoon off today though."

While Belle was talking Inez had been slowly sipping her sherry. Slater saw her eyes resting on him somewhat speculatively. He said, "That reminds me, Inez, we've been working on 'Renzo Abercrombie's recording device—Ted Wright and I—and we think we're getting somewhere. Not quite the way he did but we tried it out last night and had definite positive results. I was under it myself and Ted Wright said he got a picture of my subconscious."

"Did he?" said Belle. "What was it like?"

"I'll tell you some other time," said Slater and felt himself blushing. "What I wondered is—would you care to try the machine, Inez?"

She gave him another long speculative glance. "Will it help?" she said. "Will it set my mind at rest?"

"I can't answer that honestly," said Slater. "But at least we know enough about the way the machine works to be able to say that it will tell you the truth." He smiled. "Or at least it will tell us. Whether we tell you is another thing."

"The truth—it might be more than I want. If it should turn out—" She stopped suddenly and Slater feared for a moment that he was going to have another emotional scene on his hands, like that in the cocktail bar when she appealed to him before.

Instead, she turned swiftly to Belle. "I will tell you of this, which must sound strange to you. I have a fear—

this Lorenzo Abercrombie, of whom you have heard, the night he died, I was talking to him.

"Did I say something, did I do something that might have hurried his end? I do not know. But the heart will know." She laid her hand on it. "And now Willard says Lorenzo's own machine can probe the secret."

Belle's face had suddenly become grave. "Yes, I know," she said and turned toward Slater. "You knew about my parents? I have always thought—always wondered . . . There is something I do not understand, and I can't help feeling as though I may somehow have been partly to blame.

"You see, we were one of those families that never goes to bed and every night about half-past one I used to call them up and talk to them. But it just happened that that day I had gone for a long walk in the woods and came home and went to bed early and didn't call them.

"And it had to happen that that night they must have gone to bed early too because they didn't call me. No, I'm all right," as Slater laid a hand on hers. "I can talk about it now. But I can't understand why we both—all—slept so deeply that night."

A relay clicked somewhere in Slater's mind. He said, "Where were you?"

"At Bennington. I remember seeing the wych elms there and thinking how much they reminded me of home." She moved her shoulders. "That's why I couldn't bear the things until Inez snapped me out of it."

"Good for you, Inez," said Slater. "But what about the machine? Willing to try it?"

"Perhaps. I think—yes."

HE HASTENED to press his advantage. "All right, since you're not rehearsing this afternoon why not about half-past five? I'll have things cleared away on the regular work by then and so will Ted. This is extra-curricular."

He turned to Belle. "Can you come, too? I'd like to find out what secrets you have buried in your subconscious."

"They might not be flattering." She had recovered her gaiety. "But I can't. I promised Mrs. Harmon I'd have cocktails and dinner with her out at Laverne and explain how I've been taking care of her silver."

"There's dear Paul now," said Inez. "Is he working with you on this?"

Slater looked up to see Paul Angelus threading his way among the crowded tables of the luncheon hour, coming toward them. "As a matter of fact he isn't," he said hastily, "and he takes such a doubtful view of the whole proceeding that I'd just as soon you didn't mention it until we're fairly sure we're getting somewhere."

The Frenchman was upon them, bowing over Inez' hand. "No, I will not join you," he said, in response to the waved invitation, "for I perceive you are nearly finished with your lunch and I have not yet begun mine."

He turned to Belle. "It is a pleasure to congratulate you on the grace of your performance in the rehearsal yesterday. You entered into the spirit of the woods better than anyone I have seen since Balanchina."

"Thank you," said Belle. "I hope the critics will think so too when the performance comes off." Her voice was cool.

"Never doubt it." Now he addressed himself to Slater. "This is a fortunate meeting. I had meant to call at your laboratory this morning but I hesitated to disturb you. I wished to say that I have been talking with the president and he is united with me in the belief that we must give the bequest foundation another direction of study since we have lost our illustrious Dr. Abercrombie."

"Indeed?" said Slater. The man's sharp black eyes seemed to be trying to bore into his own.

"I have thought you might have an interest as you and Dr. Wright were

concerned with the Abercrombie machine. The lawyers are examining the document of bequest to determine what line may be followed with profit to science. *Adieu.*" He bowed again toward Inez.

"Oh, dear Paul," she said, "I forget. You save me a telephone call. Will you come for bridge again tomorrow, Saturday, in the afternoon?"

"I shall be most happy." He left them as the waiter came forward with the check.

The rain began as a sprinkle that afternoon and by half-past five, when Wright stamped into the Abercrombie laboratory, shaking the glistening drops from his hat, it was a steady downpour. "'Fraid I'd be late," he said, peeling off his raincoat.

"You needn't have worried," said Slater. "Inez will be. She always is."

"I could have suspected it. By the way I had a note in the mailbox today from her, asking me to drop in tomorrow afternoon for a session of duplicate bridge. What do you think?"

"Why not? I think the game's a little lower than tick-tack-toe myself and she knows it—but I'd accept it as a friendly gesture toward the two of us."

"Okay." Wright stepped to the window and looked out. "Hello. It seems to be breaking off there in the west. See that streak of light along the horizon?"

"Sun's nearly down," observed Slater. "By the way did you get anything more this afternoon? You slipped away before I had a chance to ask."

"I was working on the seed of some of those hybridizations between the wych elm and the American red. They're very peculiar—seem to have lost some of the gene characteristics of the wych."

SLATER frowned slightly. "I don't want to inhibit you on anything you think might get somewhere but I doubt whether that line is very fruitful," he said. "Over on ~~one~~

side we've found that those hybrids are even more subject to phloem necrosis than the native species. I'd like to know how the stuff got started."

"Came from Europe, didn't it?"

"Yes but it's insect-borne and it's rather a mystery how the insects got here in the first place. Almost as if someone had deliberately introduced them. For that matter it's still more of a mystery why hybridization with the wych strain, which should produce a hardier strain, produces a less resistant one instead."

"How did the stuff start anyway?"

"That's just what we don't know. The historical data we have on it only goes back about twenty years. Some English owner of a big estate in Oxfordshire—I forget his name—found that his elm-trees were dying off so he cut them all down and replaced them with wyches. They were *Ulmus campestris*, the common English elm. Then the next thing, bingo! it was over here and eating out our trees. I think that's her coming, now."

A gentle tap at the door announced the arrival of Inez Hutchinson. When she threw back the hood of her transparent raincoat her face was a trifle pale, a trifle set. But she said, "You see I came, Willard," in a small voice.

"I was sure you would," said he. "You don't really have to worry about this machine though. It won't harm you in the least. And in any case I'll be right beside you to cut the power if there's a sign of anything wrong."

She reached up to pat his cheek. "Dear Willard. You do not understand. I am not afraid of what can happen to me—only of what I may find out about myself."

"I understand. That's one of the reasons why Ted and I are running this test without having anyone else around."

"Thank you, you are so considerate. What shall I do?"

"Just get in this chair here. I'll adjust the instrument."

As he was fitting the headpiece she said, "Could you turn it just a little? That sun—"

Slater glanced through the window to where the big red orb, one limb already below the horizon under the sliding clouds, was striking the dancer full in the face. "Certainly. There.

"Now, Inez, I want you to remember everything you seem to feel or see while you're in the machine. It doesn't make records the way it did when Abercrombie set it up and the details of what you remember may turn out to be frightfully important. Ready?"

"Yes."

He gripped the amplifier cutoff in one hand. "All right, Ted—go!"

The cyclotron clicked and began to hum. For a moment Slater could see no change at all in the face he was watching so intently except for the slight expression of bewilderment that was normal with Inez in times of stress.

Then the long dark lashes came down on her cheek and as on the day in Kamerer's bar two big tears squeezed themselves from the corners of her eyes. Her lips moved but at first he could make out no sound from them.

Then, as he leaned closer, "Lorenzo! I only wanted to help you. That was why I took you to the elms. Truly, truly—it's all my fault. There must be some way you can get out of it. Have them cut down. Tell them about me—they'll understand. I'll tell them myself. Only give me a chance . . . Oh!"

The door clicked and Paul Angelus stood in the opening. "I fear I have arrived too late," he said evenly. "But it is perhaps my fault. I should have warned you."

In the chair the dancer's body twisted. "No, I will not let you in," she said. "You can't make me until I have told them. If the Avna hadn't taken Lorenzo I wouldn't care. It doesn't matter for me but it isn't night yet and you can't . . . Even if I love the Avna . . ."

She trailed off into vague murmur-

ings and then in quite a new almost-masculine voice said, "It's quite all right, really. So silly of anyone to get disturbed. Lorenzo was a good deal of a fool really. He used to imagine things and because I was just a stupid woman he thought he could make me back him up.

"Then he'd suggest things to me and put me under that machine and they'd come out the way he wanted them to. I think he was half crazy. He used to talk about hearing voices under the elms at night as though he were Joan of Arc or something."

She stopped again, then once more stirred under the heavy headpiece and her voice changed back to its former accent. "No, you can't make me do that . . . Haven't I given up enough already? . . . They can't need more sacrifices and especially her . . . No! No! No!"

She writhed in such agony that Slater abruptly cut the switch. Wright came through the door as he was helping Inez off with the headpiece.

"Hello, Angelus," he said. "Are you all right, Miss Hutchinson? You seemed rather agitated for a couple of minutes there."

INEZ climbed down from the chair, smoothed her dress and picked up her bag to consult her compact mirror. "Oh, dear," she said. "My makeup! I don't know why I should have been agitated. It certainly wasn't an experience I'd particularly care to repeat but there was nothing really upsetting about it."

"Indeed," said Slater and looked at her. "Do you remember what you—dreamed about while you were in the machine?"

She turned toward him, her self-possession in startling contrast to the emotion she had exhibited a few minutes before. "Not very well. At first, it seemed rather cloudy and I was going down a road somewhere, I think with Lorenzo Abercrombie, poor thing.

"I felt so sorry for him because everyone was saying he was crazy and just another spiritualist, which I never believed, even if some people did talk like that, you know. The picture changed, the way it does in dreams, and he was trying to make me take that machine again and I didn't want to because it always gives me a headache a little."

She pressed one hand to her forehead. "And then it changed again and someone was trying to make me give up my new dance recital, you know, the Druid one."

Wright said, "What about the Avna?"

"Avna?" Inez looked surprised. "What is the Avna?"

"You said something about it when you were in the machine. It seems to be connected with elm-trees."

"I can't imagine. It sounds like the name of a character in a story—or a ballet. Rather pretty too. Avna." She repeated it, savoring the syllables. "What time is it? Heavens, I've got to be running!"

"I'll take you back," said Slater but Paul Angelus cut in.

"Your pardon but would it be most inconvenient to let Dr. Wright accompany Miss Hutchinson? I request a moment or two of conference with you."

"Will you, Ted?" said Slater. "You don't mind, Inez? So long and many thanks."

She waved a hand cheerfully and said "Bye," from the door and he turned toward the psychologist.

"I beg you to sit down," said Angelus when they were alone, "and to consider with seriousness what I have to say. I do not think you realize how dangerous is the experiment you have just performed or how serious is the need that it be not repeated."

"No, I don't quite," said Slater, keeping his voice calm. "Why?"

"I am not certain what you have done to Dr. Abercrombie's machine and in all cases I would not comprehend the mechanical details. But it is evident

that the alteration produces serious results of a character not comprehended in his original investigations and in some ways beyond them."

"I noticed that. The recording device fails to work as such, but the subject becomes unconscious and his speech-centers are stimulated. Also the subconscious emotional setup."

"I perceived as much," said Angelus. "It is for that reason that I described the experiment as dangerous."

"Why is it? The subject comes out with a complete memory of everything that went on in his induced dream. I have been through it myself."

"Ah, but my dear Slater," Angelus leaned forward, "you are a tightly integrated personality. Miss Hutchinson is not. It is precisely down there that the danger lies—in the stimulation of an already unstable emotional background. The very fact that she remembers the induced experience only makes it worse."

THE guy might have something at that.

"She didn't seem unduly upset when she left here," Slater said defensively.

"Ah! Because she remembered the experience, knew she had been vocal, feared making a further exhibition of herself by giving it importance and therefore achieved self-control by a conscious effort of will-power. I assure you that it will not turn out so happily another time.

"You yourself were doubtless able to perceive that there were two almost complete personalities present. That is, the lady is a schizophrenic and according to the remarks about sacrifice I would pronounce her as one of decided paranoiac tendencies. Any further effort to stimulate her emotional centers along the same line might result in a complete severance—what you would call insanity."

"Well, I'll be careful," said Slater, standing up. "Thanks."

X

WRIGHT came in and tossed his hat onto the other chair. "It's an awful hour," he said, "but I rang you up earlier and couldn't get you."

"I was out with Belle," said Slater and yawned. "Sorry I missed you this morning. You must have gone out."

"On the contrary I was very much in—in bed. I heard the bell ring but I knew whoever it was would go away in time. You'll have to acquire the habit of nocturnal living too—if you're going to be around dancers. They can't sleep unless the sunlight is coming through the curtains. I found that out by taking the fair Inez for a drive last night after our little experiment. She kept me going till three in the morning."

"Add anything to what we learned?"

"In a negative sense, perhaps. She's a strange woman and was in a strange mood—flatly refused to discuss what went on under the machine, talked about music, art, everything else. Very diverting and gay but not at all what we wanted."

"Mmm," said Slater. "She mention the subject of Abercrombie at all?"

"I did. But I didn't get anywhere with it. She just expressed the kind of decent sympathy you'd expect from an older woman over the death of a younger man she had known socially but not too well."

Slater said, "Ted, that doesn't jibe at all with either of the two attitudes she expressed while under the machine. One minute she was practically in tears over him and the next minute she was calling him crazy. And it doesn't fit in either with the way she behaved before she took the machine.

"And I told you about her coming to me in tears, telling how hopelessly she had loved 'Renzo and that she was willing to do practically anything to clear up the question of his death. I'm almost inclined to believe Angelus is right."

"What do you mean?"

"That's so, I didn't tell you because I haven't seen you since you left the lab with Inez. Well, that was what he wanted to talk to me about. Said that Inez was a schizophrenic, a split personality with one of the two halves dangerously paranoiac. Said that if we stimulated her emotions with that machine again we'd be likely to make that side dominant."

Wright stood up and crushed out the cigarette he had lit. "Look here, Will, let's make some coffee and have a council of war right now. I don't care if it is two o'clock in the morning. There's something going on that I don't like and Inez and Angelus are right in the middle of it."

"Okay, the pot's there. Fill it with water, will you, while I get down the coffee? What makes you so excited? Don't you agree with Angelus?"

"Not one damn bit. I'm no psychiatrist and no psychologist either, thank God, and I think that most of those witch-doctors are nuttier than their patients. But I have taken enough of a layman's interest in the subject to be familiar with the meaning of the terms they use and if Inez Hutchinson is a paranoiac I'm the crown prince of Sweden. Your friend Abercrombie might possibly have been but not her."

"All right, Mr. Freud. Explain."

"Paranoia is characterized by delusions of persecution—which might possibly have been Abercrombie's case, on the showing, though it doesn't usually take so impersonal a form as the belief of commands by an entity not identified. Now we can knock that right out in Inez' case."

Slater thought for a moment. "I guess so. When she was in the machine she did have one burst of protesting—"

"Not enough to establish a delusion of persecution."

"But the main thing that was bothering her was her own feelings. Go on."

"All right," said Wright. "I think that jamoke's about ready. Shall I

pour? Now the other form of paranoia is delusion of grandeur. And having just spent a long evening with the lady I would say she was a long way from that."

"Decidedly," said Slater. "In fact the day she came to me at the lab with the appeal that I do something about 'Renzo's death she told me that she hadn't even thought of the choreography for 'Night and the Dryads' herself. It just came to her from somewhere."

"Then let's review the bidding, as we say in bridge. It's too bad we haven't got a recording of precisely what Inez said in that machine. If we try it again we ought to get a tape recorder at least. But as I remember it there were three separate stages."

SLATER closed his eyes in an effort of memory. "I'd make it four. In the first one she was addressing Abercrombie directly with the feeling that she'd gotten him into some kind of a jam and was begging his pardon. There was something in it about 'taking him to the elms' too."

"Let's skip that part of it for a minute. I'm coming back to it. But I take it we're agreed that this first phase represented a genuine dig into her subconscious."

"Yes, I'll by that. Reach me the sugar, Ted. Now in the next phase she was refusing to let somebody in and was using that mysterious word 'Avna.' And when she came out of the machine it didn't mean a thing to her."

"That phase," said Wright, "is precisely why I'm keeping you from your bed and your dreams of the beautiful Belle. Don't you remember a passage like that in the Abercrombie diary?"

"By God, I believe you're right, at that. Wait, I have it here." Slater got up and rummaged in the secretary-desk that stood against the wall, then produced the charred notebook and ran his finger down the pages. "Yes, here it is. 'May third— The command is something about letting someone in

now, accompanied by the meaningless word Avna and a picture of a dark forest."

"All right. Then you have a striking similarity of experience. In both cases the word Avna mentioned, accompanied by a resisted command to let someone in. I don't think it's coincidence unless the two were a lot closer—wait, there wasn't any sign that your friend Abercrombie returned her affection, was there?"

"I'm sure he didn't even know about it and if he had it wouldn't have made any difference," said Slater. "'Renzo played the field as far as girls were concerned and she was at least twelve years older than he."

Wright sipped coffee. "Then we can eliminate that possibility. I was sure we could anyway because of another coincidence. Remember, when we had old Yumpin' Yiminy in the machine he also used the word 'Avna' and after he came out of it spoke of seeing a picture

of a dark forest—of elm trees, exactly the trees Inez mentioned in her first phase."

Slater rubbed his chin. "I see your point. You're suggesting that the thought of elm-trees, the command to let someone in and the word 'Avna' all come from some source outside the subconscious of the three people who experienced them."

"I'm not suggesting it, I'm saying it. Bingo—like that! Because, remember the next thing that happened to Inez. She smoothed out, her voice changed and she began to pooh-pooh the whole business. I suggest that at this point whoever or whatever was trying to get into her subconscious succeeded."

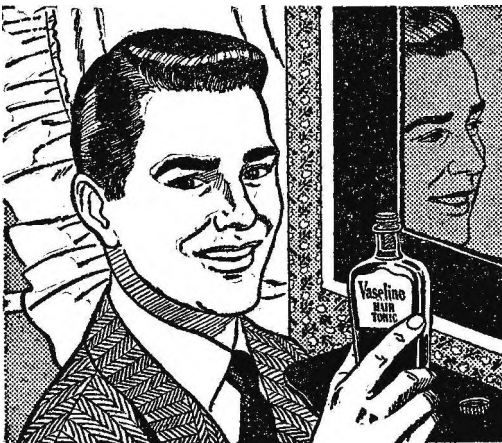
"By God, you're right again!" said Slater. "I remember thinking at the time that it was damned peculiar for a woman who was in love with a man to refer to him as a good deal of a fool and say that he used to imagine things

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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and try to get her to support him in his fantasies. But who or what could be responsible?

"Does the machine itself produce that kind of effect? Or do you think there's a disembodied intelligence floating around somewhere, looking for a place to light? Maybe the old spook-hunter who put up the bequest Abercrombie was working with had the right dope after all."

"There are so many possibilities that it would take us all night to work them all out," said Wright judicially. "We mustn't even neglect the idea that we ourselves are partly responsible. After all, there seems a hookup with elm-trees throughout the picture and we've been so close to this research on Dutch elm disease and phloem necrosis that it may represent some kind of transfer from our own minds under the influence of the machine."

"That won't do. Neither of us was around when 'Renzo wrote his diary and made the Hutchinson record."

"Then I wouldn't be too surprised if your little friend Paul Angelus were mixed up in it somehow. He's one of the most remarkable bridge players I ever saw, by the way. He took about seven deep-sea finesses this afternoon and every one of them succeeded. And every time he refused the finesse the king was offside."

Slater patted a hand over a pretended yawn. "Now you can tell me about how you would have made the fourteenth hole in five if your ball hadn't rolled into a beer bottle," he said with a grin.

WRIGHT said, "It just means that he's sensationally lucky. He plays as though he could see right through the backs of the cards—and with the most complete assurance too."

Another relay clicked in Slater's brain and his hand came down with a snap. "Ted!"

"Well?"

"The cards. That would explain. It points up the fact that Angelus must

be mixed up in it somehow."

"What do you mean?"

"What did they use at Duke in the ESP experiments?"

"Cards—oh, I see. You think Angelus is an ESP man, and did know where the cards lay. But— isn't that a little bit far-fetched, Will? Nobody has ever reported ESP on that scale before."

"And nobody has reported one mind getting complete control of another one either—except for brief periods and under something readily recognizable, like hypnotism. Look what happened to 'Renzo Abercrombie. Listen, Ted, it isn't just the cards. It's a lot of things that I didn't begin to put together until you mentioned the idea.

"Did you notice how Angelus turned up right in the middle of our experiment on Inez? I had asked her especially not to tip him off and I'm sure she didn't but he came over to our table at the restaurant just after we were talking about it. I'll bet he knew without anyone telling him.

"And remember the other day when you were repairing the machine—he came in and before either of us mentioned trying the machine on Inez he said she was dangerous and unstable and we shouldn't? And now that I think of it, when he met me at the station, the morning after 'Renzo died, Angelus seemed to know all about the letter he had written to me in Washington.

"I don't believe 'Renzo told him a word about it. Even in the letter he was being damn careful and secretive about what he said, remember?"

"Well, if it's true, it's certainly ESP on a massive scale," said Wright. "The only trouble I have in crediting it is that I can't see what his motive would be—for trying to keep us from experimenting with Inez or even for Abercrombie's death if it comes to that."

"Don't know," said Slater. "In fact the only thing we do know is that he's up to something and probably knows enough about the inside of minds to

make him dangerous. Tell you what—you think of nothing but bridge while he's around and I'll concentrate on brunettes. Then he won't even know I have my eye on a blonde. Let's turn in and leave the rest for tomorrow. I'm getting foggy."

XI

SUNDAY was usually a day which Dr. Willard Slater celebrated by sleeping until noon, then submitting the newspapers to detailed examination over his second cup of coffee and first cigarette. On this particular Sunday, however, he was destined not to complete the routine.

The first cup of coffee was hardly complete, and he was still following the deeds of prowess performed on the preceding day by the Detroit Tigers when the telephone rang. It was Inez, her voice floating down the wire with a faint thin accent of urgency. "Willard, could you come over to have a second breakfast with me?"

He noticed that she did not call him "dear Willard." That meant she must be pretty serious. "I'll come over and have the first one with you as soon as I can substitute some clothes for my pajamas," he said. "Is there any special reason for the honor? Or is Belle there?"

"No, she—oh, come over soon. I need to see you."

He decided against calling Ted Wright first—the microscopist would probably be sleeping even later anyway—and shaved hastily. Inez herself met him at the door. The maid was bringing in a warming dish of scrambled eggs from the kitchen. There was a little line of strain at one side of the dancer's mouth which her usual careful makeup failed to conceal.

"Hello, Inez," said Slater, "and thanks for taking pity on a lonely bachelor. You're nearly ready for the recital, aren't you? I'm surprised that you have time to think of anything else."

He realized at once that his effort to put her at ease had been a mistake. The line of strain deepened. "I don't know—I'll tell you about it. Cream?"

Slater tried again. "When you called me I half expected you would have Belle here."

She dropped the fork with which she had been more dabbling at the food than actually eating. Behind the kitchen door a dish clattered in the hands of the maid. "You—like her a lot, don't you, Willard?" she said in a low voice.

"Well—yes."

For a moment Inez avoided his eyes. Then she said, "Willard, I have told you about—loving Lorenzo. I think I have the right to ask—do you love Belle?"

He felt a sudden sense of shame at the idea of telling this emotional overwrought woman what he really thought but there didn't seem much help for it if he were to get at the bottom of this menace that seemed to be hanging over them all. "All right," he said, "I love her."

She persisted. "Deeply?"

"Yes."

"I think—I am sure—she loves you too, Willard."

He tried to put it on a more rational basis. "What are you asking me to do?" he said with an effort at a smile. "Make a pass at her or ask her to marry me?"

She made a gesture with one hand. "It isn't important—*that* way. Willard, I want you to take her away—now, before the recital. Never bring her back."

With half his mind on last night's conversation with Ted Wright Slater said, "It's an admirable idea and I'd be glad to take Belle anywhere any time she wants to go. But there are just a few small difficulties in the way. For instance, who would dance the lead in 'The Sacred Wood'?"

"It doesn't matter. I can use an understudy. But not Belle."

"Also there's the point that I have a job. You know, something they pay me money to do."

THE door creaked and the maid's head came through. "More coffee, Miz Hutchinson?" she said.

"No. Go away." Inez got up and walked across to the sofa. "Willard," she said and then got up again, "you don't know, you can't understand, you don't believe me, but it's important. It's more important than anything, more than just the two of you."

Slater said, "Aren't you being a little emotional, Inez? Listen, you're asking me to do something—well, rather out of the ordinary. So much so that I would hardly have a career any more. It seems to me that it's legitimate to ask—why should I?"

She sat down again and cupped her chin in one hand—gracefully, he noticed, in spite of the emotion that was evidently stirring her. "It is something that came to me, I cannot tell you how, but you must believe me.

"It was like the choreography for 'Night and the Dryads'—no, not like that either. That seemed to come to me from outside at night, when I was walking down Rutherford Row. This came to me in the morning, *this* morning, just as I woke up and from inside me, as though there were two parts of me and they were talking to each other . . .

"Suddenly, I was very wide awake—you know how it is—just staring at the ceiling, and everything I knew fitted together. Somehow I knew as though I had been dreaming all night, that someone else was part of me—"

Slater stirred and gave a little exclamation. Inez went on. "Oh, I know it sounds mad, quite mad—"

"No it doesn't," he said, deciding inwardly not to tell her about the talk with Wright last night. "Go on."

"Thank you, Willard, for believing in me a little anyway. It is so important. I knew it was important as soon as I woke up. I knew that I mustn't let Belle dance the lead in 'The Sacred Wood' or even be here when it has its premiere in the grove.

"I knew that it was terribly danger-

ous for her, that something dreadful would happen to her, like her parents, if she did. And it wasn't just Belle, Willard, it was you too and lots of other people. And I knew I wouldn't have much time to tell you about it because whoever else it was that was part of me wouldn't let me. Willard, you must take her away."

Slater said, "Inez, let me ask you something, seriously. Have you ever been hypnotized?"

"No, it isn't that. It *can't* be. Don't you remember—when that hypnotist was here for the Community Chest entertainment where I danced, he tried to hypnotize me on the stage and couldn't? And said afterward that I was the worst subject he ever saw. No, these things come to me from somewhere inside."

"I see." He really didn't but she evidently couldn't furnish much more information along that line. "Listen, Inez, will you tell me something? Has Paul Angelus got anything to do with this?"

"Paul? Of course not. I haven't even mentioned it to him."

"Is this the same thing you were telling me about before? A voice inside your head telling you to do something?"

"No, Willard. That happens to me too. It keeps happening. Mostly at night—like the choreography for 'Night and the Dryads' and now for 'The Sacred Wood.' No, when I hear something like that inside my head everything turns out all right. This is different. I felt so depressed and unhappy and knew I was going to lose something."

"You can't be any more specific than that?" he said, seeing she was about to get out of hand again.

"No—oh, you don't quite believe me! Willard, you must. What would you say if I told you that it was connected with that word you asked me about—'Avna'?"

"Is it?"

"I kept thinking about that word this morning when I was worrying about things."

Slater said, "Really?" Then he thought that it might possibly be just Inez' memory playing her tricks. But before he could think of anything more to say, Inez leaned forward.

"Promise me that you'll take Belle away."

Slater twisted one corner of his mouth in part of a smile. "Do you know, Inez," he said, "there's one person who might possibly object to that. After all I can't exactly pull a caveman stunt on her and she might have other ideas."

Now she stood up, the fear of defeat written on her face. "If I could only make you see, Willard—" she said. "But try, ask. Thank you for coming over and listening."

Slater left her apartment with his thoughts in a turmoil. In a way what Inez had said was a confirmation of the way he and Wright—or rather Wright, with the information he had furnished—had worked things out last night. Something, somebody, around the Selfridge Institute had achieved a means of almost taking over another personality, adapting it to his own purpose. It seemed impossible but there it was.

PAUL ANGELUS? He was at the center of the web in some way certainly. He had been Abercrombie's assistant when 'Renzo killed himself or was killed, probably the former, since it was almost impossible to disregard the physical evidence that he was alone at the moment of his death—and it seemed likely that if his mind had been temporarily under the control that would explain it.

But as Slater considered the matter he didn't think that Paul Angelus had anywhere near enough mental punch to have dominated so vigorous and wholly individual a personality as Lorenzo Abercrombie. The whole idea was absurd.

Also it didn't fit the reactions of Inez. It was perfectly conceivable that Angelus had achieved some sort of dominance over her. But she liked him

—it would be the kind of dominance that results from sympathy and understanding, not the hard dominance that could make a man shoot himself and burn his life's work.

Besides, Inez, was not so completely dominated but that she knew something was going on. It was hard to conceive that anyone who had not completely succeeded with her would achieve so complete a success with Abercrombie.

And Inez had spoken of an unnamed menace, the something deadly and terrible that hung over Belle and himself as well as "lots of other people"—in almost the same terms Wright had used, in the same sense that Slater himself felt. This was not Paul Angelus personally, surely. It was something bigger, of which Paul Angelus was only a part, perhaps.

The word "Avna" had something to do with it. It didn't mean anything. All that one could say was that it was somehow connected with—

Unconsciously, his steps had carried him to Chester Street and he was in front of the building where Belle lived. Well, he had intended to call her up anyhow and he might as well find out if she were home, so he pressed the button that said *Harmon*.

The door clicked. "Who is it?" a voice called down from above as he pushed in.

"It's me, Will Slater."

"Oh! Want to come up?"

It was on the third floor and she met him at the door with, "The place is a frightful mess. I was doing the usual Sunday job, which means repairing clothes. What brings you out so early? I thought you never went anywhere on Sunday before five in the afternoon."

The apartment had been decorated with taste and, under Belle's handling, had acquired something of her own vivid personality. Before Slater thought, he was saying, "Inez invited me over for a late breakfast and a conference . . ." And then he stopped. He hadn't intended to tell her about it.

"I thought Paul Angelus was the leading adviser on ballet. Or did she call you in as an expert on trees."

"No. It was something else. Belle—she likes you, doesn't she?"

"What a peculiar question!" said the girl. "All I can say is that if she doesn't she gives an awfully good imitation of it. She's practically built 'The Sacred Wood' around me and has invited Borian—he's the director of the Deauville Ballet, you know—over to see the premiere. I'm not sure I'm that good but it's my big chance, the biggest one I ever had."

"And you wouldn't want to give it up for anything?"

"No . . . unless—" She looked down suddenly, and Slater felt a wild surge of hope.

He said, "I hope you're thinking of what I am because I'm going to ask you to marry me."

Now she looked up again in a dizzying blaze of blue eyes, then slowly came to her feet. "All right, Will, ask me," she almost whispered.

He was across the room and had her in his arms before he said, "Will you?" and drowned her answer with his lips.

XII

TED WRIGHT put down his coffee cup and glanced around the Institute cafeteria. A white-uniformed busboy was picking up dishes three or four tables away and three or four men from Administration were laughing over something down at the other end—but except for that they had the place to themselves.

"All right," he said, "what is this new development you were so anxious to see me about? I notice that it wasn't so urgent that you could give part of last evening to it."

"I was busy." Slater lit his own cigarette, then said, "Inez Hutchinson called me up yesterday noon and invited me over to a brunch. She was considerably upset. I'll spare you the details but the

gist of it was that when she woke up yesterday morning it was with the realization that someone was inside her mind part of the time, giving her orders, and that it was connected with the word we asked her about—'Avna.'"

"It's called peripheral memory," said Wright, "and I believe most poets write that way but I don't see that it gets us much farther, except that she's now made the conscious connection with that confounded word after admitting it subconsciously before. What were the details? Don't spare the 'osses.'"

"Well—one detail was that the things this other mind told her came to her at night, somewhat in the form of dreams."

"That seems to have been more or less Abercrombie's experience too from what he said in his diary. But we were already nearly sure of it. Anything else?"

"And whenever she obeyed the orders everything turned out perfectly okay. She instanced the choreography for 'Night and the Dryads'—which, she says, came to her that way—and now that for the new recital—'The Sacred Wood.'"

"Hmm—that *is* new." Wright tapped the table with his fingers. "Also it's a contradiction of the Abercrombie experience. The commands he got certainly didn't make everything turn out all right. But I don't see that it improves our stock of information very much. Anything else?"

"Well, yes. It was accompanied by a warning that I mustn't let Belle dance in the premiere of 'The Sacred Wood' when it's given out in the grove, because it would be dangerous for her and for me and for 'lots of other people' as Inez put it."

"Was this one of the dream-orders?"

"Inez said not. In fact from what I gathered it was a specific contradiction of what this Other Mind wanted. She said she wouldn't have much time to tell about it because the Other Mind might not let her."

"This would be a good picture of a schizoid personality if we hadn't agreed that there was nothing really schizoid about Inez. How did she suggest you keep Belle from dancing in 'The Sacred Wood'? I should certainly be inclined to think that would be more in Inez' own line than yours."

"The point struck me too," said Slater, "and it's one of the things I can't quite explain. But she was serious enough about it—wanted me to take Belle away and never bring her back—kiss the Selfridge Institute good-bye and everything. That serious."

"Give any reasons or any clue to the nature of the danger?"

Slater thought for a moment. "There was only what you might call a hint. Inez said that it might be something dreadful—like Belle's parents. They were killed when their house in Chicago caught fire in the night."

"And Abercrombie's death was accompanied by a fire. But I don't see how there could be any fire connected with the premiere of 'The Sacred Wood.' Didn't you tell me it was being held outdoors?"

"Yes, in the elm grove to give the proper setting for the Druid rites that are the main theme of the piece."

WRIGHT stubbed out his smoke and lit another. "Let's treat this thing logically. If you were so much in possession of another person's mind that you could make them do anything you wanted, and for some reason you wanted them to commit suicide, that's what you'd order."

"Now it seems to me that this dominance keeps being connected in some way with that confounded grove of elms. Maybe Angelus uses it in some way to put his subjects under hypnosis."

Slater said, "Oh, by the way, hypnosis is out, at least in the ordinary sense. I mentioned that to Inez and she reminded me of something. They put on a show for the Community Chest a

while back and one of the acts was a hypnotist. He didn't get to first base with her, although she was perfectly willing. I know it's true because I saw it happen myself."

"Then we're back where we were before. We don't know how he does it or what he does. But we do know that somebody, probably Angelus, is gaining control over people's minds by some process connected with that elm grove and using the control in ways that are not a damn bit nice."

"Look here, I know a chap named Louis Kronstein, who is some sort of a big wheel in the Department of Justice. How will it be if I give him a ring on long distance and ask him if he won't make a little unobtrusive investigation of our psychological friend's background?"

"All right with me though I doubt if you'll find much. 'Renzo picked him on reputation and he must show up pretty well."

"By the way did you pass Inez' warning along to Belle?"

SLATER felt himself blushing. "No, I—oh, well, confound it, it isn't any secret. I went over to talk to her and got engaged to her instead."

"Congratulations! I don't blame you for not disturbing love's young dream with what may turn out to be something in Inez' own mind. But in the meantime I think it would be a good idea if you went down to that grove and combed it to make sure there aren't any trick gadgets hidden around anywhere. You know enough about trees to be able to tell."

Wright stood up. As they were on the way down the hall to their own division Slater said, "Ted, I think there's something you're forgetting. Remember that story old Yumpin' Yiminy told us about seeing 'Renzo and Inez together in the grove the night he died and her getting up and walking away? He didn't mention Angelus being around anywhere. I'll have to ask him."

XIII

IT CAME this afternoon," said Wright, as Slater dropped into the seat he had been saving after wishing Belle luck in the tent that served as a dressing-room.

Slater looked around. It was a perfect night, clear, bright and warm, with the enormous parade of the Milky Way picking its way across the sky through the gaps in the tall elms.

They soared up into mystery beyond the lights that picked out the rough old trunks and the dangling bands of artificial mistletoe that converted the grove into a copy of a Druid holy place—not one of the common groves of oak, where the ordinary rites were held but one of the secret high holy places, where rites were attended only by princes and the highest priests of the order.

In the central space the grass had been manicured to velvety smoothness. Around a semicircle comprising one side of the grove temporary stands had been erected instead of the ordinary seats of a theatre. The orchestra, all dark save for the tiny lights on their music stands, were at one wing tuning their instruments, looking like a group of gigantic fireflies.

There was a low murmur of conversation from the stands and the row of chairs that had been placed down in front for specially-honored guests. Slater could just make out the slender well-shaped head of Paul Angelus over the back of one chair as he turned to reply to something the man next to him was saying.

Probably Borian of the Deauville Ballet, he thought. Inez would see to it that her most important member of the audience was provided with someone who knew his native language.

"What came?" he said, after a pause that was less due to any inattention than to the singular enchantment of the scene before him. There was just enough breeze to produce the tiniest rustling in the upper branches. Every-

one in the audience seemed to sense the exalted almost religious mood of the place. All the voices were hushed and anticipatory as though people expected something important to happen.

Wright's pleasant matter-of-fact voice sounded flat in the magical surroundings. "The report from my friend Louis Kronstein in the D.J., the one I had looking up Angelus. I'll give you a shot at it in the morning but it's a disappointment from our point of view. It sums up to saying that the guy's nose is pretty clean."

Below, the conductor was leaning over his podium, checking something in the first violin section. Not looking at Wright but at the glowing green circle touched to the vivid color of spring by the lights, Slater said, "You have to keep the scientific spirit, Ted. If a line of inquiry doesn't give the results you want, then accept the findings and agree with the facts instead of trying to make them agree with you."

"I know," said Wright, "but you need all the facts before you can reach a conclusion. Anyway, when the war started he was a perfectly good psychologist at an institute in Rennes, in Brittany. There's a military depot there and they took him into it to conduct psych examinations on recruits.

"When the Germans moved in he joined the resistance right off the bat. His specialty was the same thing he worked at—psychology. He used to think up ways to drive them nuts, especially some of the commanders. They finally got onto the group he was working with and he was important enough so that the British sent in a plane for him."

"It's suggestive, though," said Slater, then, "Sssh!"

Down at his side of the circle of trees the conductor had raised his baton. Hush spread across the audience. A single clarinet began to give forth the laughing gay opening strains of "The Sacred Wood" and was presently joined by a high sweep of violins.

AS THE other woodwinds took up the melody Belle emerged from behind the trunks, seeming to float rather than to move by any volition of her own, clad in a single garment of royal blue, no longer Belle Ruskevicz but truly the Princess Ymair, wandering happily in a forest older than time.

For a little while the gay notes continued as she made the circle of the grove. Then one of the brasses sounded the note of inquiry as she glanced from trunk to trunk and realized that all the trees were sacred elms.

The music deepened and took on a tiny pang of fear as she spied the hanging mistletoe and understood its message—that this was one of the high holy places, forbidden to all but those most deeply initiated into the Druid faith.

In terror she knelt and prostrated herself, her long blond hair falling round her face, and as she did so a deep horn-call announced the impending arrival of a procession.

The Princess Ymair leaped to her feet and darted from side to side, seeking a hiding place, finally electing to conceal herself between two of the gigantic trunks, where she poised, light as a feather, while from the other side there moved into the grove the Druid priests in solemn procession, surrounded by leaping acolytes.

Now the music became stately and gloomy. The old king, Segontinar, Princess Ymair's father, was entering to learn the fate and future of his realm. For a moment there was a duet, danced between himself and the Chief Druid. Then the latter led the chorus in bowing low in invocation to the sacred wood while cellos and bass horns carried the music.

The music became more and more gloomy, with a shrill violin-note of anguish running through it as the Chief Druid learned from the trees and interpreted to King Segontinar in the pantomime of his dancing, that a frightful sin against the gods had been committed.

The kingdom and everything within it was doomed unless there were a sacrifice of expiation.

The acolytes flung themselves to the ground in attitudes of woe and supplication to the king. In her hiding place the Princess Ymair trembled delicately while the orchestra took up the melody with which she had entered the sacred wood but now in a minor key with an accent of sadness.

At first King Segontinar rejected the idea while the music clashed a momentary discord. Then, as he whirled away from the appealing acolytes, his eye caught the figure of his own daughter, concealed at the edge of the sacred wood.

He returned, expressing his sorrow and his knowledge that the sin was hers for having invaded the high holy places where no woman might enter. He returned to the Druids and their acolytes, showing his repentance and resignation and the fact that no one but himself would be the sacrifice.

Now there was a new outburst of supplication from Druids and acolytes alike, while the chords clashed wildly. But King Segontinar was adamant and at last two of the acolytes were dispatched offstage for the huge wicker cage in which Druid sacrifices were burned alive.

This was the most difficult part of the ballet for Belle. She could not leave her place, yet she must hold the attention of the whole audience while by small motions she expressed her horror and fear.

Slater could hardly take his eyes from her but he did so long enough to notice that Borian was watching her with rapt attention while Paul Angelus was leaning forward, both hands gripping the edge of the chair as though to tear it apart.

Slater returned his attention to the circle of green. The wicker cage had been borne in and King Segontinar was taking his place in it while the music sank to a dirge. With a golden sickle

the Chief Druid cut some of the sacred mistletoe and draped it on the victim.

But just as one of the acolytes was kneeling to apply fire to the sacrifice the Princess Ymair dashed from her hiding-place and, pushing her father aside, took his place in the fateful basket.

The lights suddenly faded. The music changed to a murmur that might have been that of tree-branches in the wind. And as the illumination changed to a softer greener hue the Princess Ymair was alone in the center of the lawn, expressing in every movement how she had become one with the spirit of the sacred wood.

IT SEEMED to go on for a magical forever. Then the orchestra reached its terrific climax, the lights came on again and Belle was bowing in answer to a storm of applause. She ran lightly to the rear of the grove and returned, leading the dancer who had done King Segontinar with one hand and Inez with the other.

Wright touched Slater's arm. "Did it ever occur to you that Druid and dryad are almost the same word?" he said. "By the way that reminds me of something else. I dug up a Danish dictionary over at the library—you remember Yumpin' Yiminy said he though Avna was a Danish word?"

"There's a Danish word a good deal like it but that's as much of a dud as the report on Angelus. It means a corn husk and I can't imagine how that has anything to do with anything."

Slater shook himself. Under the spell of the music and Belle's dancing he had felt for a moment as though he were actually in another world, one greener and more real, where everything that had happened down there in the grove was poetic and perfect. The turning up of the lights, the applause, had struck almost a jarring note.

It was as though Belle, a creature of that other world, had tried to tell him something through her dance that could not be said in words, something which

he had somehow just missed grasping. He got slowly to his feet.

"Everything about this confounded business of Abercrombie seems to be a dud except what we got from Inez under the machine," he said.

They were making their way down the steps of the temporary stands into a now fitfully-lighted darkness where people buzzed excitedly. "By the way," said Wright, "did you give Belle her witch's warning about something dangerous happening if she danced tonight?"

"No," said Slater. "I couldn't see how it would help matters while she was working so hard on preparing for this thing. And it is her big chance."

"All the same," said Wright, "it's damned funny. Remember when we had Yumpin' Yiminy in the machine he spoke of seeing girls dancing among the trees and then having an order to sacrifice one of them in just this way. I doubt if he knew the program of 'The Sacred Wood.'"

XIV

THANKS again for the champagne and everything," said Belle. "You shouldn't really have done it though. It must have been awfully expensive."

"But worth it," said Slater. "After all, you can only have a success like that once in a lifetime."

"I know. Oh, Will isn't it wonderful!" She turned and, regardless of the cab-driver's rear-view mirror, threw her arms around him. "And Borian wants me to work on 'Swan Lake.' He says that if 'The Sacred Wood' does as well as he's sure it will on this tour he'll give me a whole winter season in New York."

He kissed her with a wry smile. "It's wonderful for everyone but me, Princess Ymair. I can't very well spend a honeymoon travelling around the country with a troupe of dancers. It wouldn't look good to the academic authorities of the Selfridge Institute."

She lifted her head and picked a little

at his lapel. "Will you mind so very much having a wife who's a success? That is, if I keep on being one."

There was a squealing of brakes. The cab slid to a stop and the conversation was perforce postponed while Slater paid the driver and handed Belle out.

When they were on the sidewalk she said, "Want to come up for a little while? Oh no, let's not. It's such a lovely night and not late at all really. Come on, walk with me down to the grove and let's look at it with all the people gone."

"All right." He took her hand and they strolled down the street toward the entrance to Rutherford Row, with the lights throwing mottled spots of brightness through the branches of the trees across the way. "Inez seemed pretty happy over things tonight."

"Oh, she is. I went over for breakfast this noon, and she could hardly say anything, and almost cried. It's her first really big success."

Slater said, "And she was doubtful about the whole thing too. Shall I tell you a secret? She wanted me not to let you dance in 'The Sacred Wood.' At least not in the premiere."

Belle stopped and turned a look of amazement toward him. "Really? I can't imagine! Do you mean she didn't like my work?"

"No, it wasn't that. In fact, I gathered it was because she liked the work and you too so much. She said it was dangerous—to you and me both."

"But Will! *Why?*"

"I don't know. She couldn't exactly explain. Just said it had come to her when she woke up that morning."

"She's a very strange person anyway. Quite different when she first gets up than at night. If you see her over the breakfast table you'd be certain she thought the world was going to end by six o'clock."

"But when you catch her in the evening she's so bright and full of confidence that you're perfectly sure that if the world did end she'd be perfectly

capable of making a new one by herself. But I still don't understand. Did she say *how* it would be dangerous?"

"No. Except that it was something like—your parents."

Belle shook her lovely head. "I just don't understand, Will. I did dance the part of a girl being sacrificed by fire, but there wasn't anything in the least dangerous in it, outdoors there in the grove. Even that torch the acolyte used on the wicker basket was a fake with no flame in it."

"I don't know," said Slater. "There's something strange happening and Inez is in the middle of it somehow. It's as though another personality entirely took possession of her at times and made her do things that she wouldn't do ordinarily."

"And mingled with that somewhere is this continual idea of sacrifice. She spoke about it when she was in the machine, which shows it's down in her subconscious, and she's made it the whole center of 'The Sacred Wood.'

"Then she seems to turn against it again. She wanted me to take you away from here and never come back, as she said. I suppose it all wouldn't matter if it weren't for Abercrombie. I wouldn't want anything like that happening to you."

They had reached the entrance to the grove where the ticket-seller's booth, put up for last night's performance, now stood deserted. Belle turned toward him and put up her arms. "Don't worry, dear, it won't," she said. "Besides, I'm going away anyway on tour after two more recitals here."

"Yes," he said, kissing her, "and postpone the wedding."

She disengaged herself. "Come, sit down on this root here. You'll like me all the better for waiting and besides, then people can't say I rushed you into it."

He looked at her suddenly. The remark was cheerful and ordinary enough but there was something in it, some accent that did not seem quite like Belle.

"I don't think anyone will ever say that," he said. "Not while I'm just a rather incompetent plant botanist, unable to keep the American elm trees from dying off, and you're a successful ballet star."

"Don't be tiresome, Will." Again he experienced the peculiar sensation that this was not quite like Belle somehow. "I'm not marrying you because you're famous. And the American elm-trees don't matter anyway, not while we have these." She swept one hand up in a gesture toward the overhanging branches of the wyches. "I love these elms."

A MEMORY picked maddeningly at Slater's attention. "Do you?" he said, trying to locate it, then suddenly sat stiffly upright. "*Belle!*"

"What is it?"

"The first night I met you, when we were walking home from Inez Hutchinson's—didn't you tell me you hated elms?"

"Did I? I must have been out of my mind. But if I did say it that was before I danced under these trees here. There's something so solemn and secure and—intelligent about them. I sometimes think I could almost be a witch in a grove like this."

"Belle," he persisted, "don't you remember? The same night when you said Paul Angelus made you feel like a specimen."

"Did I say that too? I really must have been out of my mind. I suppose I didn't like him too well at first. But he's really quite all right when you get to know him. He was so much help with 'The Sacred Wood.'

"Did you know that those gestures the Chief Druid used when he cut the mistletoe weren't just choreographic motions? They're supposed to have some significance in the Druid cult—I don't know just what it is."

"Belle!" he begged desperately. "Listen to me. Have you been seeing Angelus much this week?"

She looked at him, her expression un-

certain beneath the shadow of the trees. "Only at the studio while we were rehearsing. And he did come around to congratulate me last night after the performance. Are you going to be jealous of me, Will? Because you don't own me, you know."

There was a real edge in her voice and he was miserably conscious that this was not like Belle either. "No, I'm not being just jealous," he said. "Believe me, Belle. It's—it's . . ."

He suddenly found himself groping for words. Sitting under those tall trees, in that circle with the temporary seats shining whitely at one side, where she had danced so thrillingly the evening before, it was hard to believe that Paul could have dominated anyone else. It was hard even to believe in evil.

"It's what?" Her voice was not only uncomprehending—it was definitely hostile and he realized that they were as close as they would ever be to their first quarrel.

"All right," he said, "let me try to explain. Ted Wright and I have been trying to work things out ever since Abercrombie died. We're practically certain that his death wasn't really natural—that something went wrong with his mind, somehow, to make him do something like that.

"We think someone gained control of his mind and we believe that it may have been Paul Angelus. Because we're pretty sure that he's a perfectly tremendous ESP person. He knows things not only in general terms but specifically what people are thinking."

"And so you're jealous of him?" Her voice was a little mollified but not much.

"No, I'm not jealous of him. I told you that. I suppose I'm a little afraid of him after what Inez said. Not for myself but for you."

In the dimness he saw her head turn. She was looking at the ground. After a moment she said, "You needn't worry. I won't be around here long, I'll be away on tour. And when I get back, if I ever do, we'll be married.

"If you still haven't worked things out by that time we can—oh, I don't know. . . Will, can't you arrange some other line of research, something that would take you away from here if the place makes you unhappy?"

He reached out and took her hand. "Belle, dear, I love you more than anything I know. It's partly just because of that, don't you see? 'Renzo Abercrombie was my best friend and he's dead and there's something—something around this place that's black and menacing. And I intend to find out what it is."

"If you must." She slid to her feet with easy grace. "Put your arms around me, Will. Everything's going to be all right—it must be. Isn't it wonderful here—like being in another world?"

She lifted her lips to his, and at the thrilling contact another memory came. Only the evening before in this very place he had felt, he had dreamed as he watched her dance, that they were somehow in another world. Now, behind his closed eyelids, it seemed almost to take form, the form of perpetual groves like that in which they stood.

A current of force and joy ran through him. It seemed suddenly that if he could stay there with Belle forever he would be stronger than giants, wiser than Shakespeare, learn everything man needed to know. Only there came with that feeling of approaching perfection the knowledge that it must be paid for by yielding, by sacrificing something of his own or of himself.

Belle pulled gently away. "We really must go if you intend to do any work tomorrow," she said. "Everything will be all right, I know, if we only trust in what comes to us without books or machines."

XV

TED WRIGHT came into the lab office, sat down and put his feet on the desk. "I'm almost ready to make a preliminary report," he said, "but I don't

want to put it in writing until I've talked to you. Because it's pretty speculative—a lot of it may sound slightly fantastic—and the boys at the other research foundations are going to be out after us with hammers. Gimme a cigarette."

"Why don't you buy some of your own?" said Slater. "Here—and I hope it's a brand you can't bear. Let me have the horrid details."

"That's what I want to do, to see if anything I'm saying conflicts with the laws of botany. You know them and I don't."

"The laws of botany were repealed six years ago and we exist in a state of wild confusion, tempered only by observational evidence. Go ahead."

"Okay. I've been working along the lines of the viruses lately, partly because my 'scope is the only thing that can see them and like everybody else I like to be the only one who can see something."

"Check. Go on and don't treat me like a sophomore."

"Well, you know about viruses in your own field, I guess. Nobody's satisfied with them. They're life and yet they're not life. One might almost call them halfway between."

"The description is a little strong but it will do."

"Thank you," said Wright. "You're so generous that I sometimes find it hard to bear. But I will go on, anyway." Slater snorted and Wright did go on.

"The trouble with a good many of the viruses that we encounter in animal pathology is that there doesn't seem to be any way of accounting for them. I don't mean for their behavior. That's easy enough. I'm talking about their origin. They haven't any ancestry either in chemical or biological process. They just exist."

"Wait a minute," said Slater. "That isn't altogether true, is it? Most of the viruses I know anything about are always developing new strains."

"Ah—but where did the original

strains come from? You aren't going to argue that there was just one single virus in the whole world and all the others developed out of that, are you?"

"No, I suppose not," said Slater. "As a matter of fact, now that you mention it, I haven't given much attention to the question of origin. Considered it rather futile, like looking for the origin of life or of intelligence. At least for anyone in my branch."

"I thought so. That's why I'm sitting here lecturing you. Well, the origin question is one we do worry about in our branch, and it's a sticker. Take one case in medical pathology—influenza is a virus disease, all right, but where did it come from in the virulent form that produced the big epidemic in 1919?"

"That killed off enough people to make it count as one of the great plagues of history. But there isn't any record of a previous influenza epidemic or anything that could have been the flu."

"That could have been a case of a developed strain."

"So it could," said Wright. "And so could a number of others that apparently turned up suddenly, like virus pneumonia, which may be a strain of the pneumonia they have in cattle or may just not have been correctly identified before. I'll grant all that."

"The trouble is that neither the development explanation nor the one of non-identification will do for all the viruses and there are some for which it's hard to find any explanation. Polio, for example—if it had been in existence in the Middle Ages it would have killed off half the people of the world."

"A strong statement, teacher."

"A justified statement, dear pupil. So a lot of us who deal in microscopic pathology have been driven to considering the possibility that some of the viruses are extra-terrestrial—that is, that they drift to the earth as dust out of space."

"Not all of them but some—the basic strains. There doesn't seem to be any other way of accounting for the facts."

Quite aside from the sudden and rather inexplicable appearance of some of the virus diseases, none of the viruses fit in very well with the economy of life on this earth. They just don't belong systematically."

SAID Slater, "That was Lord Kelvin's explanation of the existence of all forms of life on Earth—that they came here as spores and then developed. But it never got much of a play because it doesn't really explain the origin of life, just moves it out to some place where you can't get at it."

"Okay then—that's the introduction. In my report I'm going to theorize that both the Dutch elm disease and phloem necrosis came from some other planet in space too."

"But they're both ordinary fungus diseases," protested Slater.

"I know it," said Wright. "They're also so virulent that they should have wiped out all the elms long ago except for the wyches. You were telling me yourself that Dutch elm disease only hit this country in nineteen hundred and thirty, and phloem necrosis is just about as recent."

"I've had the spores of both under the electron microscope and I'm here to report right now that they're thoroughly aberrant—not in general structure but down at the molecular level. In fact, I don't see how some of those molecules hold together at all. They respond in the right way to the ordinary chemical tests but under the 'scope there doesn't seem to be enough valence to go around."

"All right," said Slater. "It's your report and your conclusions. I'll back you up all I can, which means that the Institute will too."

"Wait a minute," said Wright. "You haven't heard the worst yet. I said I was going to do something that would bring out the hammer brigade and I meant it. I'm going to suggest that the wych elms are extra-terrestrial too."

"Good heavens, why?"

"Because the molecular structure of the seeds is peculiar and peculiar in exactly the same way as the structure of the spores of your two elm diseases. I didn't know it until I came here and got the spores to study.

"That is I knew those seeds were damned peculiar because of the aberrant genes and I knew that in their molecular structure there didn't seem to be enough valence. But I didn't realize there was anything else that had the same characteristics."

Slater said, "You want to be careful how you throw cracks like that around. Are you sure that there isn't something else still with the same type of molecule?"

"Nothing I've ever had under the 'scope or that I can find any record of. It's a complex protein molecule held in tight bonds with apparently insufficient valence in both cases. Now I want you to follow my line of reasoning.

"The molecular character of the fungus spores and the rather abrupt appearance of the two diseases, I think, make a good case for the idea that they came here from somewhere else. Planet X, we'll call it, since there's obviously no planet in the Solar System that would grow elms of any kind.

"Now the seeds of the wych elm show the same molecular characteristics. And the wych elm is extraordinarily resistant to both Dutch elm disease and phloem necrosis—practically immune, in fact.

"To me that makes a strong suggestion that wych elm seeds are not only extra-terrestrial but that they came here from the same source that produced the spores—planet X, where they developed the necessary immunity."

Slater said, "That sounds logical as far as it goes—but it seems to me you're overlooking some factors. The wych elm interbreeds with Earthly species."

"Not with the ordinary European elms, it doesn't. It can't. You know very well they don't reproduce from seed. But that's a side issue and any-

way it isn't any argument against extra-terrestrial origin.

"There *is* such a thing as convergent evolution, you know. If planet X is enough like this one to produce a close imitation of our elm-trees and fungus spores it would probably produce them along lines where interbreeding was possible."

"Mmm." Slater's thoughts suddenly shot off on the tangent of remembering how Belle had spoken of the likeness to another world under the elms last night, how curiously this had meshed not only with his own feelings, but also with old Yumpin' Yiminy's reaction under the machine.

"It's very odd that the wych elm should have been such a super-sacred tree among the old Celtic peoples," said Wright as though following his thought. "Almost as if they had some concept of a special origin."

"Shut up—I want to think." If the trees were extra-terrestrial—they might exercise some kind of influence unknown to Earth. Something that might account for the way Inez had wholly or partly fallen under the dominance of what they had called the Other Mind. Something that Paul Angelus knew about or at least knew how to use. Then the thought of Belle's strange behavior on the previous evening struck him like a hammer. He got up.

"Get your hat, Ted," he said, "and let's go have lunch. You may have hit on a lead to the other problem that's bothering us, even if your ideas don't offer much of a lead toward the question of keeping American elms alive."

AFTER they had disinterestedly absorbed the tired Salisbury steak and chocolate pudding that the Institute cafeteria considered the proper diet for scientists, Slater said, "Ted, do you know you worry me a lot with your business about the wych elm being extra-terrestrial."

"As how?"

"Because of Belle. Ted, is there any

way an elm tree could—how shall I put it?—exercise an influence on a person? I don't know of any myself but when things get down into your region of the ultra-small the rules don't always hold good."

Wright said, "The only answer I can give you on that is that I don't know. Perhaps. In ordinary terms that we know about the thing isn't possible except as pollen might give you a case of hay-fever, which is not what you mean, I take it. But if those wych elms really are from some other planet it might be a different story. We don't know all the rules.

"There might be something in the chemico-neucleonic organization of the place that made it possible, just as we know the chemical composition of some stars is a lot different from that of our Sun. The molecular organization of the specimens I was talking about were so odd that they'd account for almost anything. But what does it have to do with Belle?"

"Ted, I was out with her last night and she said a couple of things that made me afraid she might be falling under the influence of the same kind of Other Mind that's been after Inez."

"Tell me about it, Will," said Wright gravely.

"There isn't much to tell. Quite a while back, when I first met her, she made some remark about hating elm-trees. I don't blame her. Her parents were burned to death in a place called 'The Elms,' you know, a place surrounded by them. Then last night we were down at the grove and she told me she loved them."

"Well, I suppose a woman has a right to change her mind."

"It's odd that she should change it in just that way though," said Slater. "But that isn't all. She used to dislike the ground Paul Angelus walked on. Thought he was snoop about people. But last night she had to spring to his defense and almost quarreled with me about it. Just like Inez."

"That guy turns up in all the corners, doesn't he?" said Wright. "Of course I wasn't present and I don't know—but aren't you making a good deal of something pretty simple?"

"Ted, I'm not. I may sound like Inez and her premonitions myself but while I was in the grove there with Belle it seemed to me that I felt something—sort of reaching for my own mind. And 'Renzo Abercrombie was in the same grove the night before he died, remember?"

"And you certainly didn't have Angelus around exercising his ESP either—so that's out."

"The elm-trees themselves," said Slater, "seem to be the only possible explanation. I'm reluctant to accept it but not half as reluctant as I was before you came in this morning."

"Okay." Wright grinned a crooked grin. "But how are we going to check on it? There's an Angelus angle somewhere too but I don't imagine he'll be very cooperative."

"The machine—"

"Oh, now ilsten! Can you imagine your friend Angelus letting us put him through the machine? He still wants to dismantle it and send it to Chicago and he's likely to get away with it as soon as the trustees decide what new line of research will be taken up under the bequest."

"I wasn't suggesting giving Angelus the works," said Slater. "What I was going to say is that I don't see any escape from persuading Inez to try it again and seeing if we can't dig the clue out of her subconscious."

"She wasn't very cooperative either when she left here the last time. As I remember she said something about it's being an experience that she wouldn't care to try again."

"I know it," said Slater, "but Belle said something last night that set me to thinking about that point. She remarked that Inez was quite a different person at night than in the daytime.

"When she said that I remembered

that when I asked Inez to come over here and try the machine it was at lunch. When she gave me that vague warning about not letting Belle dance in 'The Sacred Wood' it was in the daytime too. But when we put her in the machine it was just at sunset. Remember how she went through several phases in the machine—cooperative at first, then chilly toward the whole proposition afterward?

"Well, during that time the Sun had set. I think that this influence, whatever it is, this Other Mind, can't keep her under control in the presence of sunlight. But at night she's really under. So I suggest that we try to get her there during the daytime. I think she'll come."

WRIGHT said, "What about that warning Angelus gave us—that we might drive her off her base by trying it again?"

"Ted, we've got to take the chance. It isn't only Belle. Think what happened to 'Renzo Abercrombie—and I wonder how many others without our knowing about it. This Other Mind, whatever it is, isn't confining its activities to the Selfridge Institute.

"Think of Belle's parents—I'll bet anything you want to name that there's a hookup between their death and the fact that their house was surrounded by wych elms. This is something big and cruel and dangerous. It's been going on for God knows how long and even finding out about part of it cost Abercrombie his life."

Wright made a sound inside his throat. "You know, Will, you're getting pretty excited over this if you don't mind my saying so. Even if I do think that the wych elms are extra-terrestrial I can't quite agree that their presence represents a kind of invasion of the world, as you seem to think.

"That stuff went out with H. G. Wells. But I'll go along with you because I believe it's every scientist's job to find an explanation for anything he can't

explain. When do we get her here?"

"Not today—with another performance of 'The Sacred Wood' coming up tonight. I'd say let's give it a try tomorrow. I don't want to wait any longer than I have to."

Wright said, "Okay. Now one other thing—merely as a matter of tactics we've got to figure out some way of clearing Angelus off the premises while we run this experiment. He'd throw a monkey-wrench in the machinery. And I don't know that it will be so easy to run him off during the daytime."

"That's so and it will have to be a pretty genuine summons on the part of someone else if he's as much of an ESP as we think. He'd see through either of us trying to take him somewhere and besides, we'll both be needed at the lab, me to bring Inez and you to operate the machine.

"We could get Chicago to wire him to come for a conference—I know Stephens there—but the time's so short. I guess the only thing to do is ask Belle to take him to lunch. But without even telling her why. That means we'll have to operate around noon."

XVI

THE brighter lights in the center of the grove flicked out, leaving a momentary blackness until one's eyes became accustomed to the lesser illumination. The last hand-claps died out and there was a shuffling of feet as King Segontinar and the Princess Ymair ran for the dressing-tent, hand in hand.

Willard Slater shook himself a little with a feeling as though he were just coming awake and began to push his way through the throng toward the same place. In spite of the artificiality of the ballet the illusion had been so vivid that he had half-imagined himself in the enchanted Druid wood, with the fate of a kingdom turning on a girl's sacrifice.

But what was the meaning of the end, he asked himself as he crossed the

lawn at the center of the grove toward the dressing-tent. It must be somehow bound up with this business of the elms, for Inez had said that the plans of her ballets reached her from somewhere outside herself.

Certainly "The Sacred Wood" was a glorification of the trees and the spirit of the trees, a statement that it was worth giving up everything, even life, for them. Propaganda! he said to himself.

Then his mind slipped a cog and he began to wonder how many other people had felt the influence of that Other Mind which seemed associated with the trees. It could be the reason why the Secretary was so insistent on the search for a cure for the two blights.

He reached the outer compartment of the tent, standing aside to let one of the acolytes hurry outward in his street clothes but with his makeup still on. "Belle!" he called.

"Hi!" her voice came through the cloth, muffled but cheerful. "Be out in a minute."

No, that wouldn't do either because the wych elms didn't get the blight, Slater decided. Yes it would too—because the Secretary and Director Candini both wanted the other elms replaced with wyches and if somebody with a scientific background and the reputation of the Selfridge Institute said there wasn't any cure they'd have to—

The flap at the back opened and Belle came out with her graceful step, looking good enough to eat. "Did it look all right from the stands?" she said.

"Better than the first time. Couldn't you tell from the applause?"

"We had a bad moment though. The Second Druid almost missed his cue when he was supposed to hand up the golden sickle. Where shall we go?"

"You pick it, Belle. I just want to be with you."

They were at the door of the tent. Over at one side the last members of the orchestra were leaving and Yumpin'

Yiminy was turning out lights.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't want to go anywhere where there are people tonight. It's the last performance in the grove here. Let's just go over to the stands there and sit."

"All right. By the way will you do something for me?"

"Anything except marry you before the tour starts. You've asked me that one before."

"I was afraid you'd see through my plan." They both laughed. "But second best I'd like you to call up Paul Angelus and take him to lunch tomorrow."

"Whatever for? Only last night you were being jealous of him and now you want to throw me at him."

"Belle, do you mind if I don't tell you? It isn't that I don't trust you but he's such an ESP man that if you know I think he will and I'd rather he didn't."

They had reached the edge of the stands. She mounted a step and sat down with a little shrug. "Oh, all right," she said. "I suppose so if you want me to." Her voice was flat and all the gaiety had gone out of her manner.

"Please, Belle, this is serious—"

"Sssh." She reached out to take his hand. "Look up. This is *really* the sacred wood."

The last lights had gone out and overhead a slight veil of cloud hid the stars. Everything was dark where they sat while above the branches made a ghostly tracery against the night-shine, moving slightly to the breeze.

Once more, as on the previous night when they had stood there together, Slater had the odd sensation of floating into another world, of being aware of something outside himself that was trying desperately to communicate with him, to tell him something of the utmost importance from within his own head.

"Wise old trees," said Belle. "Sometimes I think they know more and better than we do." She swayed into his arms and their lips met. At the contact the picture seemed somehow to grow.

stronger and more intense.

If it *was* a picture, for there were no details, only a sensation of pleasure at the edge of ecstasy, a feeling that he could accomplish anything he chose, that he had only to desire and would receive anything he desired.

But now with it came a warning, a command. To attain this bliss and completeness he must do something, give up something of himself. He struggled desperately to comprehend what it was and as he struggled the picture inside his mind altered and shifted, became a true image.

He was living with and in one of the trees. No, the tree was living in him, becoming a part of him. It could not be but it was and it was from the tree, through him, that the delight and achievement flowed.

ONLY it was not one of the trees in this grove. The inner picture was of a wood, a wood of tall old elms at twilight, the long branches forming Gothic arches overhead. Somewhere in the distance there was slow sombre music. The branches swayed, his own branches swayed, and he realized that the other trees, like the one that was him, held persons.

Now, though the light was dimmer, he could see more clearly. The others who were at the same time people and trees became visible—people enhanced and glorified, with the brows of thinkers and the limbs of athletes, all their faces alight with the same exquisite pleasure that filled him.

He did not know any of them but he knew that somewhere among them must be Inez Hutchinson and yes, Paul Angelus—but a Paul Angelus transformed, all shrewd intelligence and helpfulness.

His mind framed within itself a question—where was Belle? As if in answer the music that seemed to flow from the background took on a pulsing accent of delight, of joy and triumph, but he knew she was not there and never would be, she was not one of the trees, but

had somehow become one with the spirit of the wood itself as in the last stage of her dance.

There was a light suddenly in his face and Yumpin' Yiminy's voice said, "Excuse it, please. I was just looking for a purse that one of the ladies was dropping."

Slater found himself sitting stiffly on the seat with Belle a couple of inches away from him, blinking as though she had just come awake. She said, "I'm sorry I dozed off like that, Will. I guess that dance must have taken more out of me than I thought. Oh, dear, I suppose I'd better go to bed and make it official."

She stood up. "All right, let's go," said Slater.

As they reached the edge of the grove and started down Rutherford Row, she said, "I had such a peculiar dream while I was just sitting there in the stand. Do you know what I was? I was really the Princess Ymair, living the part, only the story was different, somehow.

"You were in it and before I could take the King's place as a sacrifice I had to bring you to the Druids too. And that wasn't all—you didn't like it a bit."

"That part was from the life. I certainly should have some objections to seeing you climb into that cage."

"Oh, but you don't understand, Will. I feel it when I dance, just as I did in the dream. It was all sort of right and holy and wonderful and I felt happier about it than I ever had about anything."

With a flash of shock, he remembered his own dream, but she was hurrying on.

"Anyway, you didn't like it and they were telling you that if you wanted things different you'd have to become a Druid yourself and find someone to take my place instead of my taking the King's. Wasn't that odd? Though I don't suppose it's very interesting. Other people's dreams never are."

"You don't know how interesting it is," said Slater fervently, and then didn't quite dare say anything else. If

Belle were coming under the same kind of Other Mind dominance that had seized Inez—and probably Abercrombie—and how many others?—what could he do? What escape was there? His mind ran around the problem like a rat in a room.

They were turning into Chester Street. Belle said, "I wonder if it would improve 'The Sacred Wood' to change the plot like that? Of course the music is a unit now and that would have to be changed too but I think it could be done. After all they did it with 'Tannhauser'—and 'Aida.' What do you think, Will?"

He took her hand. "I think I love you," he said. "And I'll do anything to keep you safe."

"From Paul Angelus or the Druids?" She laughed. "Oh, Will, I *do* love you too and it's all right, whatever happens. I'm so sure of it."

That night he dreamed furiously—not the kind of dream he had experienced under the elms of a harmonious world of unimaginable pleasures—but of compulsions, of orders to do this or that under grim threats. The dreams were too vague for him to remember when morning came. He only knew that there was something he must do and something else he must not, under penalty of losing the delights he had been promised.

XVII

INEZ crossed one perfectly-groomed ankle over the other with a detachment that showed she knew exactly how much value she was getting from the exhibition. "Dear Will," she said, "I am so busy. I have everything to do still for the tour. Borian is in such a hurry. He's so dynamic."

Slater said, "But, Inez, don't you remember about not wanting me to let Belle dance in the premiere of 'The Sacred Wood?' This is part of the same picture."

She moved graceful hands. "Oh, I

remember. You must have thought me horribly neurotic. But she's danced it now and nothing very terrible has happened, has it? In fact she's such a wonderful success."

This was going to be difficult. "Listen, Inez," he said, "this is a matter of finding out what happened to 'Renzo Abercrombie. We're convinced that there's some clue to it, some indication buried in your subconscious, some thing that you aren't even really aware of consciously."

"I didn't—I know I didn't—"

"It isn't an accusation, Inez. We want to get to the bottom of this whole business because we're afraid the same sort of thing may happen to other people. It's connected in some way with that elm grove, we're sure, and with the ballet you did there and with your other ballet."

"And Ted and I are sure you're the only one who can help us. After all you did say that you couldn't quite explain how you happened to work out the choreography."

"I know. Wasn't that silly of me? Of course, no one in the arts really knows where they get their ideas. They just seem to come to one. I was talking with Paul about it."

He thought of Angelus, now being lured away from the Institute by Belle, and of how little time they had to operate. The thought made him squirm in his chair. "Inez, it really won't take much of your time—not even an hour. And it might straighten you out about some things too."

"But I don't need straightening out about things now, dear Willard. I've been so upset and troubled, especially with 'The Sacred Wood' to produce and everything. But shall I tell you something? It finally got so bad that I took Paul's advice and went to see an analyst. He's really helped me a lot and I can see now that I needn't have worried so much."

Slater had the odd sense of being in an insane asylum, confined alone, with

everybody but himself being perfectly normal, kind and patient. After all, what did he have—he, himself personally, aside from the fact that 'Renzo Abercrombie had gone off his crumpet and committed suicide?

The change in Belle, the fact that last evening after the ballet both of them had doped off for a moment in what seemed an inexplicable manner. It wasn't evidence enough to establish—well, even the relation of peas to beans.

"All the same, Dear Willard, it was sweet of you to think of me and to think I could help you. I really feel complimented." She glided to her feet with the lithe dancer's motion—so like Belle, as she had suddenly stood up the previous evening, that it triggered him to a sudden fury. He practically leaped across the room, seizing her by the shoulders.

"Inez!" he cried desperately. "You can't do this! I don't care if it doesn't matter to you. This is more important than you or me or even Belle. It's more important even than 'Renzo and you told me once that you loved him. You said yourself that lots of people were involved and now I know it. More people than you have any idea. This may be our last chance."

She looked up at him with widening eyes. "Dear Willard," she said, "why am I so important? Isn't there anyone else?"

"I don't know whether there's anyone else or not. But you're the only person we're sure of that has both the conscious and subconscious knowledge. In everyone else we know something seems to have happened. They either don't know about this, even subconsciously, or they seem so completely under the control of some other type of intelligence that they can't help us. You can. Will you?"

THE pupils of her eyes seemed to contract as she looked at him steadily. He knew it was absurd but he held her there by the shoulders, trying to project his own will into her mind, try-

ing to force her into acceptance. She stirred a little in his grip and then, for the third time, there were tears in her eyes.

"Yes, I'll come with you, Willard," she said in a voice that was suddenly like a little girl's.

He looked at his watch. "Hurry," he said.

"My hat."

"You don't need it. We haven't much time."

She didn't say a word during the journey. Looking across his shoulder at her in the cab Slater wondered what had made her face change so. She looked frightened and serious and determined, with wide eyes staring straight before her.

As they got out at the Institute she gripped his arm suddenly. "Promise me one thing, Will," she said. "If anything happens you'll take care of Belle? I wouldn't do this but for that."

"I'll take care of her. She's the important person in all this."

Ted Wright was waiting. "I began to think you two had eloped—" He started to make a joke of his greeting, then stopped as he saw Inez' face and turned to Slater. "Belle phoned," he said. "She said she wouldn't be home but she'd call you back later."

Slater accepted it as notice that Belle was on the job with Angelus. Inez took her place in the chair and Wright tucked strands of her hair under the edge of the headpiece. A moment later he called, "Ready?" Slater took the amplifier cut-off into his hand as the dancer nodded, her face a little drawn.

The machine buzzed. He saw Inez' fingers relax on the arms as the long dark lashes came down on her cheek. For a moment there was no reaction at all, and he began to fear that this would be another failure like the first time with Yumpin' Yiminy. Then she began to speak in a low quick hurried voice, almost running the words together.

". . . must get straightened out. If I could only be all one thing or all the

other! The Avna promised me that I would be happy and successful if I would do what they said, and, oh, I am—I am! Just like the people on their own planet, where everything is so beautiful.

"I wonder what they look like, whether they look like us. But they must be happy because they always do what the Avna tell them and even when they sacrifice themselves it doesn't hurt much or long and they don't really die, do they?"

"They're absorbed into the being of the Avna and help keep the trees alive and then they can make other people happy too. So it's all right, it's all right, everything the Avna tell me is right."

There was a momentary pause and the low voice changed a trifle. "But I can't forgive what they did to Lorenzo, can I? I loved him and the Avna made me bring him to the elms. I just can't forgive that. It isn't as though they just wanted him to accept one of them and be happy. They just didn't want him at all. And it was all my fault. Oh, Lorenzo! Lorenzo!"

Two tears came out of the corners of her eyes and Slater was just about to clamp down on the amplifier cutoff when the voice changed again.

"Still, you can't blame them. The Avna want people to be happy and anyone who does what they say will always be all right. But Lorenzo wouldn't. He didn't want to accept the Avna, and he wouldn't stop building that machine, that terrible machine that can tell what people are thinking.

"And the Avna couldn't have that, could they? They couldn't let people know how many of them are really Avnans, could they? No, it's true, it's true—they'd cut down the elms and the Avna would die and it would be years and years before they could send more seeds. Oh, if Lorenzo only hadn't built the machine!

"The Avna are so kind, really, they only want people to be happy. They even had Paul try to stop him but Lorenzo

was so obstinate. No, the Avna are good, they only want people to be happy and I must forgive them for Lorenzo and I must bring as many people as I can to the elms to help serve the Avna."

HER voice had become firmer. Now suddenly she stopped and then moved in the chair. "But I can't do that either! I can't let Belle be a sacrifice. I did what they said, I brought her to the elms, I did everything they asked and they can't ask me that. Wasn't it enough for them to take her parents? No, they mustn't have her too."

Her voice trailed off into indistinguishable words. With his blood chilling Slater leaned forward to catch what she was saying.

". . . will be all right if Willard will only do it," she said low, speaking very fast. "They'll tell him. He must know that the Avna can't let the machine go on. They'll have to stop it somehow and he can take Ted Wright to the elms instead of Belle and—"

"I missed that," called Wright from the other room. "What's she saying?"

". . . might better be him than—"

The door opened and Paul Angelus came into the room just as Slater jabbed home the cutoff.

Inez lolled back under the heavy headpiece. Then she opened her eyes, saw Angelus, pointed her finger at him and suddenly began to scream.

As Wright came racing from the other room the Frenchman stepped forward. "I warned you gentlemen against this," he managed to say through the appalling shrieks that rose and fell from the dancer's distorted lips. "I think you have done it now."

He hurried toward the corner, where a medicine cabinet stood against the wall. Inez beat the arms of the chair with her hands but did not attempt to move otherwise as Wright, his face set and grim, lifted the headpiece from her. Angelus was back with a hypodermic.

"If one of you gentlemen will hold her arm for a small moment—*there!*"

The screams and convulsive motions came slowly to a stop and Inez slumped forward. Angelus said coldly, "I will call for an ambulance. But I fear no form of therapy will help her now. You gentlemen may examine yourselves and decide where your responsibility lies."

"Just a minute," said Slater. "I think you have a little responsibility too. Are you an Avnan?"

Angelus looked sharply from one to the other, then shrugged his shoulders. "Ah! I perceive you have dragged a certain amount of information from this poor creature here. Well, I shall not deny it—but say rather I am a person who has accepted a symbiotic relationship with the Avna, a matter of mutual benefit, not so?"

"Do you expect to get away with it? Including the sacrifices?" said Slater.

"Why not? I am not the only one, my friend, and have not been for many hundreds of years. Do you think you can accomplish anything toward the destruction of the elm-trees which are the agencies of the Avnan overmind? I advise you not to attempt it. You will be laughed at, my friend."

Slater gave a rather grim bark. "Fortunately they seem in a fair way to be destroyed by natural causes."

"You are perhaps thinking of the blights? Ah, the idiot strain. A bit of history for you, my friends. When the Avnan overmind first reached this planet—I think it would be about eleven hundred B.C.—it found conditions nearly ideal except for one thing.

"There was a strain of elms already growing here which had no minds and were not suitable as residing places for the overmind of the Avna. Unfortunately, since a tree cannot walk, there was no means of preventing from interbreeding with the true Avnan elm.

"It has taken many years to develop and to transport across space, the spores of a disease that would eliminate the idiot strains of this earth."

Wright said, "You won't get away with it. With this machine—"

Angelus shrugged again. "Do you think it will be permitted to exist? That was the error committed by the late Abercrombie. The Avnan overmind has more resources than you imagine. Come, she is stirring. We must summon an ambulance at once."

XVIII

WRIGHT said, "It's like having someone admit he's an agent for a foreign power and then have no one believe the foreign power even exists. They can't find it on the map."

"The machine—" said Slater.

"Look here, Abercrombie's records on the machine are gone and I haven't even been able to give it the same setup. Besides, what have we got from the machine? Our verbal reports of what Inez Hutchinson said while she had it on and now she's—"

"Yes, I know," said Slater. "I find it hard to forgive myself for that. And even harder to try to persuade anyone else to try it after that."

"Nonsense," said Wright. "It didn't hurt you or Yumpin' Yiminy. And I don't think there was much help for Inez in any case. She was really being torn in half by the disagreement between the two parts of her mind, the Avnan and the non-Avnan, and if it hadn't been the machine that tipped her over, it would have been something else."

"Never mind the olive oil." Slater's smile was a grimace. "The point is that without the machine, we haven't one bit of real evidence. Angelus would deny everything he said to us back there in the lab.

"He knows enough about what other people are thinking to make the denial stick and to make us look pretty silly. Even your suggestion that the wych elms and the two blights are extra-terrestrial is just wild theory without something concrete."

"And he says the machine will not be permitted to exist," said Wright. "Do

you think he's going to have a try at smashing it up himself?"

"I fancy it wouldn't do any harm to ask Yumpin' Yiminy to keep an eye on it. But I doubt if it's anything as crude as that. That isn't the way he—or rather this Avnan overmind—operates. No it's more likely to be some form of attack so subtle that it isn't even recognized as an attack."

Wright said, "Then the sensible thing to do is not to keep the machine a secret, the way Abercrombie tried to do, but announce it and have a public demonstration—build more machines."

"We can try," said Slater. "What I don't understand is—"

"Well, what?"

"There's something that doesn't seem to fit quite. If this Avnan overmind has been around at least since ancient Gaul—and it certainly does fit in with the Druid religion—why there hasn't been more trace of it."

"Oh, Angelus explained that. The elms had a problem of their own to settle in these Earthly strains. Now they have it by the tail, they're ready to move in."

"All right," said Slater. "Then what about this business that Inez mentioned of taking people to the elms? If the Avnan overmind has been so subtle for so long, then why does it suddenly show its hand?"

Wright said, "I think I can explain that too. Here at Selfridge there's a particularly strong group of the trees, a regular Druid grove, and they can apparently reinforce each other's efforts."

"Also you had here Abercrombie and his machine, the one thing this overmind has ever encountered that represented a real danger to it by revealing the overmind's existence. So it had to force things a little."

"What beats me is what defense there is or could be aside from chopping the trees down. It's going to be hard to persuade people to do that, especially when we don't know how many of them are under Avnan control."

Slater rubbed his chin. "Maybe we shouldn't persuade them. Maybe it would be best for all concerned if we just let the Avnan overmind take over. I got a flash of it the other night while I was in the grove with Belle and from everything I could gather the intention was thoroughly friendly to humanity."

THE legs of Wright's chair came down with a thump. "Will! Don't tell me that you're going under this Avnan domination too?"

"No-o—I don't think so. I was just sitting there with her when I had a kind of daydream which couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds. But while I was in it I felt how extraordinary—and fulfilling—it would be to live in combination with the trees."

Wright said, "Tell me something straight, Will. Is Belle under the domination of this overmind or partly so?"

Slater's voice was troubled. "I think she may be—a little. Ever since she danced 'The Sacred Wood.' There was a change in her, one that I didn't altogether like. And that's the way it seems to work."

"I've been in the grove dozens of times before without experiencing any particular sensation but when I was there with her I got this dream-picture. It seems that you have to be close to the elms and at the same time with someone already in contact with the Avnan mind."

"Then we've got to work fast," said Wright decisively. "Look here, you're concerned in this business. You're even involved in it. If you don't mind my saying so you're finding it difficult to separate the emotional and intellectual aspects of this Avnan overmind business. There's only one really detached and unprejudiced observer connected with the whole push. That's me—Theodore Wright."

"All right, you're wonderful. So what?"

"So I have to figure out a flash defense that will work for long enough

to have this public showing of the machine with all the big pots present that we can get—and convince them that this Avnan overmind really means business. So I want you and Belle to take me to that wych elm grove tonight and find out what really gives from personal experience.”

Slater felt the skin going tight over his face. He said, “Ted, you don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I know perfectly well and I know that you can’t run a battle until you know all about the enemy you’re fighting.”

“Ted, you don’t! You don’t know how bad this may be. Do you remember one of the last things Inez said today. No you don’t because she rather mumbled it and you called out that you didn’t hear what she was saying.

“She said something about Belle going to be a sacrifice but that if you came to the elms instead you’d be accepted in her place. You can’t afford to take the chance, Ted.”

“You just leave that to me, my good and great friend. I’m taking the chances, not you—or Belle. I tell you we’ve got to work fast. Walter Reed didn’t hesitate on yellow fever, did he? This is just as serious.”

Slater got up. “Ted, I—”

“Shut up. Call your girl-friend and make the date—for midnight.”

* * * * *

They sat, one, two and three on the bench, Belle in the middle. The stands were gone. They had been taken down that day in preparation for “The Sacred Wood” going on tour, though whether it now would go no one really knew, with the only person who could direct the choreography in a sanitarium and Borian doubtful whether he could take the chance under such conditions.

They sat and it was dark. Belle extended a hand to each. At her touch Slater felt a thrill go through his veins but he could not tell whether it was the

thrill merely of her nearness or of something else—of the Avnan overmind that seemed to be hovering somewhere in the background, waiting to step in.

It was the dark of the Moon and the stars were very bright above. Perhaps, thought Slater, one of them was the sun of the planet of Avna. He waited and, looking beyond Belle in Wright’s direction, could make out that Wright was also waiting attentively, his head cocked slightly on one side, alert and watchful.

The thought came to Slater that the Avnan overmind might encounter in the forceful young microscopist a problem different and more difficult than any it had faced before. If there were a person who could work out a means of defense against this subtle invasion it would be Ted.

YET why should there be a defense after all? The Avnan overmind was not malevolent. Its promise was of peace and joy and pleasure. To those it dominated it gave much—not as slaves but as partners in a strange symbiosis.

If the wisdom of the ancient Druids had prevailed over the legions of Rome the world might have been spared much. And now that the Avna was recovering its strength, now that it was able fully to establish itself, there would be not only for him but for many others a new and better life.

No, it would not be a better life, he argued violently with these thoughts that thrust himself upon him. The Avna wanted sacrifices to maintain itself. It had demanded Abercrombie and now Belle—it would not permit the machine.

Slater felt himself stir with angry resistance—and then from somewhere within his own mind he was answered gently, reassuringly, that there were no true sacrifices as humans understood them but only the operation of an inevitable law, which could not be understood but by an entity as vast and embracing as the overmind.

He struggled to reject this thought but the tide of reassurance flowed in

overwhelmingly. Once again he was amidst the peace and unutterable delight of the forest of Avna. But this time there was a change and he knew without words that Belle was there too, not as a part of the total spirit of the forest but as an individual like himself, partaking of the same pleasures. The decree had been revoked. It was not necessary to have her as a sacrifice.

A sense of victory flooded his whole being as he sat immobile, his mind still dwelling in the realm of the trees. Yet even as he felt this sense of triumph he saw as though from a great distance that Ted Wright was slipping from his place, moving with a step almost like that of a sleep-walker away from the bench.

With one part of his mind Slater realized terribly what this meant. It was not victory, it was defeat and Wright was being accepted as the substitute for Belle. He ought to get up, to shout at Ted, to rouse him.

But there was another part to Slater's mind. It commanded him not to move, to stay there if he wished to keep Belle on this plane of existence—and it was to this voice that he listened as Wright's figure disappeared beyond the trees.

Belle leaned slowly against him. "Will," she said softly, "did you sense it too? I know now that everything's going to be all right. I can't tell you but it's all changed."

Abruptly Slater was on his feet. "No it isn't all right," he said. "Which way did he go? Come on!"

"Will! What do you mean?"

"I mean that Ted Wright's in danger—and for trying to help us. Let's get over to his place right away."

She stumbled across a tree-root and had to be helped up. Then they were past the entrance of the grove and out into Rutherford Row, almost running.

"That's the house," said Slater.

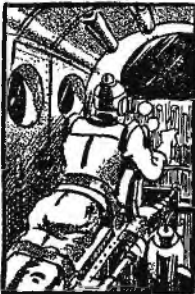
"But there isn't any light."

"That's right. And his car's gone too. He always parks it out in front. My God, the Institute! Let's get over there."

Belle's long legs kept pace with him as they hurried toward Chester Street and then turned into Madison. "Damn it!" he said, "When you want a taxi the worst there's never one to be seen. Hurry!"

"I think—" she began and then stopped as the night sky ahead of them was suddenly brightened by a spurt of flame. A moment later the sound of an explosion reached them. "What was that?" cried Belle.

"It was at the Institute," said Slater and with a sick shock of horror he knew that they were too late, too late for anything but regrets. But as he put his arms around Belle and the Avnan mind swept wholly over his own he realized that they two would never have any more trouble.



DESTROY THE CIVILIZED GALAXY!

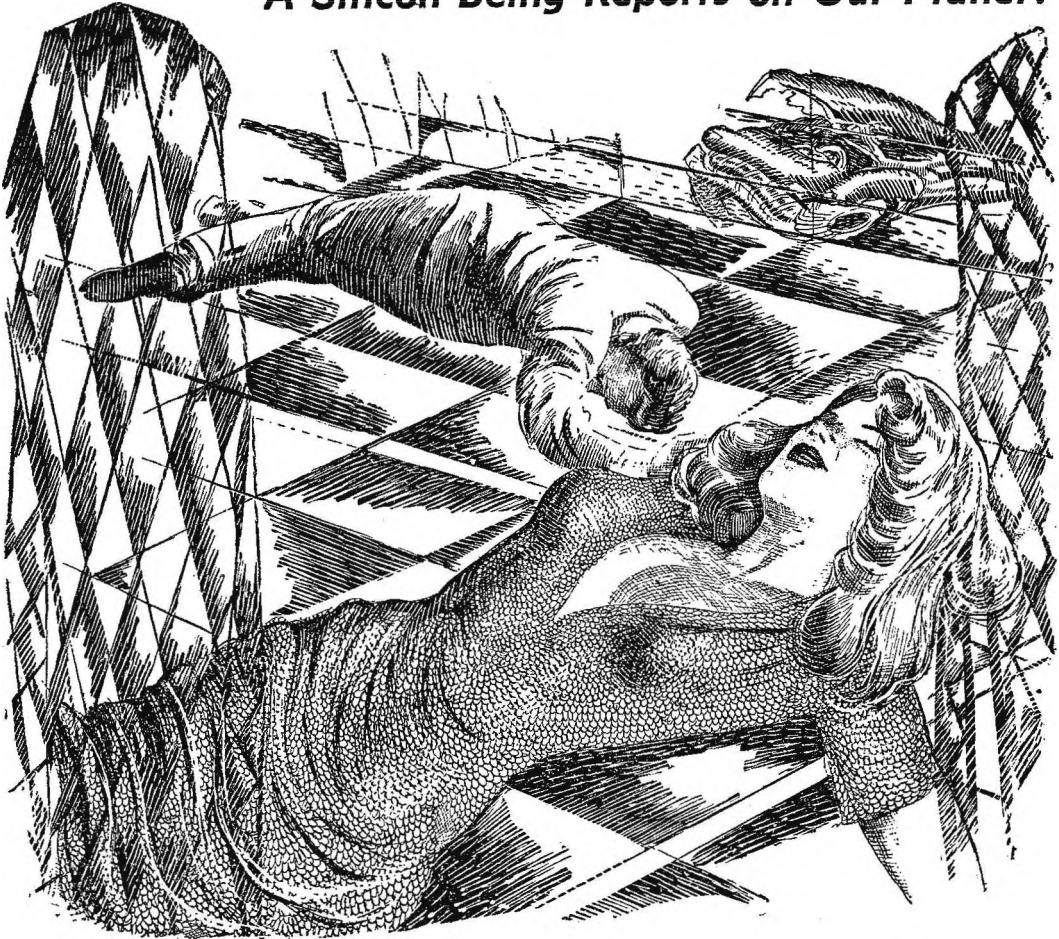
This was the aim of Rolph and his crude barbarian hordes as they careered from planet to planet, wrecking all in their path, urged on by a strange and evil influence left behind by earlier space invaders to keep men warring upon their own kind. Only one man has the ability to check their wild onrush in—

THE DARK TOWER

A Novel of the Future by WALLACE WEST

•
FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE!

A Silicon Being Reports on Our Planet!



. . . and the walls
came tumbling down . . .

By JOHN WYNDHAM

Report No. 1. From Mantus, Commanding No. 8 Expeditionary Party (Sol 3), to Zen-nacus, C-in-C Vanguard Emigration Forces (Electra 4).

Sir,

Craft State: Fully serviceable 4; Slightly damaged 1; Lost in action 2.

Casualty State: Fit personnel 220; unfit 28; lost in action 102.

Present Position: 54/28/4 x 23/9/10—Sol 3.

Supply State: v. satisfactory. Equipment: Satisfactory.

Morale: Fair, improving.

APPROACH was made to Sol 3 at 28/11 (Electra 4 time). Signs of hostility were immediately encountered. Expedition withdrew without counter action. Approach made in other

hemisphere. Signs of greater hostility encountered. Two ships were disintegrated with all aboard. Third ship sustained minor fractures, ditto 28 crew, 2 lost. Expedition withdrew. Signs of hostility in all inhabited places visited. Conference was called. It was decided to set down in uninhabited area, if suitable. Very suitable position located after search. Expedition set down without interference 34/12 at reading given. In consideration of hostility encountered, construction of a redoubt was commenced immediately.

DEAR Zenn, the above is for the official record but even from that you may judge that this planet, Earth, is one hell of a spot. Just my damned luck to draw Party No. 8. Serves me right for behaving like an honest fool when I could as easily have fiddled the draw.

I'll never get any place in politics, I'm afraid—even if I ever do get back from this grotesquely misconceived planet. I would sum it up as a disgusting and dangerous dump with the potentialities of a paradise.

To begin with the worst features—about two-thirds of the place is waterlogged. This results in masses of suspended vapor forever hanging about in its atmosphere. Imagine the gloomy effect of that for a start!

But it is almost worse when the main masses of vapor clear, for then the humid air gives to the whole sky a hideously ominous shade of blue. Not, of course, that one would expect the place to look like home but there does seem to be a kind of wanton perversity over everything.

One would assume that development would take place in the most suitable and salubrious spots—but not here. The larger centers were not difficult to distinguish from above, being clearly of artificial construction with marks (some form of communications?) radiating from them. And all were remarkably ill-situated.

As we steered close to one, we had

thought ourselves unperceived, but on our approach it was clear that preparations had been made against us. The defences were, indeed, already in action—without any attempt to inquire whether we came in good faith. One must assume from this that the inhabitants are of an abnormally suspicious or possibly a sheerly vicious disposition.

CONSIDERING it possible that other parts of this world might be uninformed about us we moved halfway round the planet before making another approach. Here the centers of habitation were more frequent and had a more orderly appearance, many of them being laid out in lattice form.

They proved, however, to be even better defended, and over a considerable range. Indeed, so accurate was their estimate that two unfortunate vessels were completely disintegrated and another somewhat fractured.

We in the other four felt our craft and ourselves shaken so much, and subjected to such stress and tension that we thought the end had come for us also. Luck, however, was with us and we were able to draw off to a safe distance with the loss of only certain fragile but unimportant objects.

After that we proceeded with great caution to investigate several other cities. We found every one of them embattled against us.

We do not understand why the inhabitants should, without provocation or enquiry, turn weapons upon us in this way. We have been given no chance to explain that we come with peaceful intentions—nor indeed any chance to attempt communication at all. It is a very disappointing and ominous climax to our long journey and it has depressed us.

I called a conference to decide on our next move. The views aired there were not encouraging. Every contribution to the debate endorsed that this planet is crazy beyond belief. Some compensations did emerge, however.

The concentration of civilization in

unsuitable spots—moist humid areas, often alongside large bodies of water—cannot be accidental though its purpose is obscure. But it does, quite absurdly, mean that the most hospitable regions are without signs of life.

This observation, supported by several speakers, did much to raise our spirits. It was decided to set down in one such spot and there to build a redoubt where we can live safely until we shall have discovered some means of communicating with the inhabitants to assure them of our peaceable intentions.

This we have done at the position stated and I may explain the report on morale by saying that it has given everyone a great lift to be settled in a spot so rich, so lushly furnished with the good things of life. Imagine, if you can, an area composed almost entirely of silicates! This is sober fact. Never did I expect to see such a thing.

It is Eptus's opinion that the planet itself may consist almost entirely of silicates beneath the water and under a hideous green mould which covers most of the rest of its surface. It is difficult to believe in such a wonderful thing as that, so I am accepting his view with caution for the present.

If it were true, however, all our problems would be solved. A completely new era would open for us since we would be justified in assuming that the other planets of the Sol system are similar. In other words we should be able to report that we have found a whole system built of silicates in easily assimilable form and inexhaustible in extent.

This remains to be investigated and proved. It is not known to the rest of the company, who assume that this is a mere pocket delectably rich in silicates.

The exact site chosen lies between two large rocks, which will provide natural bastions to the north and south sides of the redoubt, making it unnecessary for us to do more than build the east and west walls between them and roof the space thus enclosed.

This should take no great length of

time. Sol is close enough to exert considerable force here. Several members of the party were immediately detailed to assimilate silicates until they were extended to the required shape and pattern.

They then arranged themselves in a refractory formation bearing upon a remarkably pure quartz deposit. Fusing took place in quite a short time. Before long we had the material to make several furnace-lenses, and these are now fusing blocks of first-class boltik from the raw ingredients strewn all around us.

SINCE we set down we have seen nothing of the inhabitants, but several things lead us to suspect that the region, though neglected, is not entirely unknown to them. One is that a part of the ground surface has been hardened somewhat as though an exceedingly heavy weight of some kind had been dragged over it.

This mark lies in a line roughly east and west, passing between our two rocks. Westward it continues without feature for a great distance. To the east, however, it shortly joins a broader mark evidently made by the traction of a still heavier object.

A little on our side of this junction stands a curious formation which, by its regularity, we take to be artificial. It is made of an impermanent fibrous material and bears apparently intentional markings. Thus:

DESERT ROAD
CARRY WATER

We do not understand the significance of this—if it has any.

Since I began this account Eptus and Podas have brought me the most fantastic news yet. I have to believe it because they should know what they are talking about, and assure me that it is positively a fact.

It seems that Podas collected locally a few specimens for examination. Several of them were asymmetrical objects attached in some way to the

ground. Another was of different type and showed some degree of symmetry. This latter was in the form of a soft cylinder, having a blunt projection at one end and a tapered one at the other, and was supported by four further projections beneath.

It was by no means attached to the ground, being able to move itself with agility on the four lower projections. After examining them all carefully Podas declares that they are all living objects, and that the basis in both types is carbon! Don't ask me how such a thing can be but Eptus supports him, so I have to accept it.

It has further occurred to them as a result of this discovery that if all life on this planet is on a carbon basis it may well account for the neglect of this excellent silicate region. It does not, however, account for the immediate and unprovoked hostility of the inhabitants, which is a matter that interests me more at the moment.

Podas states that none of his specimens exhibited intelligence, though the cylindrical object displayed some clear reflexes to external stimuli.

I find it difficult to imagine what a carbon-based intelligence could possibly look like but I expect we shall find out before long. I must admit that I look forward to this event not only with some misgiving, but with a considerable degree of distaste.

* * * * *

Report No. 2. All states and positions: No change. Redoubt completed. No confirmed contact yet with intelligent forms.

Dear Zenn. Soon after the third rising of Sol enabled us to set the furnacelenses to work again we produced enough boltik to finish our redoubt. The last block was fused into place halfway through the diurnal period, which is very short here. I am relieved that it has been completed without interruption. Now that we and our craft have this protection we can face the future with more confidence.

Podas and Eptus have examined more

specimens. These confirm their earlier views but add little. So far we have not made contact with any intelligence here. After our earlier experiences we are not seeking it out but are waiting for it to come to us.

As a qualification I should add that Podas thinks we almost contacted an intelligence during the fourth Sol and still may do so. Eptus, however, disagrees with him and on the face of it one would say Eptus was right. What happened was this.

ABOUT the middle of the fourth Sol a cloud of dust was seen to the east of us above the long mark referred to in my last. It was soon evident that the creature responsible for the dust was traveling along this mark toward us.

We observed it with increasing amazement because it was clearly to be seen that this creature supported itself upon four disks. Its body was black and shining; at the front were metal appendages which shone like silver.

It moved at a moderate speed but clearly with discomfort since its disk supports transmitted the result of every inequality of the ground surface to its carcass. Eptus deduces from this that it evolved upon some level surface, possibly ice, and is ill adapted to this district.

That its intention was hostile there could be no doubt for it projected strongly against us. Luckily it was either ill-informed regarding us or was not capable of serious attack, for it operated upon a quite harmless range. Out of interest we let it come quite close before we turned the beam on it.

When we did we saw with astonishment—and I must admit some consternation—that nothing whatever resulted. We watched it with growing anxiety as it came on, still keeping close to the line. Two more beams were turned on to it, still without effect.

Podas said, "I don't think it can be sentient. It is coming as if we weren't here at all." And indeed it was.

In spite of our defences it continued to come until, without slackening speed in the least, it ran right into the side of the redoubt where the front of it was crushed and some pieces fell off.

We waited some moments, and then when it did not stir again, we left the redoubt to examine it. It appeared to be a composite creature. One part had become detached and projected forward against the wall by the sudden stop.

This we found to bear a generic resemblance to the cylinder spoken of in my last but unlike in that it was covered with detachable teguments. Its forward blunt projection had encountered the side of the redoubt with some force. Possibly this was the cause of its de-animation.

Podas, investigating, found a similar creature *inside* the body of the disked creature and unattached to it. Possibly this is some singular form of parturition natural to this planet. I could not say. It is hard enough in this crazy place to hang on to one's reason, let alone try to apply it to the utterly unreasonable.

Against the idea is the fact that neither of the smaller creatures showed any vestige of disks. Also both of these were covered in teguments which can scarcely be natural—especially in the case of the latter creature, where the tegument seemed designed with the purpose of hampering the hinder limbs—though it may have some other purpose unguessed.

The two creatures were brought into the redoubt for closer examination. The parent or host—for Frinctus has put forward the theory that the two we have may be parasitic upon it—creature was left outside on account of its size.

More careful examination showed that our two new specimens were not identical though the differences are of no great importance. The shortness of the fibers on the blunt projection of one compared with those on the other could easily be due to some kind of accident, for instance.

Podas, who set about opening up the revoltingly squashy body of our first find with a scientific lack of disgust that I can only envy, reports that its internal arrangements, while quite incomprehensible to him, are on the same general lines as those of the small cylindrical creature referred to in my last.

Eptus is anxious to open the other for confirmation but Podas is against it. He says that we shall learn nothing more from it than from the other and that furthermore it is not entirely inactive. It inflates and deflates in a most curious rhythmic manner which interests him. As it is Podas' department the matter rests there for the moment.

Meanwhile, Orkiss, our chief mathematician, who had out of curiosity been examining the supposed parent creature outside, returned to say that in his opinion it is not a creature at all but an artifact. Podus went back with him to look at it again and now concurs. Eptus reserves his opinion.

Podus has also tentatively suggested that our second specimen—the one with its nether limbs webbed by the odd tegument—may possibly be the vessel for an intelligence of some kind, since it was inside the artifact. To this Eptus objects strongly.

HOW, he asks, can any form of intelligence recognizable as such be expected from a sloppy collection of innumerable tubes slung on a hardened lime framework? Further, says he, reason presupposes at least the ability to comprehend a straight line. This type of creature has not a straight line in its make-up.

It is pudgy and squashy and would be almost amorphous but for its framework. Clearly it is not of a nature that could comprehend a straight line—and if it cannot do that it follows that it cannot be capable of mathematical nor, therefore, logical thinking. Which, I must say, sounds to me a very reasonable argument.

Podas replies that there are certainly

straight lines in the construction of the artifact outside. Eptus says, *if* it is an artifact. Podas maintains that it definitely is an artifact and the product of some kind of reasoning. Eptus objects that the existence of a creature which is just a sack full of tubes is not reasonable in itself, let alone that it should generate reason.

And that, for the moment, is how things stand.

* * * * *

Report No. 3. All states and positions (except Casualty) — No Change. Casualty — One lost.

Little progress to report. One intelligent being of a kind has been discovered. Contact with it is not yet established. The term "intelligent" is here to be understood technically as being the power to influence reflexes to some extent.

Both ratiocination and perception are so restricted in the specimen observed as to make it appear unlikely that this can be the most advanced form here. The creature is hostile and has caused one casualty—Althis, engineer. Contact with more intelligent forms is still awaited.

Dear Zenn. Too much of the good things of life presents almost as many problems as too little. The temptation of such a wealth of easily assimilable silicates has proved too much for several of our party. A dozen have succumbed to it and indulged in what can only be described as an orgy of gourmandizing a little west of our position.

When discovered they had already created a pit of some size and had increased themselves beyond possibility of their re-entering the redoubt. So there they will have to stay and take their chance. I drew the attention of the rest to the result of such intemperance with, I hope, salutary effect. We shall see.

Meanwhile Podas has turned out to be astonishingly justified in some of his deductions. Eptus is a trifle piqued about this and doggedly insists upon applying reason in what seems to me—and to Podas—an unreasonable way.

As I pointed out to him this is by no means a reasonable planet. After what we have seen of it I, for one, would be by no means surprised to find that two and two make seven by the local rules. To this Eptus obstinately asserts that reason is absolute and universal and therefore must hold good on even the craziest planet. All I can say to that is that it just doesn't look that way from here.

Podas' second specimen—the one taken from the disked artifact—after lying for some time doing nothing perceptible beyond expansion and contraction, then began for no discoverable reason to show signs of re-animation. It moved a little.

Then we observed that small flaps in the tegument—the permanent, not the dispensible tegument—covering the blunt projection were drawn back, uncovering a kind of lenses made, seemingly, of liquid. For a short while no more happened. But it was then that we realized that it did have intelligence of a kind.

We could feel its mind, which had apparently been absent or in some way diffused before, coalescing into some sort of form. Quite suddenly it raised its cylindrical main mass to the vertical on the rounded lower end—where, in this species, there is no tapered projection.

Immediate reflex concern filled its mind at the absence of the detachable teguments Podas had removed when examining it. This concern, however, was quickly replaced by another—an urgent fear of falling. It turned its lenses downward. There was immediate chaos in its mind but the dominant question seemed to be—why did it not drop to the ground some little distance beneath?

WELL, why should it? It was supported on a solid block of boltik, which in turn rested on the solid boltik floor. This it presently discovered for itself by sliding one of its slender upper projections over the surface. At this its

confusion grew rather than diminished.

Then we made the surprising discovery that its lenses were extraordinarily defective. Their range of vision was so limited that they were quite insensitive not only to boltik but to all our other materials, including ourselves! It had no means of detecting them or us except by touch.

Consequently, what it was now asking itself was how it came to be suspended above the ground in the middle of a desert. It gave a long look at the damaged artifact outside. It took hold of a part of itself, apparently with the intention of proving its own existence to itself.

Hostility is evidently instinctive to this species. Its weapon is concealed somewhere within it and is projected from an orifice a little below the lenses. It takes the form of a slot or a rough circle according to the force employed. It began to use it now, fortunately on a low power and register which caused us no more than a slight discomfort.

It moved one of its lower projections and found the edge of the block. Thence it felt downward to the floor. Assured by touch that that existed it put down the matching projection—but instead of bringing down the other pair of projections, it remained balanced upon two!

At this point Eptus complained that he must be suffering from hallucinations. The creature was so manifestly top-heavy that it was against reason for it to remain stable in the position in which he now saw it.

We agreed in principle, but pointed out that we were seeing the same thing, so that we must accept its reality in spite of reason. Eptus declared that Podas must have overlooked a gyroscope somewhere in the tangle of tubes.

The creature remained vertical but stationary for a moment. It then began to make its way, by an ungainly swaying of its weight from one projection to the other, toward the disked artifact.

Not being able to perceive the wall of the redoubt it encountered it somewhat

suddenly and with natural surprise. It continued its manifestations of hostility as it felt about the boltik surface in bewilderment. Then, discouraged, it turned back.

It was at that moment that it saw for the first time the other specimen which Podas' investigations had reduced to a rather disorderly condition.

It stopped. Its lenses widened. The slot below them also widened. In that instant we learned how terrible the attack of these creatures can be. Although it could not see us it must have sensed in some way that we were there—we could feel its awareness of danger—so it gave its weapon full power.

By misfortune, I think, rather than by design, it had the range of one of us exactly. Poor Althis, the engineer, was shattered in a twinkling and fell in a pile of dust. Simultaneously a fissure occurred in one of the interior walls of the redoubt.

Luckily the sharp report of Althis' disintegration startled the creature. It ceased the attack momentarily and stood looking round to see whence the sound had come. Before it could renew its attack we took action, holding the creature in such a way that it could not use its weapon.

Podas, with great presence of mind, cast a shape of boltik and cooled it—for we have found that the substance of these creatures calcines at quite low temperatures—and then fitted it to the creature in such a way that it could not open its slot and was thus virtually disarmed.

It is true that this did not pacify it, for it continued to attempt to use its weapon, but its power was reduced to mere nuisance value. When we released it, it struck at us with its upper projections although it could not see us.

In doing so it cut its soft tegument on Eptus and left a smear of its red liquid upon him. The sight of this moving as he moved seemed to worry it a great deal. Finding that its soft members suffered in this way when they encountered us, it desisted and turned its

attention to trying to rid itself of Podas' frame in order to attack us again.

This was, of course, far beyond its feeble power and in a short time it began to feel its way round the interior of the redoubt, apparently seeking for a way out and still making suppressed attempts to use its weapon.

It seemed also to have damaged its lenses in some way, for liquid from them was running down toward its slot. Its mind was so confused and disturbed that such thought processes as we could discern were by no means rational.

This was still going on when the approach of another disked artifact similar to the first was reported. It held to the mark in the same way but when it reached a point close behind the other it stopped. A part of it opened and a creature similar to our first specimen (i. e., the bifurcated, not the webbed type) emerged. It looked at the first artifact with obvious curiosity and peered within it.

MEANWHILE, our specimen within the redoubt had also noticed the creature's approach. It tried to move toward it but was, of course, held back by the redoubt wall. It stood there, obviously trying to bring its weapon into use against one of its own kind, which puzzled us very much.

Presently the creature outside looked up and saw the one inside. For a moment we expected an attack. Its lenses widened quite remarkably, its slot dropped wide open—but oddly enough nothing came from it immediately. When it did it was surprisingly weak and harmless.

"We should catch it before it attacks," Eptus advised.

"It may not attack—unless we give it reason," Podas replied.

"Reason—*bah!*" said Eptus, irritably.

A sudden confusion came over our specimen. It picked up a piece of the tegment which Podas had removed and held it against itself.

The creature outside cleared its mind

somewhat and began to project thoughts at the other. We found that when it made this direct form of address we could follow it concisely.

It said, "What a shame you're not real, honey. If mirages are like this, I've wasted my time on bathing-beaches."

Why it said this we do not understand. But we observed the very curious fact that though its mind was by no means hostile it was making low-power aggression with its slot. We also observed that our specimen did not receive the message. It was, in fact, simultaneously putting out a confused plea for help which the other was not receiving—or was only faintly aware of.

"This is curious indeed," said Podas. "There seems to be no comprehension between the two—and ours is struggling hard to use its weapon, yet with no aggressive intent in its mind. Is it possible that these weapons have the secondary purpose of communication?"

"In this place anything is possible and everything is unlikely," said Eptus. "I have reached the state where I am prepared to believe that they normally communicate by battering one another to death if you claim that it is so."

The creature outside approached and encountered the wall of the redoubt. It rubbed the part of itself that had made contact, and explored the wall with both upper projections. Its mind was full of astonishment.

Meanwhile the creature inside appeared to be trying to push itself through the wall. Finding that futile it started to make signs with its projections. It indicated itself, the artifact and the first specimen.

When the outside creature saw the first specimen, which, as I have said, Podas had left in a very untidy state, its mind hardened remarkably. It stepped back, and took something out of a slit in its tegment. It extended this object towards the redoubt. There was a crack—not dissimilar to the sound of a person disintegrating and therefore on a harmless range.

Something hit the wall and fell. The creature walked forward and picked up a round flat splash of metal. One could sense that it was extremely puzzled. Then it put its projections against the wall and felt carefully all the way along from the rock on one side to that on the other.

It was dismayed. It shifted the tegument on its blunt projection and tried to aid its thoughts by stimulating the surface exposed. It went back to its artifact and returned holding a squat cylinder. This proved to contain a black viscous substance which it daubed on our wall. The marks are still there. From our side they appear so:

WAIT! I'LL BE BACK.

Our creature comprehended this and made a sign.

The other re-entered its artifact and went away.

And so the situation rests.

Eptus now agrees that the disked affair is an artifact but contends that so squashy and semi-liquid a creature as our specimens cannot have made anything so hard. Therefore, he argues, there must be another and doubtless higher type of intelligence here, housed in a harder form capable of dealing with such materials.

PODAS is still trying to communicate with our specimen. It has folded itself up against an angle of the wall and floor where it again tries quite desperately at intervals to remove the boltik frame which prevents it from using its weapon.

He is convinced that the slot is somehow linked with its transmission of thought. Eptus says this is nonsense—it has become quite clear to him that our wall interrupts these creatures' thought waves, so that they fall back on a secondary form of communication by marks.

Podas objects that we were able to distinguish the outside creature's thought waves—some of them very clearly. To which Eptus objects that it stands to reason that we are a great

deal more sensitive than this soggy and revolting form of life.

Argument on such lines, it seems to me, not only can go on for some time but doubtless will.

* * * * *

Interim Report.

Dear Zenn, I have become worried by recent developments. The plain fact is that we do not know enough about these strange creatures here to keep the situation firmly in hand. There is now a crowd of them with their artifacts outside our east wall.

Several of our party have disintegrated and I fear that more may go at any moment. The creatures fling the most dangerous frequencies around, not only without effort but regardless of consequences.

Podas suggests that they may not know the danger in the frequencies since their pudgy bodies are unlikely to respond, that they are, in fact, naturally sound-absorbent. Fantastic as this may seem Eptus is for once inclined to support him. It is also apparently endorsed by our attempts to beam them.

We directed a most powerful beam upon them and ran it through a range of highly destructive frequencies. One cannot say it was entirely without effect. For a moment they did check and we were gratified—we thought we were near a critical length.

They turned to look at one another with obvious puzzlement in their minds. Then they started to communicate—it does look as if Podas were right, for they invariably accompany thought projection with movement of their slots.

As far as we could interpret they were "saying" such things as, "Do you hear it too? . . . It's not just my ears, is it? . . . Like a funny kind of music—only it isn't music . . . No, not exactly music . . . It's very queer . . ."

That last seemed to be the most general reaction. So far from disintegrating them it did not seem, even at full power, to do more than disturb them

slightly, and puzzle them. In other words this powerful weapon is useless against them. And we are left somewhat at a loss . . .

Not caring for the situation, I decided to anticipate my usual report time and give you this immediate current account.

The creature which had visited us previously returned accompanied by a number of similar artifacts. More followed later and indeed I can see still more approaching as I make this report.

Before that the creature we hold here had become listless. Podas was of the opinion that it required nourishment of some kind. Eptus put some silicates before it, but it was clearly uninterested. Podas, recalling its chemical basis, reduced some of the local growths to carbon, and offered it that—also without success.

We do not wish to cause the creature unnecessary distress but it is difficult to know what to do about it. We might try injecting some carbon into it if we were at all sure which of its several orifices it uses for purposes of assimilation.

However the return of the other creature stimulated it to some activity, so that it raised itself erect again.

Almost all the creatures that now arrived were the type with bifurcated teguments—a number of them being exactly similar in dark blue with metal attachments. Their reaction at the sight of our specimen was much the same as that of the other at first. It was then we discovered how rankly careless they are with their frequencies. Luckily, however, all were below danger level.

Like the other they began by feeling their way along the wall of the redoubt. All their minds were and still are full of astonishment. Having discovered the length of the wall, they set about determining the height, and presently there were some moving about on the roof above us.

Nearly all of them were given to stimulating their blunt, uppermost projections where they appear to carry

their minds, by friction of their upper limbs. They made use of several metallic implements experimentally but the metal was, of course, far too soft to make any impression on boltik. They seemed as much at a loss to deal with us as we with them.

But not all of them were employed in the same way. -One in particular remained close to its artifact, holding a small object before its slot, and making frequencies at it. It was clear from its mind that it was describing what went on—but to whom or to what or why we cannot perceive.

THINKING we might learn something new from an animate specimen of this type, we opened our door. One of them discovered the entrance as it felt along and came in. Podas had a frame ready to prevent it making distressing frequencies and we shut the door again behind it.

This seemed to cause some consternation to the others outside. By bringing the new specimen close to the other one, we established fairly conclusively the correctness of Podas' theory of slot-communication in the species. Both struggled to use them but, failing, remained out of communication.

Our attention was diverted from this interesting discovery by the arrival of more artifacts. Some of these contained creatures with webbed teguments. These are now established as the more dangerous. One of them, immediately upon emerging, uttered a frequency which was extremely painful to many of us.

Unfortunately Ankis and Falmus happened to hold just that critical periodicity and disintegrated on the spot. The sharp report of their simultaneous demise startled all the creatures, who began ineffectually to make a search for the source of it.

We cannot learn much from our new specimen yet. Its mind is quite chaotic with alarm. It seems particularly disorganized by the sight of Podas' work on the first specimen. I have already

suggested to Podas that he should incinerate this untidy object. I shall now insist ...

* * * * *

I have done so. Unfortunately the result does not seem to have had a sedative effect upon the minds of either of our other specimens.

We continue to be greatly puzzled by the creature which never stops emitting noises at its instrument. At first we heard it alone. Now, however, we hear it considerably amplified, issuing from several of the disked artifacts. How can this be? Why should it be? There is no sense in it. The creatures here are observing for themselves the very facts he is communicating. And it is very wearing to us.

A row of the creatures outside is now trying to communicate with our two specimens. They emit very strongly on a harmless though disagreeable frequency without success. Now they are making marks on white surfaces to which our two are responding by signs.

Another artifact with a lensed machine on top has arrived. It is directed at us by a creature standing behind it. It is quite ineffective, and does not trouble us at all.

Still more disked artifacts continue to arrive. All the creatures are puzzled over what to do next. In one small group they are discussing whether they shall bring something—something that disintegrates violently—I do not understand clearly—against our wall but are afraid of destroying our two specimens at the same time. One of the creatures exploring our roof has discovered the further edge by falling off it. Others have come around to pick it up, so now they are on both sides of us.

Meanwhile, we are still trying to communicate with the specimens. Podas has arranged a battery of ten minds concentrating thought upon them simultaneously. The pressure is terrific—and entirely without effect. They are obtuse coarse hopeless clods, as insensitive to thought as they are to sound.

One of the webbed creatures outside has just emitted a frequency which has destroyed three of our party in a twinkling. This is a shocking business. We are going to try our beams again.

They are surprised—but no more. The talking creature has stopped talking. It is holding up its instrument as though to catch our beams. What—? Stop! *Stop! STOP!*

That was dreadful. Somehow our beams were coming back at us. There's a fissure in our wall, cracks in our roof. Half a dozen more of us have disintegrated. I'm sure it was something to do with that talking creature and its instrument—but how? I don't understand. Now it has started talking again.

All the creatures are trying to trace the sounds of the disintegrations. They are very bewildered.

The talking creature has stopped talking—that's better. But the reproduced sound from the disked artifacts has not stopped! How—? Oh, it must be amplifying another creature now, the resonances are different. Queer!

It's the sound they make—but it means nothing. I can catch no thought-wave connected with it. It must originate somewhere else. I don't understand ... There, it has stopped now, and a good thing, too.

The— Oh, merciful heaven, what a sound from those reproducers! What excruciation! An appalling sound! Rhythmic, pulsating, piercing, devilish! This is killing us, damn them! It's—*oh!*—it's shaking us to pieces ...

Dreadful ... Agonizing ... Oh—*oh!*

A couple of dozen have gone—Podas with them. Now Eptus ...

The whole redoubt is trembling ... That frequency ... It's almost critical ... If it goes any higher ...

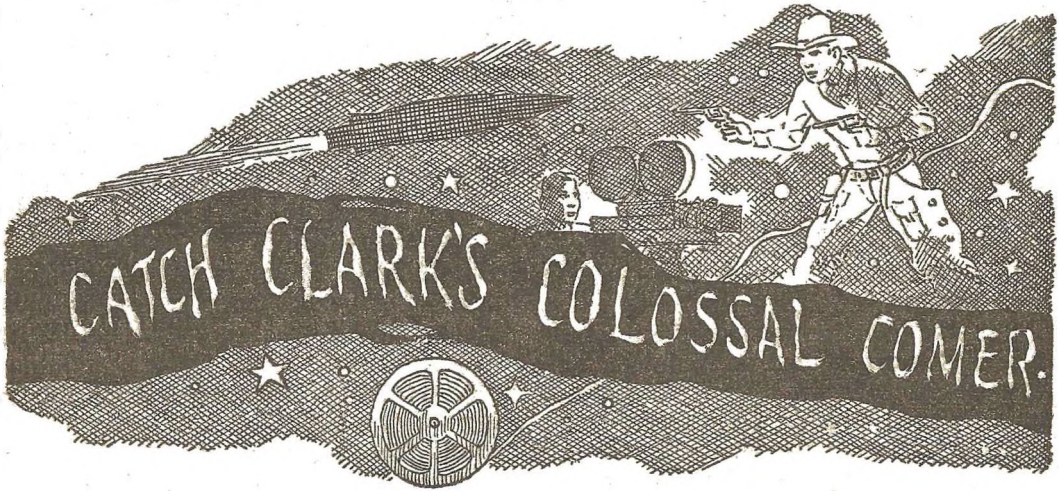
Too late! The boltik has shattered. It's falling in powder round what's left of us ...

Oh! That sound—that awful sound! I can't—oh, what agony! Almost on my frequency ...

Now it's—Oh!—OH!—OH!

Letters of Fire

A Novelet by **MATT LEE**



Austerity was the law of the galaxy until a Hollywood promotion man's ulcers upset the entire balance of the universe for keeps!

CHAPTER I

Unexpected Audience

IT ALL began with an ulcer—the pampered petted property of Jay Carens, erstwhile college professor, erstwhile carnival barker, erstwhile journalist and current publicity chief for Cosmic Productions. At the outset it was more bileful impulse than idea.

Carens was sitting on the sidelines at a very gay party in Pasadena, which the ever-spreading entertainment capital of Hollywood had long since cannibalized. He was sipping the flat glass of ginger ale with which his thoughtful hostess had provided him, burping occasionally and loathing the entire human

species because his ulcer would not permit him to share in the increasingly alcoholic gayety.

He wanted to hit out at somebody and, since beneath the various layers of Machiavellian calculation and verbose camouflage that made up his personality, Carens was at core a kindly soul, he decided to take out his urge on Stellar Studios, Cosmic's hated rival, rather than on his own gang.

Watching unhappily as an alluring daiquiri disappeared down the luscious gullet of an equally luscious blonde, he wondered if ever again he would be al-



lowed to feel the salubrious inner glow, the sunburst of sociability, that followed such imbibing. He culled his memories—of which he had more than his share—to find the phrase that would precisely fit the feeling.

It was, he decided, a little as if the heavens had lit up unexpectedly. And from this the fantastic idea was born.

Why not, he thought, light up the heavens? Why not hang a flaming sign-board in space, plugging the forthcoming production of Clark Dorrance, Cosmic's greatest star and Jay Caren's closest friend, so that all the world would know about it?

Thus it was that space-writing was born.

It took a lot of finagling and work, even in a world which had renounced war in favor of enjoyment of life by popular command.

First there was the matter of rigging such a device—but as usual Dr. Murray—Dr. Cobb Murray, known as "Loggy" (short for logarithm) by his friends, came up with the answer. It arrived in

the form of an old war-rocket, rigged atomically and with a satellite anchor and immense refracting devices so that it would remain on the night side of Earth and send out its glowing message in thousand-mile letters for forty-eight hours.

Getting the uranium was tricky, of course, since the United Nations had charge of all radioactive minerals and saw that they were distributed only for promotion of the new Utopia. It was Clark Dorrance, the star himself, who used his fabulous personality to promote this end of the stunt.

SO, one September evening in 1992, the three of them—Jay Carens, Dr. Cobb Murray and Dorrance—hovered over the former rocket-testing ground at White Sands, New Mexico, while the space-writing rocket was set off by remote control from Dorrance's bubble-car.

"I wish you'd never done it," moaned Carens, suffering from an acute attack of cold feet once the bright rocket trail had wound its way upward to invisibility in the star-studded night sky.

"You thought of it, Jaybird," said scientist Murray, a redhead, who looked far younger than his thirty-seven years, far more the Hollywood star than Clark Dorrance.

"Might be 'jailbird' soon," said Dorrance, casual as always, from the driver's seat. "Remember, Jaybird, if anything goes wrong Loggy and I are going to hang this right on your corvine beak." Dorrance was of medium height, rather thick-set, rapidly becoming bald. He looked far more the traditional sloppy publicity man than did Carens.

"Oh for the days when a publicity stunt was merely getting a contract honeycomb in a bathing suit to share her bath with an aardvark!" moaned Carens, who looked far more like the traditional concept of a scientist than Murray.

At that moment the heavens above

them burst into fast-spreading bright yellow letters. They spelled—

CATCH CLARK'S COLOSSAL COMER—
TWILIGHT ON TELLUS
IT'S YOUR VIDAR HEAVENLY BEST
FOR 1993

Vidar—the incredible development in entertainment that had saved Hollywood from extinction when television threatened to sweep everything else out of the entertainment field! Vidar was the medium that had brought people out of their homes and back into the theaters.

Thanks to its incredible chromatic fidelity—even more to its ability to create the impression of three-dimensional depth not only into but out from the "screen"—vidar was the greatest single enterprise remaining in an atomically socialized world.

Actually the screen was not a screen but an electron film of amazingly controlled stereoptic effect. And it reacted to the carefully varied and regulated electrolight beams of the atomic projectors to give the audience the effect of being right *in* the scene. Cobb Murray, as a very young man, had made some of its basic discoveries—which were ultimately what had brought him to Hollywood.

It was incredibly expensive—too much so even for the entertainment capital. But the United Nations, aware of the public hunger for it, doled out the more precious ingredients in accord with strict rules of fairness among the studios—of which Cosmic and Stellar were the chief two. Needless to say these rivals were always seeking to gain advantage, the one of the other.

Their conflict was actually the one war alive on Earth.

Diane Luray, sultry top star of Stellar, almost blew her beautiful cork when she saw the space writing. Stellar at once protested to U. N. headquarters in New York but nothing came of it.

Too many hundreds of millions of people were too amused by it for punishment to be practical. Cosmic escaped with a warning. And Stellar sulked.

* * * * *

However, not all the eyes watching the incredible Dorrance-Murray-Carens advertising caper were on Earth. Out close to the orbit of Mars an immense and utterly alien star-ship, in the process of taking evasive action from pursuers bent on its destruction, emerged sud-

safely with his amazing story.

It was a galactic sensation. News of an atomic and presumably humanoid culture in this far-distant corner, isolated as it was, thousands of light-years from the main currents of the civilized galaxy, was sensational beyond its intrinsic importance.

For more than two hundred orzacs—two hundred and eighty revolutions of the space-writing planet around its small-fry sun—the humanoid planets of the galaxy had been trapped in a

About This Story

THE problem of the alien and of alien existence on the planets of other stars is one which has long concerned science fiction writer and reader alike. Even presupposing, as does Mr. Lee in this story, the fact of widespread humanization throughout the stars, the effect of exotic environments and climatic and atmospheric conditions, utterly unknown to us of Earth, offers interesting ground for speculation.

But almost invariably this subject is approached from the point of view of the effect of such aliens upon our own insignificant planet. Hence it is welcome to get a switch—one in which the effect of Earth humans and of some facets of their culture upon the rest of the galaxy comes under the glass.

Let us assure you that the impact, if not catastrophic, is something like that of a shrapnel burst in a glass factory.—THE EDITOR.

denly from sub-space to get its bearings, and its crew saw the great sign blazing in the black velvet of the sky.

—REMOCLASSOLOC S'KRALC HCTAC
SULLET NO THGILIWT
TSEB YLNEVAEH RADIV RUOY S'TI
3991 ROF

For a moment the weary pilot of the fleeing ship thought he had lost his mind. Then, with horror, he saw that two of his pursuers had emerged from sub-space within easy ray-gun distance of him. He crouched a little in his harness, readying himself for annihilation.

But the deadly beams did not flash. Evidently the crews of the enemy vessels had seen the fiery letters, had been as amazed as their quarry. In that second of bewilderment the fleeing star-pilot was able to get a line on his home star, vanish again into sub-space and return

war-that-was-not-a-war. The conflict had spread through almost the entire star-system, was so evenly divided between the two chief opponents that each new habitable planet, no matter how obscure or isolated, could be the vital factor in upsetting the balance of power.

Basically the war-that-was-not-a-war lay between the so-called Boötean League and the Planets of the Cross. One by one the remaining planet-groups had been drawn in on one side or the other until there remained few habitable worlds fit for conquest.

It was a collision of fundamental views of life that had reduced the races of galactic man to an austerity which had come to seem the only normal way of existence. It was cardinal in the Boötean League that each individual should have a chance to fulfill his own destiny as long as that destiny did not

do harm to the society around it.

The citizens of the Planets on the other hand believed in the superiority of their vast central cybernetic machines when it came to the matter of solving human problems. Each member of their vast society had his path plotted by subordinate machines, whose dictates he had faithfully to serve lest he disrupt the entire fabric of thought-logic on which his civilization perforce rested.

Every energy, every resource of both expanding groups was directed toward winning the struggle. While open warfare was not indulged in lest it destroy the galaxy through the terrible weapons possessed by both combatant groups, there were endless friction, endless intrigue, an endless series of local combats and pursuits and liquidation of "enemy" agents, endless daring infiltrations.

It was a League pickup pilot, who had collected a small group of such infiltration agents from a Planet system, who first saw the strange space-writing of Clark Dorrance while en route to home base. And it was a pair of Planet ships pursuing him that saw it also and at once raced to report their findings.

Repercussions were immediate on both sides. Scouts and reconnaissance agents were despatched to the strange planet by each group as rapidly as possible, to determine the extent of civilization on Tellus, its origin, its component parts, its level of culture, its usefulness as a possible ally, its menace as an enemy.

Rendezvous points were set up and a steady stream of reports and stolen artifacts was smuggled out to be weighed and judged by the authorities in such matters on either side of the galactic struggle. Not the least of these artifacts were vidarolls, screens and projectors, a matter which caused consternation to Earth's United Nations.

In League headquarters on the planet Clu-Rno, Serpens, a decision was finally reached as to what steps to take toward gaining control of the new planet. On advice of the League Council itself, Mun-

r-Coveu, Galactic Sector Chief of Infiltration, consulted his long list of agents—they numbered over a million all told—and finally sent out a summons for the most competent one available.

Her name was Fer-o-Tiquari and she was a comely young woman with red hair and a figure whose whip-steel strength and conditioning were hidden beneath entirely pleasing and feminine curves. Although she was but three orzacs out of the League Infiltration Academy she had already proved her worth in assignments on planets of Antares and Andromeda, both strongholds of the enemy.

When she was thoroughly briefed and had studied Tellurian vidarolls for half a zernal—approximately three Earth-weeks—Mun-r-Coveu had her brought to his office. There, lying on a foam pad to abet concentration without increase of fatigue, he explained to her the nature of her assignment.

"In short," he said when summing it up, "your job will be to attain personal control over this man known as Clark Dorrance and maintain it—even though it develops into a Zed-mission."

"Yes, sir," said Fer-o-Tiquari, her amber eyes steady despite the churning she felt inside her. It was not that she feared possible danger—which appeared to be slight enough on this assignment. It was not that she objected to the giving of herself that gaining "control" over Clark Dorrance meant.

FER-O-TIQUARI had already given herself, had already killed, had long been prepared to die suddenly and violently in the course of her job. Those who were not prepared thus to live and to die were scarcely the material of competent agents. She was puzzled.

A pink-tipped tongue ran over full lips and she tugged uncertainly at the dress girdle which, with ankle boots bearing the stars of her captain's rank, made up her costume. Her hair was almost its natural auburn as the light green dye required on her Andromedan

mission had faded with the passing zernals.

"I am baffled," she confessed bluntly, for bluntness was encouraged as a time-saver in official conferences. "From what I have been able to learn this man Dorrance is a mere entertainer—yet he is of sufficient importance on his planet to rate a Zed-mission."

Mun-r-Coveu nodded and permitted his thin lips to curve in a half smile. "Indeed it is hard to comprehend," he said slowly, "but this seems to be the case. On this Earth you are to visit it is the entertainers—this Dorrance and to a lesser degree the woman Diane Luray—who are the people most admired and followed."

"Perhaps," said the girl, frowning, "it is a priesthood—a cult of some primitive nature."

"A cult perhaps—but definitely not the other," said the Galactic Sector Chief. "He is in no way a religious symbol. In most sections of the planet there are religious leaders—but their influence seems to be local and generally of an ephemeral nature. It is the same with the statesmen and politicians."

"Indeed a strange world," murmured Fer-o-Tiquari.

"That it is," said the Galactic Leader. He paused, frowned, then said speculatively, "Its humanoid origins are buried in a fog of legend and mist—mostly of the baffling pantheistic type. It appears probable that it was settled by some group of the earliest star-drive pioneers, who landed by mistake or accident.

"At any rate," he went on slowly, "this Earth has remained entirely isolated from the main currents of galactic life for some thousands of orzacs. It is backward by some of our standards, utterly incomprehensible by others. Yet in some ways it is advanced."

"A combination which should prove even more difficult of solution for our logic-ridden opponents than for ourselves," said the girl with pardonable bias, considering her background and training.

"Do not underrate your opponents," Mun-r-Coveu told her. "It may well be that there is some key to the apparent anachronisms of Tellurian culture. And in this case our cybernetic friends may well stumble upon it before we do. And while the assignment does not on the surface look difficult or dangerous—remember it is usually such jobs that cost the lives of careless agents—just as it is the trivial missions that frequently shake the galaxy."

"Yes, sir," said the girl. She revered her Leader but she was not fool enough to take his speech at face value. He was simply bolstering her to endure an assignment which promised to remove her from the worlds and the struggle that had been her whole existence—remove her not for a period of zernals or orzacs but for life. That was what a Zed-mission meant—till death.

None the less she made no complaint when he touched her brow with his right forefinger in farewell salute. To do so would have been tantamount to treason. Instead she returned his salute, bobbed her head in token of good-bye, turned smartly on her heel and marched out of the headquarters office—headed for Earth and a Zed-mission which had Clark Dorrance as its final objective.

CHAPTER II

Contact

WHEN Liza Winters was informed by the hotel switchboard that a bubble-car from Cosmic Productions was waiting to take her to the studio, she had to acknowledge the call three times before any sound emerged from her lips. As she replaced the instrument on its cradle she discovered that her hand was actually shaking.

All this, she thought self-derisively, because at last the avenue was opening for her to meet a ham entertainer on a

two-bit planet. Yet such mental flagellation did nothing to clear her diaphragm of the butterflies which were cavorting upon it. She actually had to sit down for a moment to collect herself.

It had taken fifteen zernals, an orzac and a half—a trifle more than twenty-one Earth months—to make even this preliminary contact with the object of her mission. And when, three zernals after Mun-r-Coveu had given her first instructions, she had first set foot on this weird planet, it had seemed a simple assignment.

Everything possible, of course, had been arranged—as was usual on such a mission. Her Tellurian identity as Liza Winters, a young girl singer, had been planted. There had even been a trio of agent auditions set up in which she was to display her talent and move directly into vidar and a meeting with Clark Dorrance. It had looked almost fool-proof—on the visagraphic records.

In practise it had been something else again. Apparently these barbarians found her trained galactic voice all but unbearable. The first—a gaudy specimen in checked bolo and olive-tinted glasses that happily hid half his face—had simply shaken his fez-topped head and walked out, leaving her alone.

The second—a squat cigar-smoking character with shoe-button eyes and a fatherly manner—had said, “Baby, I don’t know what you got with them pipes but whatever it is I don’t want it. Why don’t you forget your career and have dinner with me?”

The third—but Liza had not bothered. She had sulked in her hotel room until her usual morning calisthenics brought about her eviction. Then, bursting with need for exercise in this confined and noisy and evil-smelling world, she had happened to spot a sign outside an arena which promised jet-skating—whatever that was it promised to give her muscles some sort of a workout.

It had not taken Liza long to learn how to handle the odd little self-propelled foot runners. After all, they

were infant’s play to the complex exercise-machines of her home planets. On her very first evening at the rink she had been tapped by a scout for the Girls’ Jet-skating Derby, as a potential Los Angeles Angelina.

She had asked just one question when informed that taking the job would involve a continental tour. “Does this Derby business get on vidar?” she had wanted to know.

She was informed that it was one of the main features of television, where it had succeeded the one-time roller derby, that in time vidar was bound to recognize it. With a grateful glance at the scarred face of Buck Gentry, the rugged ex-athlete who had discovered her, Liza had signed up.

Being better trained and conditioned than any girl ever born on Earth, Liza had leaped into stardom without quite seeing the sense in doing what she was doing. Her alert good looks, her amber eyes, her dark red hair, her slender, strong and graceful but definitely feminine figure—all counted along with her ability.

The other girls had ganged up on her, of course, the second time around the circuit. Once in Detroit she had been obliged to press the button on her combat girdle that put its anti-gravity beam into operation in order to escape a deliberate jam-trap. As a result she had sailed through the air a full sixty feet, alighting with speed undiminished and leaving her rivals lumped behind her in an unladylike tangle of scrapes, contusions and curses.

It was that leap that did the trick—coupled with her looks and the immense popularity of the Girls’ Jet Derby. Already a subject for numerous news features Liza found herself being interviewed, photographed and recorded for the big-time vizazines. Thereafter the vidar bids had begun to roll in.

Liza waited until Cosmic made an offer before she even considered accepting. Then she dickered until Vidar was signed and sealed as the pro-

ducing agent. Her job was to be that of jet-coach to the actress selected for the role opposite Clark Dorrance, with the promise that she would have a part in the vidar show itself. She was also drawing fat pay as technical advisor, whatever that meant.

"Around Robin Hood's barn," she muttered, repeating an archaic Earthism she had picked up during the long months of frustration. She rose, took a look at herself in the full-length pier glass on a wall of her bungalow.

Knowing that they would be expecting a tough cookie from the jet circuit Liza had decided to look as much like that other Earthian archaism, a lady, as was possible. She had not done badly, she decided as she lined up for final inspection.

THANKS to the fact that the acticomb was as yet unknown on Earth, she had been able to arrange her lustrous auburn hair in the flattering current frog-horn fashion without going to one of those torture dens known as a beautician's. She had perforce become accustomed to the use of face make-up in small quantities, had applied lipstick and panpow expertly and effectively to bring out the healthy pallor of her skin, her amber eyes and dark red hair.

She still found it difficult to accept having her bosom covered in ordinary wear. Yet the zebra-striped bra she wore was spectacular without passing the bounds of good taste, since with it she wore a simple white bolo jacket and black skirted clout. Her sandals were of arresting black-and-white design.

She enjoyed the ride to the studio in the large and imposing chauffeur-driven bubble-car. Although this Earth might be barbaric its denizens had incredibly high standards of comfort compared to the austerity of the rest of the galaxy.

It was a strange place, she thought, a planet in which entertainment had become the most formidable single factor. Instead of concentrating their dawning atomic age upon galactic expansion the

Tellurians, as yet far from developing star-drives and isolated in their own system by the inhospitality of their sister planets, had turned their unlimited new energy sources to social purpose.

Within certain well-defined limits every man and woman could live about as he or she chose under the benevolent rule of the United Nations, which had been dusted off and given teeth following the near catastrophe of the war of 1960.

Productive community work was treated much as conscription had been in pre-atomic eras—it was confined to a single year of the citizen's life, after which he was free beyond emergencies. Those who enjoyed such work were allowed to take up the few necessary permanent jobs for life and to become trainers of the one-year masses. For the rest, food and living and culture were virtually free.

Consequently entertainment, in television and even more in vidar, became the most sought-after element in life. All over the world people put their spare mone-units into payment of vidar rent, into visazines giving gossip of the stars, into purchase of admission to personal appearances of stars, into pilgrimages to Hollywood, where most of their idols lived and worked and played.

Although Liza could understand this state of affairs intellectually she—like any other girl brought up in the austerity of the galactic war-that-was-not-a-war—simply could not accept it emotionally. Not that she didn't enjoy it—especially as at last her mission seemed to be moving. But it was something that was at direct cross-purposes to her previous experience. Therefore it was unreal.

Jay Carens was a surprise. He rose from behind a monstrous blond desk at the far end of an office that looked like a dry swimming pool whose interior had been plastered solidly with sere leaves. His greying hair fell in twin rivulets barely to miss contact with his dark bushy brows. Beneath them and sheltered by ribbonless pince-nez shrewd

watery blue eyes twinkled on either side of a noble nose.

"My word!" he exclaimed with a sudden emergence of too-symmetrical false teeth. "My sainted word! I never expected a lady jet-skating star to look so—so—" He paused to avert his face and emit a tremendous belch, concluded with an unabashed "—so perfectly enchanting. Your presence here should make publicity for *Ladies from Hades* a pleasure. Do you really jet-skate, my dear?"

"I really jet-skate," Liza replied, sitting down. "I presume you'll want me to pose. When will you be wanting me to get together with the cameramen?"

"How cooperative can you get?" murmured Jay Carens, adjusting his pince-nez, which had slipped. He burped again, shuddered and said, "Shall we lunch here while we talk things over? If I take you over to the commissary we'll be swamped."

Liza agreed. She intended to "cooperate" with this unprofessorial experimenter but only as long as it was business. To her he was a stepping stone, nothing more. Over a vocograph on his desk Carens ordered her steak and onions and his own graham crackers and milk. When her food came his eyes seemed ready to pop right through his pince-nez—but a belch and evident internal discomfort caused him to lose his appetite.

Savoring the excellent cut of sirloin Liza thought, not for the first time, that the Tellurian steer was one item from this barbarian planet that should be exported for galactic breeding. It had the texture of Heracleian Cor-ox with the juicy flavor of the succulent Boötean plant-felv, along with something that was neither but was delicious in its own right.

CARENS was in the midst of telling her the story of the spacewriting rocket, about which she had pumped him gently, for it represented a minor facet of her assignment, when a tall copper-headed young man with bright brown

eyes and a firm square chin came in without knocking through a side door.

He said, "Listen, Jaybird, I think I'm caught up on a way to nail those vidaroll thefts. I've rigged up a little electric-eye with a stinger in it and the next time anyone tries to sneak out of the cannery with one of them he'll stay there until someone turns the gadget off. If that doesn't get them—"

"Loggy, please!" said Jay Carens, finally swallowing the mouthful of crackers which had been defeating his efforts to speak. "Can't you vox me first—or knock? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"You—*busy*?" The red-head opened his mouth to laugh derisively, then followed Carens' pointing spoon and saw Liza for the first time. He glanced away, did a double take, then laid back his ears and gave vent to a long low whistle.

"Dammit, this is the technical advisor for *Ladies from Hades*," Jay said. "We're talking over angles. Miss Li—"

"Don't tell me—I can guess," said the tall man standing over Liza and looking at her as if he didn't believe it. "Those hair, those eyes, those mouth, those—save them till later. I can't believe it, Miss Winters. They told me you were a looker but—"

"Please, Loggy, we're talking publicity angles," said Jay.

"Angles—with *her*?" cried Loggy, outraged. He grinned and added, "I'm Cobb Murray—Loggy to you, Liza. Listen, what about that flying-fish act of yours? I've heard about it but I don't believe it. Will you show me how it works some time, Liza?"

"It is part of my job to coach your leading lady in jet-skating," Liza said coolly. She suddenly discovered that she disliked this fellow redhead intensely. The emotion surprised her. She could discover no good reason for any feeling at all.

"Seriously," he said. "I've looked at the vidareels of you in action. You actually appear to defy the law of gravity."

"If you don't get out of here I'm

going to break the law of manslaughter," said Jay Carens. Liza finished her steak.

"Oh—*hey*, I forgot the real reason I busted in," said Cobb Murray. "Clark's on his way over with Pankhurst."

Jay Carens sprayed a mouthful of crackers and milk all over his desk. He combined a cough with a belch, then began mopping-up operations with his napkin. "You mean to tell me Clark didn't let me know?" he said angrily. "How am I supposed to handle things—"

"Pankhurst landed on him at the ranch without warning this noon," Cobb Murray said. "He tried to get you but you had your box shut off and a do-not-disturb sign hung on the door. So he got me and told me to tell you they're on their way down."

"Gawdamighty!" barked Carens, his pince-nez flying through the air to fall in his gruel. "If Pankhurst is here it means—"

"Trouble, Jaybird, trouble in piles," Murray told him. A buzzer sounded somewhere and both men looked at each other, aghast. Murray picked up the two trays and dropped them in back of a sofa.

Liza in the meantime had been practising one of the first things an infiltration agent learns in pre-institute training—the art of becoming invisible by being absolutely still. She knew without saying that her break had come. Already she had acquired valuable and important knowledge. Now she was about to meet the object of her mission—and from the inside. Mentally, morally, physically, she marshalled her not inconsiderable forces.

The door opened and both men rushed to meet the new arrivals and still Liza sat motionless, well back in the armchair. In a mirror diagonally across from her she could see all that transpired at the distant end of the long room.

She knew Clark Dorrance instantly, of course. He looked exactly like his vidar images if slightly balder. He was bare-headed, held a well-browned meer-

schaum pipe between his teeth, was clad in rope sandals, grass-stained flannel clout and a red-and-gold Evzone jacket. He looked tanned and fit and thinner than he had appeared on the vidarolls.

THAT the man with him was important shone around him like an aura. Not unhandsome in a grey-at-the-temples trimmed-mustache way, he stood stiffly erect and his face seemed frozen in gravity.

He wore the striped culottes of a diplomat or an undertaker—Liza correctly judged him to be the former—and his lower legs were chastely encased in white-clocked black nylon socks and gold-mounted black garters. In the lapel of his black bolo jacket rested a white flower. He was, it developed, the Honorable Cecil Pankhurst, Entertainment Secretary of the United Nations.

They gathered around a low table in armchairs close to the entrance and Jay Carens offered to pour a drink—an offer which Mr. Pankhurst politely but firmly refused. There was silence while Clark Dorrance and Cobb Murray drank theirs. Then the vidar star cleared his throat and looked at his two colleagues.

"Panky here," he stated, "has an idea these vidaroll thefts are the result of our war with Stellar. He claims that if we and Stellar don't play ball he'll cut off our projection rentals. Have I got it right, Panky?"

"That seems to be the gist of my messages—as far as it goes, Mr. Dorrance," said the United Nations representative formally in beautifully chiseled English. "There has been considerable feeling at United Nations Headquarters ever since your—er, spacewriting japery."

"*Japery!*" exploded Jay Carens, eyeing the whiskey bottles on the table in front of him as longingly as he had the steak.

"As a matter of fact, Pankhurst," said Cobb Murray pleasantly, "I think I have arranged a remedy that will put a check to those damned thefts. The next one

who tries to lift a vidaroll from *this* studio is going to be in for a surprise."

"Ah, yes. Good, good!" said Pankhurst. Then, "But what about the thefts from Stellar? Not that I mean to cast any asper—"

"Wait a minute, Panky." There was an undernote of anger in Dorrance's usually soft voice. "If there has been any vidaroll thievery on our part I'd know about it. Right, fellows?"

They nodded but the diplomat lifted a chaste white palm before anyone else could speak. "I am implying nothing, gentlemen," he said smoothly. "However, in view of the cost and cooperation involved in each vidaroll—much of which comes from us, you'll agree—it has been decided in closed council that you, Dorrance, and Diane Luray, as the greatest stars of your studios, should co-star in your next production."

"But that's the jet-skating epic," protested Dorrance. He paused and an almost beatific expression passed over his face. "That's *it!* I'll even give Diane one more song than I take." He paused and added blandly, "Do you suppose she can jet-skate?"

"If she can't," said Jay Carens pontifically, "Cosmic has just signed the girl who can teach her."

"Did someone mention me?" said Liza, rising slowly from the depths of her chair. She put all the magnetism, all the glow, all the warmth she could muster into voice, smile, gesture, as she moved toward them down the long room. But her whole being was focused on Clark Dorrance and she could see him glaze as she came closer to him.

CHAPTER III

The Man in the Tub

SHE was a devastating success. Clark Dorrance stayed stunned until she

stood before him. Then, like a man in a dream, he rose and walked slowly around her, whistling melodiously through his teeth. Finally he said, "Suave, suave, *suave!*"

He looked at Loggy, added, "Come, come, Loggy-buck, aren't we getting the lady a chair?"

"I thought she'd—" The red-headed scientist got up hastily to comply, darting a glance of unadulterated venom her way. As he passed her he whispered softly, "You little auger-artist."

She cast him a smile that was pure sweetness, made him move the heavy chair three times before she permitted herself to be satisfied. Then, as she dropped into it, she managed to bring one of the hard flat heels of her sandals down hard on his half-bare instep. His brown eyes flashed fire but he managed not to wince or limp as he resumed his own seat.

"Liza Winters—Clark Dorrance—the Honorable Cecil Pankhurst," murmured Jay Carens, regarding her with a look that expressed a combination of puzzlement and admiration. He too seemed to be wondering how she had managed to stay in the room.

When she had acknowledged the introductions it was Clark Dorrance himself who suggested, "How about a drink, Liza?"

"I'd love one—if *you'll* mix it," she said.

"A privilege—truly a privilege," the star told her lightly with the half-bantering air that she found hard to comprehend. "Am I to understand that you're the little lady who flies through the air with the greatest of ease?"

"You are—and I'm hardly a lady," said Liza.

"If you aren't, Miss Winters," spoke up the Honorable, "then I fear many of our greatest ladies will have to change themselves inside and out." He stopped and blushed at his own blurtation.

"Oh, I'll wager you say that to all the ladies," Liza told him. She found herself understanding and rather liking the

diplomat. He was not unlike a type of high official in the League.

"He's only saying it because it's *true*," said Clark.

"Jack Carson milked that one dry fifty years ago," Jay Carens reproved. He barely managed to suppress another internal explosion.

"The idea, as I get it," said Cobb Murray brusquely, "is whether Miss Winters can teach Diane Luray to jet-skate."

"Oh, I think it can be arranged," Liza said modestly. At this point she managed to spill her half-finished drink squarely into Jay Carens' lap. She felt she owed it to him for the shut-off vox-box and do-not-disturb sign. He gasped, sputtered and fled the room, mopping himself vigorously with a white handkerchief.

"That," said Clark Dorrance chuckling, "is the first drink Jaybird has had in three years. And he had to take it externally."

An hour later, the meeting concluded, she found herself on her way back to the hotel. She hummed a strange little galactic melody in the back of the studio bubble-car. Before the session in Jay Carens' office broke up Clark Dorrance had managed a moment alone with her. He was sending for her at six that evening to have dinner at his ranch near Ojai. After nearly two years of frustration her mission was at last moving with a rush.

She walked to her bungalow in a daze and draped herself on the love-seat. She smiled a little at Jay Carens' absurdity—although she did not for a moment underestimate the keen jack-rabbit brain that lay behind his poses and atop his indigestion. She thought of the Honorable Cecil Pankhurst amiably—he had produced pictures of his wife and three children on their Devon estate.

Then she frowned. Cobb "Loggy" Murray was the fly in her ointment to date. For some reason he antagonized her more than any male she had ever met on any planet of the galaxy. She could not help thinking that he saw right

through her—and if it was he that had conceived the spacewriting stunt and carried it through successfully, with the primitive means here on Earth, he was of a mental caliber to be reckoned with—barbarian or no.

Thinking of the red-headed scientist brought her mind back to her own job. She had obtained some information that must be passed along—and at once. She dug under her clout-skirt and from her flat combat girdle pulled out a tiny beam transmitter, plucked the code-receiver from under the broad bracelet on her left wrist. It was the first time she had used either since reaching Earth.

She pressed the transmitter—it was already personality-tuned to her one Earth contact—to give the come-in signal. She repeated the pressure twice, then waited until her code-receiver flashed blue and buzzed its response. She announced herself in the transmitter, lifted the code-receiver to her ear.

WALSH—Rolf Walsh—was her contact's Earth name and he was ostensibly a theater-accessory salesman for a San Francisco Company. Actually he was relay communications agent for the League in Western North America. Liza had seen him only once, when she first reached Earth via star-ship pinnace, almost fifteen zernals earlier. He was a tall barrel-built man with thick black hair and features that betrayed an Andromedan rather than a Hibernian origin.

She reported her success, then said, "Apparently three vidarolls of every production at both Cosmic and Stellar are being lifted. Is all of that our work?"

"We are taking only two," he told her and both were silent.

"That means the Planet agents are active," said Liza. She went on to tell him that Cobb Murray had rigged a trap and that they had better lay off until she found out what it was and how best to circumvent or negate it.

"We can't," Walsh told her. "There's a pickup due early tomorrow morning.

They're howling for vidarolls. Don't ask me why? Seems they mean something significant just now."

"Better lay off for a bit," Liza repeated. "I'll move fast."

"You'll have to," Walsh told her. "This job is getting hot according to the messages I'm getting from outside. I'll be in myself tonight to clear things. Where can we meet?"

"My bungalow," Liza told him. "Know where it is?"

"We're not blind," he replied. "Got to sign off now. Make sure you haven't been spotted. I wouldn't want *them* to get onto both of us. When you get back from your date I'll be waiting."

She signed off, feeling better. Pickup or no a vidaroll theft would not be within the percentages tonight. At least she had given warning, as was her duty. And the rendezvous with Walsh would force her to keep Clark Dorrance dangling a bit—which, in view of the silly courting customs of Earth, might prove wise.

She prepared herself for her trip to Ojai with more care for her appearance than ever before in her life. She bathed in scented water, found herself thoroughly enjoying it, then laved her magnificent young body with anti-odorant and toilet water. She had learned enough to know that she was not a heavy perfume type.

She redid her hair with her acticomb—which operated through polarized magnetic control of the individual hairs—arranging it in a charming bang and shoulder wave—spent a good half hour on her face. Then she donned silver bra and skirt-clout, gold sandals and a dusty gold bolo jacket, calculated to bring out her amber eyes.

Clark's bubble-car, driven by a bearded chauffeur, was on time. They moved easily along the great triple-decked boulevard until they reached a takeoff spot, where the bearded driver lifted his vehicle in easy flight. Once in the air he removed a black wig and unhooked the whiskers from his ears, handed them back to her.

"You might as well take care of these," he said, "and come on up front with me. I wanted to get you myself but I didn't want the world to know about it." It was Clark Dorrance and he was grinning from nose to ears, as pleased with himself as an infant.

"Suave, Dorrie, *suave!*" said Liza, mimicking him as she slipped gracefully over into the front seat. The star surveyed her long shapely limbs with approval.

"How come you haven't got lump muscles, honey?" he asked.

"Mine are granulated," she retorted and got a laugh. She was acquiring a repertoire in, if not a complete understanding of Earthly badinage.

The great star's place proved to be a considerable estate, devoted to the breeding and exercise of various Earth animals and centered around a low and delightfully luxurious nine-room house, complete with swimming pool and silently efficient Oriental servants. They dined in simple magnificence, alone at a low table of solid blond mahogany, and Clark kept the chatter flowing.

Afterward he took her downstairs into a long rumpus room that, save for the luxury of its appointments and the rather primitive crudeness of its exercise equipment, might have been located on a world of the League.

He removed his bolo jacket and demonstrated his indoor driving range. Liza, who had never played golf, was embarrassed when she fanned the air completely on her first try. She removed her own jacket and tried again, topping the ball badly.

"Here—let me show you," he said, coming up behind her and putting his arms around her, his hands over hers on the clubshaft. "That is, if I'm not being too forward."

"I was beginning to think you were the reverse," said Liza, allowing herself to lean back against his bare chest.

"I'm not usually, honey," said the star, "but you scare me. Any girl who can lick the jet-jockey derby might plant

an elbow in my eye or twist my arm off if I made the wrong move."

"Nice arms," said Liza, snuggling in their embrace. Although rules and setting were slightly different, this was a game she had played too often and too expertly to muffle.

He turned her around—and then the visaphone signaled. He said, "Drat and triple drat and *psshaw!* Wait right where you are while I annihilate this would-be interceptor of Cupid's arrows. I'm shot through the heart."

LIZA, who had arranged a call for approximately that time, waited, a half-smile on her face. She knew she had him, could afford to let him dangle for awhile. However Jay Carens' pincenezed countenance appeared on the screen. It seemed that Clark's presence was absolutely essential at a get-together in Hollywood, where he and Diane Luray were to appear publicly together, beginning the build-up for their co-starring in the forthcoming *Ladies from Hades*.

"But I thought the campaign wasn't to start until Thursday," cried the star, moaning as if someone had run a spear through his kidney.

"Luray says now or never," the publicist replied. "And you know that meat-axe when her alleged mind is made up."

"Indeed I do, indeed I do," said Clark Dorrance sadly. "I wish we could get Panky to substitute for me. He might get an idea of what he is getting me into." He sighed. "Very well, Jaybird, but if this happens again I'll—I'll reverse your toupée."

On the whole Liza was glad that it was through Clark's affairs that their date was broken rather than through her own. She murmured the appropriate sounds of distress, kissed him expertly, found herself heading southward again with him in the bubble-car minutes later.

"I hope we can manage a repeat performance—with more than a first act," he told her. "The luck I don't have!"

"If you don't get entangled with this

meat-axe creature," said Liza, prettily feigning jealousy. Actually she found herself liking Clark Dorrance. His warmth and charm and vitality were genuine, not mere costumes put on for his public and removed when away from them.

He dropped her at the hotel and went on to his appearance with "the Divine Diane," as the Stellar press agents had dubbed her. Liza strolled along the carefully landscaped walk to her bungalow, entered it and stopped dead on the threshold.

The red-headed scientist, Cobb Murray, was stretched out on her love-seat, his long legs protruding well beyond its far end, smoking a cigarette. He got slowly to his feet, waved a salute and said, "Good! So Jaybird managed to bust up your date after all."

"How did *you* get in here?" Liza snapped. As before, sight of this tall assured young man caused things to happen inside her—unpleasant things. The idea of his having broken her date with Clark made her furious. Entirely apart from the fact, of course, that she had only just been forestalled in a similar move of her own.

"The door was unlocked," he said lightly. "So I come in."

"I don't for a moment believe it," Liza told him. She dismissed the gnawings of something Earthfolk called conscience. Actually she had left the door unlocked so that Rolf Walsh could enter without any act of violence to hotel property.

"Sorry about the date, sweetness," drawled the scientist, "but the big-shot really took a tumble for you. Right now the timing is off. He's got to play up to Luray and make her like it."

"I suppose he isn't capable of taking care of himself," Liza said sweetly. She felt like butting him in the wind.

"Sometimes just a little too well," Cobb Murray told her. "Let's get things cleared up, shall we? I don't see why we can't make a deal. I know you're clever and on the make. I also know you've got just about all the assets a woman can

have—and very neatly packaged too. I can make it easy for you—or I can make it very difficult indeed.” He paused to flick ashes into a tray.

Liza couldn't help it. Something seemed to fizz up and explode within her. Before she quite realized what she was doing she had picked up a potted plant and pushed it into his face.

When he could see Cobb Murray didn't hit her although fists were clenched and his brown eyes were twin pools of rage. Instead he picked her up with the sweep of one arm—as though her one hundred and twenty-five well distributed pounds were no more than ten. He held her high over his head with both hands like a baby, then crashed her hard into an arm-chair, so hard that she bounced twice.

“With your permission, sweetness,” he said, wiping black loam from under one eye, “I shall step into your bathroom to get some of this guck off me before I leave.”

She was too angry, too confused, too mixed up, to speak. She felt like setting fire to his clout as he turned and disappeared behind the bathroom door. She was still meditating revenge a moment later when he reappeared suddenly, the pot-loam still lumped on his face, bolo jacket and upper body.

“I didn't know you already had a caller,” he said and something in his posture, in the look he gave her, in his voice, caused her anger to drain away as if someone had opened a vent.

“I hadn't—what do you mean?” she said. She got up hastily, summoned by his gaze. He held the bathroom door open for her and she stepped inside. A man was lying on his back in the tub, fully clothed. He was a barrel-built man of early middle age with thick dark hair worn longer than was the Earth fashion for men. Unquestionably he was very very dead.

“Know who he is?” the red-headed scientist asked behind her.

“I haven't the slightest idea,” she replied aloud—but within herself she was wondering how *they* had got to Walsh

here in her bungalow. She needed time to think and she didn't have it. Her eyes rose to meet Murray's—which stared at her unblinkingly.

CHAPTER IV

Lights Off

HE MOVED then, quickly, came toward her. Instinctively she prepared to defend herself, her hand slipping to a button on her combat girdle beneath her skirt-clout. But he brushed on past her, knelt and looked at the body. He rose after awhile, shook his head.

“I wonder what killed him,” he said shakily. “There doesn't seem to be a mark on him. I'm no coroner but he looks fresh.” Some of the accusation seemed to have faded from his regard.

Liza knew. She had at once noted the faint cyanosis around the lips and eyelids that to her indicated use of a Planet ray-blaster. She went back to the living room, poured whiskey into a glass, pulled a tiny white pellet from a little box in her girdle and dropped it into an empty tumbler. She handed Cobb Murray the drink, then filled her own glass with soda and drained it.

“What did you put in yours?” the scientist asked her as he put down his tumbler, gasping a little.

“Benzedrine,” she lied. Actually the *hzrophle* pellet was already doing its stuff. Her mental processes were going into ultra-high gear, would do so for at least a half hour. Something like marijuana but far more stimulating, *hzrophle* left the user in full control of muscles and emotions during its period of effect.

“Loggy,” she said, “did you say that trap you prepared for the vidaroll thief was electronic in nature?”

He goggled at her briefly, then recalled her having overheard him in Jay Carens' office. “Right,” he said, “but—”

"Take another look at our friend in the tub—he shows traces of electric shock around his mouth and eyes. Do you suppose we could arrange things as if he were the thief and—died."

"Bu—but—" began the scientist. Then his eyes narrowed. "Okay, it's possible but it will put me in a hell of a spot."

"Because a weak-hearted thief died in a burglar trap—in the act of stealing?" she countered scornfully. "You know perfectly well it won't do to report the body from here. It would be bad publicity for the picture and the studio—especially if I told the police the truth—that I came in and found you here with it—him."

Actually her thoughts were running along a far deeper vein. If *they* had spotted her, had spotted Walsh as well and killed him and left him in her tub, they would be expecting her to report the body to the police. It would be the logical move and the cybernetically-trained Planet agents always moved along the lines of logic. Therefore they had something unpleasant planned for her with the police. Therefore she was not going to report the body.

"You want me to help you move this body and plant it in my trap at the studio?" he said. "Of all the unmitigated . . ." His voice trailed off and he sat down, unable to find words.

"Certainly," she said crisply. "It makes sense. *You* don't know who he is—I don't know who he is. He may be some careless hotel guest who wandered in here by mistake and got electrocuted in the bathroom. He *may* be a thief for all we know. But first, go look at him and then get that muck cleaned off yourself."

Like a man in a nightmare the red-headed scientist obeyed. He came back with most of the pot-loam off, pale and trembling. He had evidently been sick and for some reason Liza felt a desire to stretch him out on the bed in the adjoining room and nurse him back to something approximating his norm. He

nodded shakily.

"You're right," he said. "He *could* have been electrocuted." He poured himself another drink and his color began to improve.

"Have you a bubble-car here?" Liza asked him next. When he nodded she told him to float it down outside the bungalow with its lights off. "We don't want to be seen," she concluded.

"Swell," he said, "James Dandy! But what about the floodlights on the grounds here? Everyone that's up will see us."

"I'll take care of them," said Liza. "Now get going."

Still like a man in the midst of an evil dream Cobb Murray went. Liza pulled up her combat girdle so that she could get at its various flat knobs and buttons without having to manipulate them beneath her skirt-clout. She had automatically proofed the bungalow against Planet X-scanners upon her arrival in Hollywood the night before, so she had no fear of alien observation beams.

She went into the bathroom, performed the brief League Agent Farewell Ritual for poor Walsh, then got busy with her antigravity director, focussing it upon the body. As she manipulated it with skilled fingers the corpse rose slowly above the level of the tub. She swung it feet first toward the door, halted it about two and a half feet above the living-room floor.

She checked the body hastily but thoroughly. A single bit of ash that drifted to the floor informed her that poor Walsh's combat girdle's personalized self-destruction unit had functioned with his ray-blasting. There was always the possibility on a new planet that some unknown factor might cause an Agent to leave his tools intact behind him. No Agent was ever captured. It was an inherent part of their training that they destroy themselves first.

SHE beamed the body on outside the door, where she left it at the same height, concealed behind a clump of

shrubbery. She waited there, ears cocked, until she heard the faint hum of Cobb Murray's bubble-car somewhere out of sight in the night sky above. Then she pressed another button on her girdle and every light in Hollywood within a radius of more than a mile went out.

The red-headed scientist brought his bubble-car to the ground with a bump—evidently partially blinded by the sudden darkness. He opened the door and Liza steered Walsh's body through it, keeping her arms under it as if she were supporting it. She scrambled in after putting it on the rear seat, shut the door behind her.

"Take off," she snapped. Cobb Murray obeyed and said nothing until they were well up. There was a large black hole of darkness in the sprawling light-area of the vast city beneath them.

"How'd you do it?" he inquired then. "Come on, give."

"Oh, I was told at the desk that a main electric cable ran right in front of my bungalow," Liza replied sweetly.

He glared at her. "How did you get that body out alone?"

"Wanna feel my muckle?" she countered. Somehow it felt normal to be sparring and slugging with the scientist once more.

"And how in hades are we going to find the studio?" he asked. "You put your blackout over it as well as over the hotel."

"Thoughtful of me, wasn't it?" she countered sweetly. "Well, maybe the lights will go on again pretty soon." She pressed a button and they did so. Cobb Murray looked at her and shook his head.

"I know I'm going to wake up pretty soon and find none of this has happened," he muttered. He swung the bubble-car over the vast area of the Cosmic plant. "Hey!" he cried. "With all the lights on how am I going to plant this stiff unseen?"

"Better get your bearings just right," Liza told them. "It's just possible that the lights may go out again." She knew

she was being a damned fool but she couldn't help showing off just a little. Cobb Murray was such an insufferably self-assured male.

When he stopped moving and hovered she put her blackout into effect again. Murray grunted and muttered under his breath and then got busy making a landing not far from the vault-like caisson in which the vidarolls were kept after being processed.

"You stay here," he told her fiercely as he opened the door.

"And leave little old you to lug that great big body all by yourself?" she countered. He swore fiercely if softly and she let him stagger and grunt as he got poor Walsh or what was left of him out and on the ground. He made no objection when she took over the feet for the journey the rest of the way.

"Okay—hold it," he whispered. "This building is on separate battery. My thief-trap will still be working."

"Will it?" she said sweetly, well aware that her blackout blanket was effective for all electric devices within its radius. She smiled in the shadows when she heard him cursing the inexplicable failure of his separate-battery gadget.

He came back after several moments and whispered, "I'll have to work it by hand. Help me move the sti—the body over here."

She gave him a hand. The snare was apparently arranged to work on the bear-trap principal. In the narrow alley between the vault building and its neighbor Cobb Murray had rigged his electric eye so that whoever crossed it going in would set it up to nail him neatly when making his exit.

On recrossing the invisible beam the thief would discover himself sliding down what had been a coal chute, after which the cover would slide back, shutting him in. The beam was arranged to give him enough of a shock to stun him and make it impossible for him to escape sliding into the pit.

As it was, without electricity, Murray had to work back the metal cover by

hand. It took considerably more grunting and swearing to accomplish this feat. While he was busy Liza floated the body over to a handier position, then stood back, well away from it, so that he could not connect her with the change.

But both of them were in for a surprise. No sooner had the red-headed scientist got the cover back than a tall male figure came scrambling out, knocked him reeling back against a wall and raced past Liza along a prearranged escape route. He was gone before Cobb Murray could get his wind back.

"I'll be switched!" said the scientist, unconsciously aping the vocabulary of Clark Dorrance. "I'll be double-slewed and flummoxed! How do you suppose that happened? Did you see him, Liza?"

"No," lied the girl. She had seen him and was engaged in further furious thinking. For the escapee was none other than the jet-skate scout, Buck Gentry of the scarred face, who had signed her up for the derby. She considered allowing the lights to go on, causing him to be caught again, decided it would be better to leave him at large since she knew his identity.

"One of those so-and-sos from Stellar!" moaned the scientist. "And we had to let him get away!" He lit a match and peered down the chute. "The darned fool left his stolen vidaroll here anyway."

"That will make our dead friend look like a more successful thief," said Liza. Without further words they got poor Walsh's body into the pit and closed the grating, then ran to the bubble-car and took off. Liza let the lights of the city go on again when they were safely in the clear. Murray eyed her sharply but said nothing.

THE more she considered it, during their brief flight back to the hotel, the more pleased Liza was that she had let the elusive Buck Gentry go his way. It was too thoroughly coincidental all the way that Buck should be a mere Stel-

lar operative.

He had spotted her jet-skating talent and signed her up from the rink, which seemed innocent enough in itself. But it might not be so innocent if he were a Planet Infiltration Agent and aware of the fact that Cosmic was planning a jet-skate epic.

In that case he might have been looking for just such a talented girl, to place her in the derby and later in the vidar production as Liza had been placed. Then he would have an insider under obligation to him and might possibly obtain control over Clark Dorrance through her.

It might also mean—just possibly—that Liza was as yet unsuspected. They might, working along their lines of logic, have been expecting a League Agent to get in touch with her for the same reason they had. In which case they might have ambushed him. However Liza had no intention of accepting this wishful thought as fact until further developments proved it so.

"Care to come in for a drink?" she asked Cobb Murray when his bubble-car came down gently in the aeroparking lot of the hotel. After all, she felt, she did owe him something, even though he had projected himself into her affairs uninvited.

"Why? Do you have any other bodies to move?" he asked her.

"I hope not," she said. It was time to play soft—at least a little softer—with Dr. Cobb "Loggy" Murray, she decided.

They walked slowly to her bungalow, which was still open and ablaze with lights but had apparently not been entered since they took off on their expedition. She led him inside and closed the door and poured them both stiff drinks.

"I hope my ears don't fall off when I drink this," he said eyeing it speculatively. She laughed and he drank it and sighed and smacked his lips and looked at her curiously.

"I don't want you to think that you're getting away with any of it," he told her,

then paused to light a cigarette. Through the smoke he went on with, "I knew damned well there was something abnormal about those jet-skate derby run-offs I saw of you making like an airplane.

"And now this business of tossing the body around—and the tricks with the lights of the city . . ." He paused and shook his head slowly and studied her with somber speculation.

"I suppose," he added, "you could take off on a broomstick if you cared to and no other means of air transport were at hand."

"Have another drink," she said, smiling. "Perhaps you'll see me ride a broomstick then—if you'll supply the broomstick. This bungalow seems to be fresh out of them."

"Have your fun," he said idly. Then, leaning forward to refill his glass, "But I'm going to find out how you do every one of those capers of yours. And then I'm going to add a couple of wrinkles of my own." He lifted his glass and drained it.

Strangely Liza felt that he meant it—also that, barbarian or no, he would do it before he was through. He rose and came to her and stood over her and she was limp as he pulled her to her feet—limp in a wonderful terrifying glorious way.

Then she had a sudden vision of Rolf Walsh lying dead in the bathtub, of Murr-Coveu's tired face and voice expressing confidence in her, of certain other Agents she had seen lying dead and comforted from combat for the League they believed in.

She stiffened in his grasp and said, "Good night, Mr. Murray. The door is over there. And remember, if some of the things I have done seem odd to you, think how some of the things you have done tonight would look to your employers—or to the police. Good night!"

He looked stunned, was still a little unsteady on his feet as he moved through the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Alone, Liza went into the bungalow bedroom and sat on the bed and thought. She had to have a new contact and quickly—with everything breaking at once. Somewhere far up toward the stars even now a Boötean star-ship must be hovering—and somewhere nearby, perhaps within a few score miles—a pinnace was awaiting the arrival of stolen vidarolls that would never come.

All at once she wished she were off of this crazy planet—where nobody did what was expected and where the grass was green instead of the familiar soft burnt orange. She loathed the sickening luxury of her surroundings, wished desperately for the simple rules of the austerity to which she was accustomed, longed for the austerity itself. To her amazement she wanted to cry—like an Earthwoman.

But she had to have a new contact. She turned off the lights in the bungalow, got out transmitter and code-receiver and sent her signal flashing out far across the night.

By the time the blue star glowed on the receiver she was her usual tight-lipped and utterly efficient self.

CHAPTER V

Hugger-Mugger

FOR the next ten days, as *Ladies from Hades* got into vidar production, events moved with some semblance of normalcy. Thanks to the power of Cosmic Productions, Inc., the finding of poor Rolf Walsh's body was kept out of the headlines and Liza's and Cobb Murray's roles in the moving and placing of his corpse remained apparently undiscovered—for which Liza was properly grateful.

She had a couple of dates in town with Clark Dorrance but there was no opportunity for Liza to gain over him the control her mission demanded. She sus-

pected that Cobb Murray, through Jay Carens, had a hand in making it impossible. This caused Liza mixed feelings—since for the first time in her life she was suffering from a conflict of her own wishes with the demands of her sworn job.

However the vidar star still seemed entirely enchanted with her, which was something at any rate. He kept her bungalow filled with flowers and even tried to send her presents—bejeweled sandals, a pair of stunning topaz and gold bracelets that matched her eyes, even a bolo jacket of albino sables. She sent back everything but the flowers, which kept the great Dorrance in something of a tizzy—to use his own words. Actually, having no vanity save for her job, she had scant desire for the gifts.

She saw little of Cobb Murray during this period, though she could sense his presence behind the studio scenes. He was, Jay Carens informed her, toiling busily on some new gimmicks for the roller-derby epic. Furthermore the publicist added, "When Loggy really digs in like this he always comes up with something."

More and more as the days went by Liza found herself wondering what the red-headed scientist was working on. She had a hunch he was trying to show her up and so great was her respect for his talent that, despite the primitive science he had at his disposal, she could not help worrying just a little.

As for the fabulous Diane Luray, Liza found her—well, fabulous. The Stellar she-ace was at once magnificent and incredible. She was magnificent of face and body and in performance—incredible in her demands for attention, her willingness to make trouble for others when she failed to get what she felt was her need.

And although she was a hopeless amateur on jet-skates, Liza noticed that she had a knack of mastering just what would be needed for the vidar performance. Liza found herself disliking Diane increasingly even while her respect for

the actress rose.

It was the evening before the jet-rink scenes were to be shot that Liza returned home to her bungalow, tired and ready to turn in early, to find the scarred Buck Gentry waiting for her. Not by a muscle of face or body did she betray the curling tightening process, like that of a raw oyster dipped in alcohol, that went on inside her.

Instead she smiled and said, "Well, well—surprise. Mix yourself another drink, Buck. Little Liza is pooped."

"Sure, sure," he said pleasantly enough although he failed to rise at her entrance. "I won't be long, kid. Listen, honeycomb, you know I got you started on this career of yours."

"That you did," she told him, lighting a cigarette and flopping on the love-seat. Then, "Come to demand payment, Buck?"

"Don't be crude, Liza—besides, it's not like that. I've got an idea in mind that ought to be easy for you—and it would not only square things with me but put you another notch up the ladder."

"Go ahead," said Liza. "I'm listening." Casually she loosened the top of her skirt-clout, thus setting a disintegrator dead on the chair in which Buck Gentry was sitting. All her inbred hatred for Planet Infiltration Agents rose up within her.

"Tomorrow you shoot rink rushes—and you take Diane on the flyaway caper for the first time. Right, Liza?" he said. His eyes did not match the smile-curve of his mouth and she could see that their normal Antarean cerise was concealed by contact skins.

"Unless they make an overnight schedule change," she replied. She wished it were politic to press the button on which her thumb lingered innocently. Not once in a score of lifetimes did League and Planet Infiltration Agents meet face to face. Not once in a hundred did one of them have the other at such a disadvantage.

"Okay—well, here it is," he told her.

"Incidentally I've got some pretty big people behind me in this—out of this world if you'll pardon an old-fashioned phrase."

"Certainly," said Liza politely. She had decided that she was not under suspicion despite the doings in her bungalow some eleven days previously. It was not part of Planet Cybernetic logic to string a League operative along. They burned on suspicion rather than take a chance. Their "brains" figured the percentage that way.

"Okay," he repeated. "Now I know you're tops as a jet-skater. Spotted you right away," he added proudly. "You can match Luray for looks any time in my book. I got a hunch you'd be a lot better in the lead of this picture than she would. Catch on?"

LIZA decided not to play dumb. She let Buck light her a cigarette—she was beginning to like tobacco—then said, through the smoke, across the coffee table, "So you want me to sabotage the Divine Diane and step into her size fives?"

"In an eggshell—that's it," he replied, squinting at her.

"And here I thought you were working for Stellar," said Liza, believing it was time to score a point for her side. "They got infra-red pictures of you the other night over at Cosmic—the night they found that dead man in the burglar trap." She giggled. "They couldn't figure out why you didn't look alike."

He had paled visibly while she spoke. He said, running a finger inside the collar of his bolo-shirt, "You didn't—er—say anything about knowing me, I hope."

"Liza Winters sing a song about someone who has given her a break?" she countered. "You're a bigger fool than I thought."

"And you're a hell of a lot more girl than I thought that night when I spotted you at the jetadrome," said Gentry, subsiding visibly. "How about it—will you do it for me?"

"I'll do it—but not for you," she replied. "I consider that debt already paid. I'll do it because I despise Diane Luray—and because I find myself increasingly fond of Clark Dorrance." She watched him struggle to conceal his rising satisfaction, added, "Now get out of here, Buck. I want to take a bath."

The next morning Cobb Murray was on the set and Liza could sense a feeling of general satisfaction. The director and Cobb pulled her aside and the former said, "Liza, you know that take-off stunt of yours is unique. You know we figured you'd carry Diane with you and make it look the other way around. Well, Loggy here has just figured out a gimmick that will make Luray sail on her own."

"Sounds fine," said Liza warily. "How does it work?"

"That's *my* secret, sweetness," said the red-headed scientist, sucking on an unlit pipe. "Take it from me, Luray will take off at the right spot and come down where she should too."

"Aren't you *clever!*" said Liza sweetly. She was about to add a couple of hundred more well-chosen words when Diane entered with Clark and Jay on her heels. Clark gave Liza a wink as he went by.

When at length Liza and Diane lined up for their rink shots the Stellar star, looking luscious in her virtually invisible shorts and bra, smiled sweetly at Liza. Liza managed something in return which she hoped was not a snarl.

"You've been so awfully sweet to me, Winters," Diane said. "I know *nothing* is going to go wrong now." There was a knife under the velvet of her voice—not an iron glove but a steel knife.

"You've been sweet to me too," said Liza, calculating just where she would give the star a nudge with her hip and send her flying over the rim of the track. She hoped Diane would crash into nothing harder than one of the iron vidar camera pillars.

The idea, Liza decided, was to get it over with on the opening take, thus

eliminating the lush star as quickly as she could. As they had originally planned it Liza took off first, then caught the speeding Diane with the arm away from the camera, yanking her up to and past her and making it look as if she were being outjumped. It was not an especially difficult stunt.

This time, however, Liza took off a quarter second ahead of schedule—planning to be just out of Diane's reach and thus able to tumble her with apparent innocence in the resultant confusion.

Only one thing went wrong. Diane went right up with Liza on her own and before Liza could readjust her plans she got as neat a hip jarringly against her right side as she had ever received in the professional rink.

Result—Liza sailed from the track onto the cluttered infield, taking up considerable floor with her chin, and conked head-on into a light standard. Just before darkness fell she thought annoyingly of an ancient Earth-joke she had heard in which "the horse blew first."

She finally got the point.

Liza lingered in the studio infirmary for reasons that afternoon. Clark came in to see her, as did Jay Carens. They kidded her about taking a tumble from an amateur.

"Where's Cobb Murray?" she asked through taped lips.

"He's—he's very busy," said Clark, trying to laugh it off.

"He's scared to see you," said Jay Carens. "Give the kid a break, Liza. He didn't know Diane was going to cut a caper."

"I'll break the 'kid's' skull—I'll fracture his femur," said Liza, meaning it. "Does either of you two gentlemen of science know how he rigged that little gizmo of his today?"

They looked blankly at one another. Then Clark said, "Hey, Jaybird, Loggy did mention something about electromagnetic repulsion yesterday, didn't he?"

JAY CARENS nodded and Liza said, "Come on, let's go." She got up off the bed while they looked at her in astonishment.

"Where to, honeycomb?" Clark Dorrance inquired.

"To buy little Liza a drink—if I have to use a straw!"

The next morning it was Liza who walked on the set last. She had a legitimate excuse. It had taken an extra hour for the studio makeup department to cover her bruised chin with a special collodion and conceal the contusion with paint.

Diane Luray was all contrition and solicitude over what had happened. Cecil Pankhurst was there to view the progress of the rapprochement between the stars. He came up, looking genuinely concerned.

"I was terribly sorry to hear about it," he said warmly and his eyes were sincere. "I was afraid you might be seriously hurt when I saw the rushes earlier this morning."

"Shucks, mister," said Liza in a drawl. "We don't call a mosquito bite like this nothin' back on the jet-skate circuit."

They chatted a moment longer until the director, noting Diane's increasing restlessness, called for places. As Liza moved toward the track on her skates Cobb Murray, looking harried and solicitous, caught her arm.

"Liza, I feel awful," he said in low tones. "If I'd had—"

"Shut up, you crumb," she snapped at him, jerking her arm free. She managed to suppress a smile as she watched him slink onto the sidelines along with the U. N. secretary.

Luray was nervous, much to Liza's gratification. And Liza's bland politeness did nothing to lessen the star's concern. There was noticeable tension while they took their places as marked in chalk on the hardwood track. Liza tugged at her clout-top.

She had done a little tinkering with her combat girdle before going to bed

the night before. By combining two of its ray functions she had an idea—thanks to the information Clark had given her about the working of Cobb Murray's gadget—that the turning on of her own anti-grav circuit would, in conjunction with said gadget, cause some very odd magnetic reversals on the track.

They hit it full tilt and Liza leapt before pressing the anti-grav. Diane Luray was at her shoulder when she did it. Liza had timed it precisely. Contrary to Buck Gentry's fears, she had no intention of injuring the lush actress. It would smack far too much of revenge, would only defeat her own mission on Tellus.

Instead she merely planned to make actress and scientist both ridiculous—by sending the plush Stellar luminary smack off the track and into the midriff of the anxious Cobb Murray.

Liza pressed, then released pressure and came down lightly, continuing on around the track. She heard the roar and confusion behind her and came to a fast stop, swung gracefully around. According to her calculations Diane should first have been chained to the track in mid-flight when she pressed her anti-grav, then sent sailing when she released it. Apparently all had gone off as planned.

All Liza could see of the actress were her magnificent legs sticking up from an overturned chair. And then she saw that Cobb Murray was upright, bending over, helping untangle the mess. A horrid presentiment came to her—a presentiment that was fulfilled as first a groggy Luray, then a pea-green and ruffled Cecil Pankhurst, were pulled out of the wreckage.

"Suavest trick of the week, honeycomb," Clark Dorrance said to her out of the side of his mouth. "But why pick on poor Panky?"

"I didn't mean for her to hit Panky," blurted Liza. She crimsoned and Clark began to chuckle, then to gasp and sob with laughter.

"I didn't *think* you'd take it lying down," he finally managed. "But to turn poor Panky into a slapstick victim! I hope you know we've had the vidar-scopes grinding through both of these incidents—yesterday's and today's. It's going to make the whole world laugh. Getting Panky into the act will do the U.N. more good than anything that's happened to it since nineteen sixty-one."

"I'm going home and be good and sick," said Liza. "As soon as I've apologized to Pank—to Mr. Pankhurst."

"You do that little thing, honeycomb," said Clark Dorrance. "And then get your skates off and into your pretties. You and I and a couple of people are going up to my place and celebrate the funniest scenes shot on anything since Charley Chaplin hung up his shoes."

CHAPTER VI

Planet Pickup

THE "couple of people" Clark had invited to his Ojai ranch in the hills consisted of Pankhurst, Diane Luray, Cobb Murray, Jay Carens and the *Ladies from Hades* director, Rex Markham. They all piled into the Cosmic star's bubble-car and made the flight to his rural estate in a matter of twenty-two minutes.

As the only women present Liza and Diane found themselves in a large bathroom, designated a powder room by their host, immediately after landing. They eyed one another like a couple of strange cats for a couple of minutes, making terse polite remarks about the weather, who should have the basin mirror first and the like.

Then Liza, who was studiously not looking at Diane, glanced up from the mirror at which she was daubing on fresh lipstick, and caught Diane casting a sidelong look in her direction. Diane's

lips suddenly twitched and that was too much for Liza. Unexpectedly the two of them were close to hysteria, laughing and actually hugging each other.

WHEN they had subsided to semi-tearful ruin Diane looked first at Liza, then at herself and said, "Shall we put our makeup on now or shall we go out as we are and scare hell out of the men?"

"Let's scare hell out of them," Liza suggested, sighing as her breathing finally returned to normal.

"I've got a better idea," said Diane. She rang for the maid, who appeared promptly, and ordered a bottle of champagne served right there in the bathroom. Then the girls got busy making repairs.

"Tell me, Winters, what did you pull out there at the studio today," said the Stellar luminary, evening the color on her lower lip. "First you stopped me, then you sent me flying."

"Why don't you ask Cobb Murray?" said Liza. "After all, he rigged the gadget under the track."

"I already have," said Diane. "He told me to ask you, dear."

"Ya wanna fight, huh?" said Liza, thrusting her jaw out pugnaciously. This caused another round of hysterics, cut short by the arrival of the champagne. Even the imperturbability of the slick-haired little Chinese maid who brought bottle, bucket, tray and goblets, was threatened by their condition.

"Seriously, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," said Liza. "And I'm bound to secrecy. Tell me, Diane, why did you give me the hip yesterday? I didn't think you were that foolish."

"Some so-and-so gave me a tip that you were out to sabotage me and take my job away," said Diane. "You're a pretty cute cookie, you know, Winters, and I've had to battle my way up from the chorus. I've learned it's better to hit first. Say, this bubbles."

"I never thought of you as a fighter," said Liza. "I'm one myself—shake."

They did so, clinked glasses and then Liza said, "Was your informer a big pro athlete with a scarred face?"

"On the nose, Winters," Diane told her. "Why—don't tell me he got to you too? And I fell for a whiskery one like that!"

"He got to me too," said Liza quietly. She was about to speak further—she found herself liking the star more and more now that the bars were down between them—when there was a yell from outside.

"I can't hold these wolves at bay forever, kiddies," called Clark. "How about shedding your sunshine on some of us for a change—if you don't we're going to picket you as unfair to men."

"Quiet, Dorrance," called Diane. "You've lured us out to your hideout in the hills—but we're still our own women."

When he had gone Diane said, "What do you suppose that scar-faced creep was trying to pull anyway? Why should he want—"

"I wouldn't have the slightest idea," lied Liza and she knew that Diane knew she was lying. There was an awkward pause and then they had another glass apiece of the champagne. They were about to unlock the door and go out when there was a sudden intense bluing of the air in the room. Diane looked startled.

Liza knew. She had seen a Planet blanket beam in operation before. "Get down!" she snapped, her voice low. When Diane, bewildered, did not obey, Liza flung her to the mat on the floor, flopped herself and worked with a counter-beam in her girdle. She still didn't believe it could be happening.

"What is it?" Diane asked. "What is it, Winters. You know!"

"Yes, I know," said Diane. Around them came a sound as of rising winds, rising, rising to a shrill whistle. Through it they could hear faint shouts, shouts of men and women caught in the blanket-vortex. Then the wind-sound ceased abruptly and there was no noise

at all for a moment. Diane started to get up.

"Not yet," said Liza, pushing her firmly back on the floor. The two women waited fearsomely through further silence. Then there was a sort of droning vibration that mounted for a second or two, only to fade quickly away to nothingness.

LIZA turned off the counter-beam. It should have protected them within a force-dome of twenty-foot radius. She led the way outside and even though she knew what to expect the sight was horrifying.

The entire house seemed to have been sucked inside out like a fly left hanging in a spider's web. Great gaps in the walls and roof showed the hills and sky around them. The furniture appeared to have turned into matchwood, intersprinkled with bits of ground glass.

"What is it—what's *happened*, Liza?" Diane Luray gasped. "Is it a tornado—or what? Where is everybody?"

"I say—something seems to have happened, doesn't it?" The Honorable Cecil Pankhurst emerged from a closet which apparently backed up against the bathroom in which the women had been. He carried a cobwebbed bottle in either hand and appeared obviously unruffled—until he gazed at the devastation surrounding him.

"Awfully difficult to get inured to these sudden changes in your American weather," he muttered after a bit.

"This is no natural disaster," said Liza. It was time to cast caution to the proverbial winds. She sat down on an intact bit of flooring, got out her transmitter and code-receiver, began frantically sending to her new contact, a man in Alameda named Grant. She had to send three times before she got the flash of the blue star in her code-receiver.

Relieved, she put it to her ear.

She told her contact what had happened, concisely, as befitted the trained agent that she was. Since concealment

was out of the question, she talked Boötean. Her contact was alarmed. He had received, less than an hour before, messages of a totally different tenor. He told her to stand by until he could get further orders.

"Inform nearest base that Dorrance and other important vidar folk from Tellus have been picked up by a Planet star-ship pinnace," she concluded tersely. "Report I am in operable condition with two other survivors—Tellus U. N. Secretary Pankhurst and Vidar Star Diane Luray. Tell them further orders are urgent."

When she had finished and put away her transmitter she looked up into the steady gaze of Cecil Pankhurst. He said, "Now, my dear, suppose you tell me what this is all about. You know, it's rather important to me. I went into that closet for some brandy and became so intrigued by Dorrance's 'cellar' that I noticed nothing until I heard you girls in—or rather *out* here."

"All right," said Liza. She looked squarely at Diane and added, "This has *got* to remain confidential until I give you word otherwise. The consequences, if it got out prematurely, could be terrible beyond anything either of you ever conceived of."

She went on to explain who she was, what she was, why she had come to Earth. "My job," she told them, "is or was to get Clark Dorrance under my influence by any means at my command, to hold him there throughout my life and his if necessary, to see to it not only that he remained under my influence but that he was important enough to be worth the use of an Infiltration Agent."

"It's screwy," said Diane. Yet belief lay in her dark eyes.

"To think the entire galaxy has been enduring a cold war like our recent one for almost three of our centuries!" murmured the U.N. Secretary, his mustache ends trembling. "It seems strange that after so long we should become such a hot bone of galactic contention."

"That's odd," said Liza, regarding him thoughtfully. "I've had somewhat the same idea myself of late. When I was given this mission I was informed that the only importance of Tellus—whoops, Earth—was negative. That I was only to come here in order to keep Planet agents from establishing control.

"Yet things have been getting increasingly active. I don't understand it. In fact, I don't understand a lot of things. For instance, Panky—Mr. Pankhurst—how did people like Clark Dorrance and Diane here get so important?"

"Because our world was divided against itself, much as you say the galaxy is," Pankhurst told her. "And then one day people simply got tired of fighting. They wanted to laugh. Don't people in the rest of the galaxy want to laugh, Miss Winters?"

"I—I guess so," she replied slowly. "If they know how to."

"Haven't *you* laughed more here on Tellus, as you call it, despite your assignment, than at home. And haven't you liked it?"

"I—yes, I have. It's been puzzling me," said Liza. She thought of her hysterical session with Diane in the bathroom. It might have been utterly purposeless—but it was fun. And perhaps it had a purpose at that. At any rate she felt she had a new friend.

"Our people got tired of not being able to laugh," said Pankhurst in his beautifully-modulated voice. "They got tired of having the means of an atomic Utopia kept from them by the frozen political views of a wee minority of their leaders. They made a mass appeal to the U.N.—not to their governments—practised passive resistance until they got their way. Since then they have simply been trying to make up for lost laughter."

"Amen," said Diane Luray. Liza looked at her, startled, was surprised to see that the actress was utterly sincere, looked close to tears. Diane got up and kissed Pankhurst on the forehead. He

looked fussed and removed the lipstick with his handkerchief, then stared in dismay at the bright smudge on his kerchief.

"We won't tell Mrs. Pankhurst, will we, Diane?" said Liza, smiling despite the tension and worry that were ripping her apart inside. She knew she had failed incredibly on this assignment, as she had never failed before. She had simply never thought that the Planets would attempt such aggressive action. It seemed utterly out of proportion with the importance of Tellus, of vidar.

IT WAS then that the light flashed again on her wrist and the faint buzzer sounded its signal. Diane looked at her recent rival and said, "Is this it, Liza?"

Liza merely nodded a tight-lipped nod and gave her code response through the transmitter. All the time, when she knew she should be worrying solely about her mission, she was worrying about a tall brash red-headed young scientist, toward whom her chief previous emotion to date had been exasperation. But then, he was the first person outside of her Chief ever to arouse true emotion within her at all. And she was no longer feeling anger toward him.

Her contact betrayed unexpected excitement when he came on. He had been in touch with Base itself, across countless light-years of space-time, had direct word from Mun-r-Coveu. And his message sounded incredible to Liza's conditioned ears.

". . . and furthermore all scout ships have been called in by the Planets of the Cross and the Boötean League for conversion to merchant and passenger vessels," he concluded. "Do what you can—the fate of the entire galaxy may hinge upon your getting there."

Liza signed off and turned to face her frightened companions. "It's all haywire," she told them. "Apparently, for some cause as yet unknown to my contact, the entire struggle has been halted. The Planets have revolted against their

cybernetic rulers and the provisional military government of the League has resigned."

"Then why—?" began Cecil Pankhurst, wearing a frown.

"The raiders who attacked us were already in sub-spatial star-drive when the 'cease' order went out. They emerged briefly but have returned to it since sending out their pinnacle. They plan to make instantaneous contact with the pinnacle carrying Clark and Loggy and Jay at a Planet landing spot just north of Death Valley."

"Then they'll be all right," said Diane with relief.

"No they won't," said Liza. "If we don't get there first and put a communications request through—or make them do so—they'll take the gang aboard the star-ship. And it was sent out with orders to capture and liquidate the leaders of Tellurian vidar."

"Let's go," said Diane. "How much time have we?"

Liza looked at her watch. "Not enough—unless we can get ourselves a bubble-car. They're due in fifty-three minutes."

"Where's Clark's bub—" began Diane. Then she followed Liza's meaningful stare and her eyes went blank at sight of the twisted wreckage. Cecil Pankhurst shook his greying head.

"I have anti-grav equipment," said Liza. "I could probably make it alone—but it's odds-on I'd be dead long before I could establish any kind of convincing contact. And we can't fail!"

"Perhaps if we all went," suggested the diplomat, "at least they'd be curious. And since Diane and I are rather important to vidar they might just—well, hold their fire."

"Are you game?" Liza asked the brunette beauty.

"If you can figure out a way to get there, count me in, Winters," said Diane. "Vidar wouldn't be vidar without Clark Dorrance. I hate to admit it but I run off his vidars myself."

"Come on then," Liza told her. "Let's

see what sort of a perch we can rig for ourselves. It's going to be a rough ride."

Finally, from the wreckage of the flooring, Pankhurst came up with a fairly sturdy broad plank about six feet long. He held it up proudly, said, "How about this, Liza?"

"It will have to do," the girl from Boötes told him. She got busy with her anti-grav, lifted the plank to comfortable sitting height.

"And I tried to play rough with you!" murmured Diane, awed.

"Tried to—you *did!*" countered Liza, tossing her auburn hair back from her face. "All aboard. I'll keep her low so we won't freeze."

"Don't worry about me. I've never convinced Mrs. Pankhurst that our house in Devon should have central heating. I'm quite accustomed to chilblains," Pankhurst remarked as she took off. Thanks to the anti-grav beam it was as steady as if it were on the ground.

"Has it occurred to you, Winters, what you and I are going to look like on this thing if anyone sees us?" said Diane.

"I've been here through one Halloween," replied Liza. And all at once she recalled Cobb Murray's remark about her being able to ride on a broomstick. Well, she thought, if they were at all lucky he was going to have his chance to see her.

"I've been accused of being a witch often enough," said Diane, "but this is the first time I've ever lived up to it literally."

CHAPTER VII

Broomstick to Antares

IT WAS cold going over the mountains but Liza kept the flying plank close to the surface and the sun was

still well up in the western sky. As she moved swiftly and steadily, threading a path among the seemingly endless snow-capped peaks, she began to appreciate for the first time what a jewel of a little planet Earth was. It might be unimportant—but it was almost perfect for humans.

She gave thought to what wandering group of ancient explorers had first landed here, why they had not reported its finding to the rest of the galaxy. But the reasons—and whatever they were they could have been many—were lost in the mists of time.

“Do you know how to find this—er—pinnacle, Liza?” Pankhurst inquired as they shot out along the rim of the great Nevada desert.

“I’ve got a beam on their force-dome,” Liza replied. “We ought to make it just about in time—if they don’t get their take-off orders early. That starship isn’t going to wait and travel in sub-space can play tricks in time—as well as in space.”

“I’m keeping my fingers crossed,” said Diane over Liza’s shoulder. “If anyone tells me this is actually happening I’ll mow him down.”

“Don’t kid yourself, honey,” said Liza. “It’s all too true.”

A few rapid minutes later Liza directed the flying plank toward a faint dome of blue that rose from the flat sandy desert directly ahead of them. The moment she dreaded most was rapidly approaching. She keyed her transmitter to Planet-general and sent a message on ahead.

“Planet Infiltration Agent Buck Gentry—Planet Infiltration Agent Buck Gentry.” She watched her receiver.

The star flashed red instead of blue, indicating a message from the foe. Liza listened. It was Gentry. He said, “We have you spotted and beamed. We want Luray and Pankhurst. Thanks for bringing them, League Infiltration Agent known as Liza Winters. We shall open a lane through the force-dome.”

“Get in communication with your

nearest base, Gentry,” Liza said rapidly. “It is urgent. I would scarcely be here otherwise.”

“Impossible, Winters. We are under orders to communicate with no one beyond a half-mile radius. Come in at once.”

Liza again turned toward the force-dome. She felt discouraged but not hopeless. There was still a chance and at any rate she had made the rendezvous in time. At least this part of her mission was not all fouled up. The blue dome in front of them parted to leave an entry and they sailed on inside and landed close to the top-shaped Planet pinnacle.

“My word!” muttered Pankhurst. “My *sainted* word!”

“Mine too,” said Diane Luray but her voice was shaking.

They were met by swarthy red-eyed Draconians, who hustled Pankhurst and Diane up the invisible ray gangplank-fan. Gentry himself met Liza, a tiny but deadly beam-gun in hand.

“I should ray you down right here,” he told her. “You are not included in my orders and you’re a self confessed League Agent.” He laughed with a trace of bitterness. “In Tellurian words you made a sucker out of me, Liza. Hand over your belt.”

He expected her to refuse. His beam-gun tube was pointed directly at her diaphragm. Never in the entire history of the Galactic conflict had an Infiltration Agent of either side given up the precious secrets of his or her equipment. For a moment Liza hesitated, defying him, awaiting instantaneous destruction.

Then she remembered that the long war-that-was-not-a-war was over at last—for reasons she did not yet either know or understand. She pulled her combat girdle up from beneath her skirt-clout, pressed the key button and handed it over gravely as it opened and fell from her slim waist.

Buck Gentry’s mouth was agape as he took it, saw that it was intact and

completely equipped. He stared at her and then into his eyes came something like contempt.

"The war's over, Buck," said Liza. "That's why we came to you. Naturally I got in touch with base after the raid. The entire galaxy is frantically trying to give you a switch-order. These captives of yours are *not* to be liquidated, *not* to be harmed."

His laugh was an insult. He still toyed with the belt as if he expected it either to dissolve or to blow up in his face. He found the central de-activating pin, pulled it, said, "Sorry, Liza. A nice try." He made a face.

"And to think—of all the jet-skaters on Tellus I had to pick a League Agent!" Then, "But it won't wash. I've got orders to break up vidar—to smash Tellus if needed to do so. They came through on a triple imperative yesterday."

"It seems drastic, doesn't it?" she said quietly. She was now appealing solely to the weak point of any Planet agent—his total faith in logic. "I mean, why such tactics here?"

It troubled him. She saw the slight knitting of his brows and went on with, "And why the change in tactics? I don't know the full story yet. But something has happened out in the galaxy as a result of this little planet—and its vidar.

"In view of this, if you're wise, you'll refrain from any liquidation tactics. You'll have hostages anyway. And if you're wiser you'll put in a communications call right now. The galaxy is blue with messages for you."

"Perhaps—perhaps not," he said slowly and she knew she had won. Then, with a gesture of his beam-gun, "Get aboard, Liza. We're taking off any second now."

"Thanks, Buck—you won't regret it," she told him as she passed him to step up the inclined plane of light that led to the still-open port. Gentry shook his head dubiously as he followed.

SHE was led to a gaunt and Spartan bunk-chamber where the rest of the

party were gathered. They looked at her with a mixture of joy and apprehension. It was Diane who rose and put an arm around her shoulders and asked her how things had gone.

"I think we're going to be okay," she replied. "I conned him out of liquidation tactics." There was a humming sound from the ship around them. "Get on your bunks—on your faces," she told them. "Stay there until I tell you to get up."

"Yes, teacher," said Clark Dorrance, irrepresible as ever. But he obeyed as did the others. Cobb Murray seemed to be avoiding her searching eyes. He was evidently still angry with her.

She flung herself down barely in time. Pinnacle take-offs were usually rough and this was no exception. She wondered, before she went into acceleration coma, how long it would be before Earth had its own starports. Then everything blurred out for a bit and she hung on tightly to her bunk to keep from rolling out of it.

She recovered full consciousness in time to hear the soft *thock* of the pinnacle's nose into the body of the starvessel. She sat up and looked around. The others were still out cold—all save Cobb Murray, across the narrow chamber, who was regarding her speculatively. He caught her eye and grinned sheepishly.

"You know this can't actually be happening," he said. Then, "I'm still sorry about what I pulled at the studio."

"Oh, Cobb!" she said softly. This was no time for such a scene—but perhaps they would have no other.

"Why were you always so—witchy to me?" he asked when they found themselves in each other's arms without apparent volition.

"I didn't dare be anything else," she told him honestly. "You stirred me up too much and my assignment was Clark."

"How about now?" he countered a trifle grimly.

"No more assignment—except sur-

vival," she told him. "The war's over."

They kissed and then he said, "And I thought you were just kicking around a poor rube scientist like me. And speaking of witches—I saw you and Diane and Panky ride in before they hustled us into this flying top. All you needed was a pointed hat and chin."

"Oh, Cobb—darling!" she sighed, kissing him. Then, fiercely. "You are *not* a rube scientist. You're a wonderful scientist. Anyone who can do the things you have done with Earth resources is—well, when you see what we have out there, you'll . . ."

"I'll have a lot to learn," said Cobb, his eyes alight.

"Cut," said Clark Dorrance. "We don't want the educational part if the kissing's over, do we, folks?"

"No!" roared the others in what approximated unison.

"Who says the kissing's over?" said Cobb Murray. He proceeded to put on a demonstration that left Liza flushed and happy as she had never before been happy in her hard and austere young life.

This time they were separated by the arrival of Buck Gentry and some red-eyed officers of the star-ship. They were escorted into the mother vessel and Cobb gaped at the apparatus that lined the passageways along which they walked. Then they were put into an outer chamber with a transparent indirect window through which they derived the illusion of looking out directly into all of space.

The others crowded to the window, awed by the spectacle of the galaxy seen from outside Earth's atmosphere—but Liza sat alone on a bench, hugging her knees and her new happiness—and her fears. For the first time in her life she felt afraid to die.

Cobb Murray was the first to rejoin her. He sat down beside her, slipped an arm around her, said, "Darling, you're shivering."

"I-I'm scared bl-blue," she replied. "Suppose this ship doesn't get new orders before we slip into overdrive . . ."

"I thought you talked them out of liquidation tactics," said the red-headed scientist, turning three shades lighter himself.

Even as he spoke the ship gave a sudden sickening lurch, as if it had been tipped from the edge of a gigantic table. The stars in the window went into their dance, became lines of light, then faded into a sort of tweedy greyness that filled the universe around them like some strangely vivid sort of fog.

"Good Lord!" Murray exploded when he could speak. "Is it—"

"We're in overdrive," Liza replied simply. "They'll be taking us to the central cybernetic machines. And if they are not sincere—I mean, if they believe it more logical to destroy us now that they have the chance, they'll do it, agreement or no agreement."

"Nice machines," murmured Murray. "They sound almost human."

"A fine time to be funny," said Jay Carens, who had moved up to listen in on what Liza was saying. "Do you have any idea as to our destination on this glorified buggy ride, my dear?"

"Probably Central Planet itself, in the Cross," she told him. "They put us as problems to the cybernetic machines."

"My goodness!" said Carens. He gave vent to a burp and went over to a bench across the cabin and sat down weakly.

"Any idea when we get there—wherever it is, Liza?" Clark was speaking, his arm about the trim, slim and yielding Luray waist.

"Not long—in overdrive," Liza told him. "Not more than a few Earth hours. You'd do well to try and get some sleep."

THEY stretched out on the benches and tried to doze—not a difficult feat in overdrive, where even the tightly sealed atmosphere of the star-ship was heavy and unnatural. But none of them needed rousing when they pulled into the space-port on Central Planet. Buck Gentry came in to prepare them for disembarking.

"I still don't understand your tactics,"

Liza told him when she had a chance to talk to him alone. The great star-ship around them was yawing and shuddering as it came in for its landing.

"Why," she went on when he failed to answer, "did you try that double-sabotage trick on Diane and me, for instance? It seems illogical—if your side is out to gain control."

For a moment his scarred face went white with anger, his hand went to his belt. Cobb Murray, with a cry of alarm, moved to step between the girl and the Planet Infiltration Agent. And then Gentry regained his self control with an effort. He even shook his head slightly and allowed a faint grin.

"At first," he told the girl, "my assignment *was* to gain control. Miss Luray here was first objective. But a cybernetic reading made of her vidaroll performances changed that. The machines decided that she represented too great an instability factor."

"Careful, there, cowboy," said Clark Dorrance. "You're speaking of the instability I seem to be growing to love."

Gentry looked at him, puzzled, for a moment, then shrugged. He ignored the pleasantry and continued to address Liza. "We decided to move on Clark Dorrance then through a girl-control. I got a tip about the jet-skating epic and took a job scouting for the jet-derby. Thus I had a legitimate Earth-reason for picking up the best girl jet-skater I could find for the purpose."

"And you picked me," said Liza. She smiled at Cobb but her eyes were haunted. She knew what they were in for—a session with the central machines could have but one outcome.

"Under the circumstances, hardly surprising," said Buck. "It turned out to be a longer haul than anticipated—but you finally made contact with Dorrance. The fact that a known League agent made contact with you only clinched my determination that you were the girl we needed to establish control for the Planets."

"That I understand," Liza told him.

"But why the sudden switch to sabotage? It would make any control impossible. And why this mass-kidnaping? It's going to make trouble."

Buck Gentry looked puzzled. He frowned and shook his head uneasily. Then he said, "All I know is that I got orders to sabotage vidar by any tactics at hand. Then, this morning, a message to get Dorrance and Luray off the planet and to leave them in space. I have merely been doing my duty."

"What's this 'leave them in space' business?" Diane asked.

"A polite term for liquidation," Liza told her bluntly. She studied the Planet agent, her amber eyes narrow, said, "Then why haven't you done it, Buck, or whatever your real name is—why?"

He looked confused, then said, "Because the arrival of the rest of you, especially Mr. Pankhurst, and your surrendering your combat girdle brought new factors into the problem. And with communications inoperative there was no way to submit it to the machines save by bringing all of you to Central Planet. But I need not explain to you. And I doubt that you'll have much use for what I have told you."

"I have an idea the worry-shoe is on the other foot—*yours*," said Liza with a confidence she was far from feeling.

Star-ship officers came in again then and they got orders to move. Once more they were ushered through instrument-crowded corridors to an entry-port, high above the landing field that roofed Centralopolis. A light-escalator made their descent easy.

Save for Liza, to whom strange worlds beneath strange suns were no novelty, the Earthlings reacted with awe to their alien surroundings. The great cool green sun seemed to fill half the sky, which was of a liverish tint.

Beyond the miles-long landing area they could catch faint glimpses of a mountain range that rose sharply to incredible heights. The shoulders of these huge hills bore vegetation predominantly yellow and they were topped by a red-

purple snow. All sorts of humanoids packed the landing-field.

"It seems we have a reception committee," said Clark Dorrance, eyeing them dubiously. The star sighed, then added, "Really, *such* a bore! These grubby little autograph-hounds. Tsk, tsk! Can't we ever get away from it all, Diane—even on another planet?"

"You idiot!" said Diane unsteadily but new color rose in her cheeks. Liza, who had heard the interchange, felt her admiration for Clark Dorrance reach new heights. What a League agent the vidar star would have made!

"Hey! They're coming this way!" Jay Carens all but squealed his alarm and the immense mob of Antareans, Draconians and others surrounded the vast platform of the landing-area, stirred restlessly, began to mutter like an angry sea and push the guard-cordons so that the latter were hard put to it to restrain them.

"I don't understand it," said Buck Gentry suddenly.

Liza just looked at him, then snuggled close to Cobb Murray. She too was puzzled and frightened. For the presence of a crowd to look upon a small cargo of incoming prisoners represented some sort of ultimate in illogic. It meant Planets citizens had deserted their austere and logical tasks in favor of a comparative triviality.

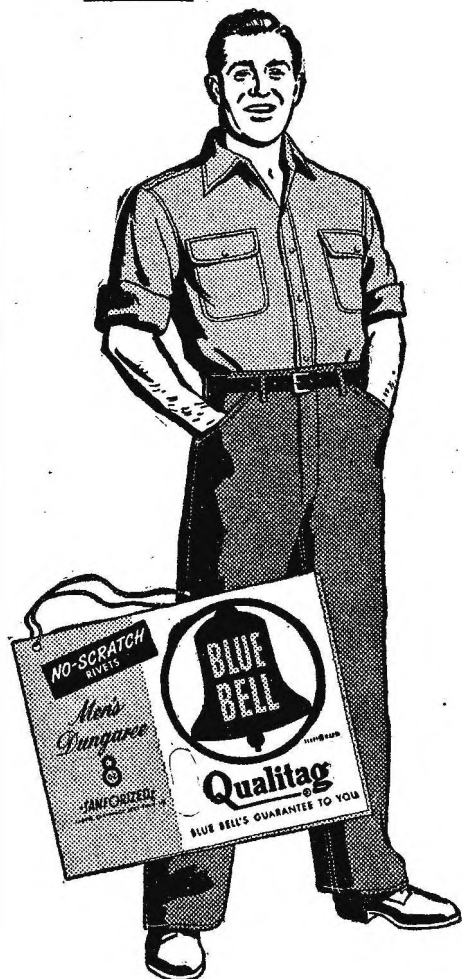
"I don't get it either," said Cobb Murray. "Those people look as if they are happy. From what you've told me about them . . ."

IF HE said more Liza failed to hear it. For the vast horde at that moment burst through the guard-cordon and came streaming toward the Earth-party and the star-shipmen like a tidal wave. The expedition officers, without command for the first time in their lives, were indecisive one moment too long.

When they ordered the prisoners back into the ship the crowd was already upon them, shouting, cheering, laughing,

[Turn page]

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crying, separating the star-shipmen from the rest of the party, who were promptly hoisted on jostling shoulders to look down into a sea of adoring faces.

They were being greeted as heroes—as human idols! From her own unsteady perch Liza saw the others bobbing up and down and being touched by admiring hands. They looked as bewildered as she felt. And then a vast wave of gladness, of relief, swept over her. This could not have happened, whatever the reason, if the galaxy were not at peace.

At last, hours later, they were assembled in what had once been the private suite of the central machine supervisor—human agent-dictator for the entire Planet alliance. He, it appeared, had been carted off to an asylum some days earlier.

"Apparently," said Buck Gentry, who was Planet spokesman as far as the erstwhile cybernetic-run groups were concerned, "our machines could solve human problems only as long as humanity behaved logically. The difficulty began with the stolen vidarolls, of course. They were utterly non-logical and caused symptomatic shorting in parts of the cybernetic synapses."

"Hence the switch in your assignment," Liza told him.

"Right," Gentry replied. He looked younger since released from the thrall of his agenthood. "It was decided to show vidarolls to some of the people and that was the undoing. Their illogical laughter and yearning for more overcame their desire to master the Boötean League. One thing led to another and . . ." He shrugged.

"You are all free to return to Earth if you wish," he added, "but you are wanted throughout the groups of the entire galaxy. People want to see you in person. The trip will take about six Earth months—and frankly you'll be making billions happy."

There was a silence, unexpectedly broken by Cecil Pankhurst. He said, "If we can make arrangements with our various families and get our af-

fairs in hand for that period, I for one should like to go." It was unexpected, caused further silence.

Then Clark Dorrance spoke up—to Diane. "You know, honeycomb," he said, "we wouldn't want to be knocking each other's brains out trying to be the first vidar stars to tour the galaxy. This looks like our chance to do it together. Suits me—how about you?"

"You've taken the words right out of my big foot-filled mouth," said Diane.

Rex Markham, the director, chimed in with, "And think of the documentary and process shots we can pile up as we travel the Milky Way!"

Gentry tapped Cobb Murray on a shoulder, said, "And how about you two? Is it back to Earth or a jaunt through the stars of both League and Planets of the Cross?"

"Oh, Cobb," said Liza breathlessly. "Think of it—a honeymoon through the whole galaxy!"

"We'll have to get married then," said the scientist dubiously. "After all, if we're going back to Earth . . ."

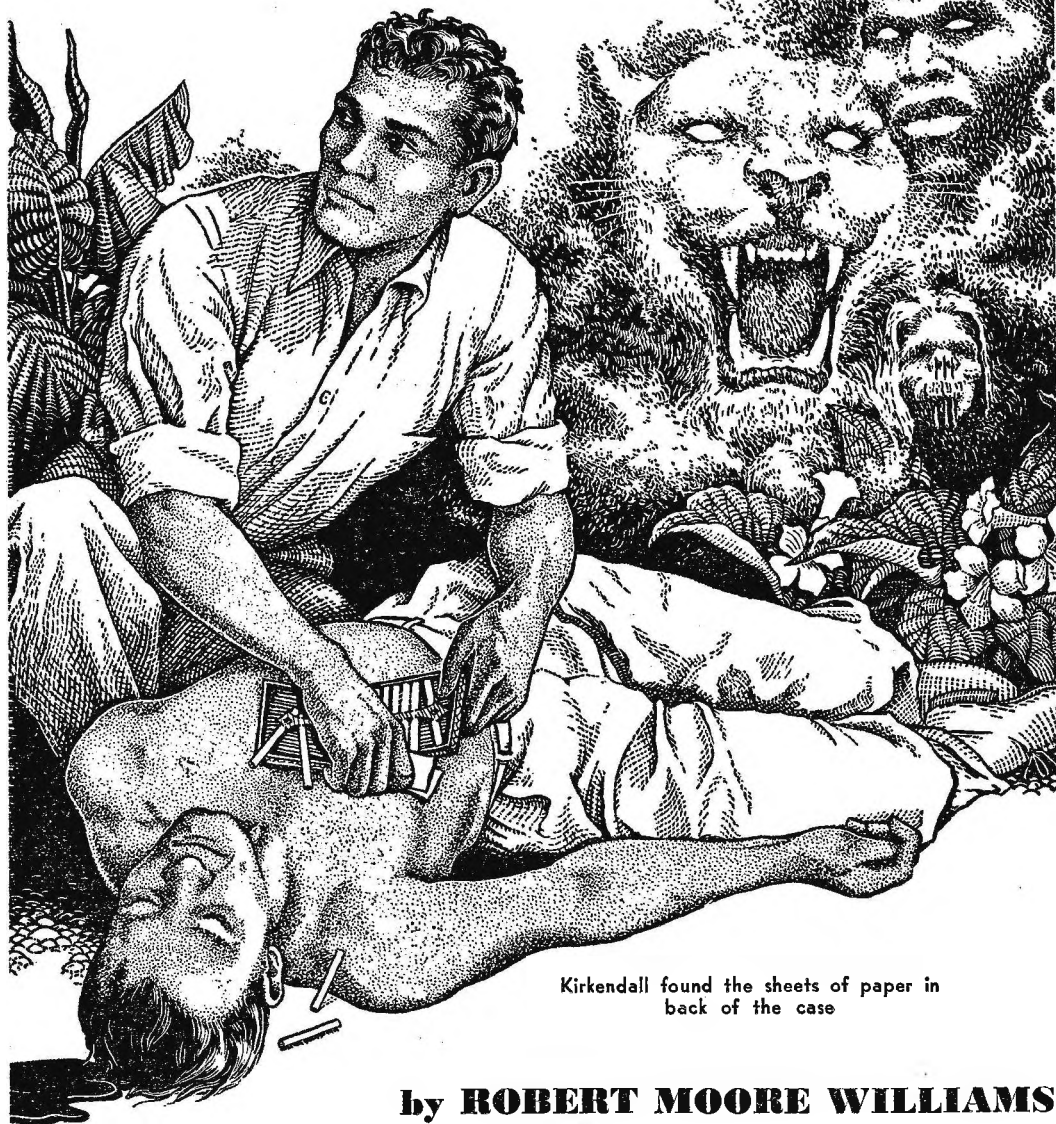
"There *is* no marriage anywhere else, idiot," Liza told him and ruffled his hair. "We'll have to wait till we get back."

"Well," said the scientist, "if it's all right with you I guess I can manage. Did I remember to tell you that I'm absolutely nuts about your . . ."

Jay Carens, sitting off by himself, positively beamed at them over his pince-nez. "This caper has everything," he told himself silently. "Danger, the unknown, space-flight, personal-appearance hoopla, documentaries, even romance. What a double and triple-terrific stunt! Wait until I get back to Hollywood and give them a few blasts on *this* one—just wait!"

With which his thoughts scurried off like mice, exploring angles and figuring percentages and special stunts and promotion campaigns. He pulled a pencil from his pocket and began to scribble on a ragged sheet of copy paper, making notes as ideas popped into his head. He was so busy that he forgot to burp.

Tame Me this Beast



Kirkendall found the sheets of paper in
back of the case

by **ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS**

Professor Shaler thought his experiment would free humanity—but was he creating a tool for autocrats?

IN the compound Professor Shaler was beating the Dyak, Tom, again. Kirkendall could hear the sharp spat of the lash and Shaler's voice telling Tom that he was a pig and the son of a pig. Since the Dyak was a Mohammedan

this business of being called a pig stung much harder than the whip.

Kirkendall walked over to the compound and stood looking between the posts. The black leopard came as close to him as her chain permitted, making mewing sounds. He reached down and scratched her ears. She purred in delight. He could remember when Garson had brought her here, a spitting chunk of savage fury. Now she was completely tame.

Shaler's magic, Kirkendall thought. He knew there was no magic involved in the domestication of the leopard, that her tameness was a scientific achievement of the highest order. But he never could quite get out of his mind the feeling that these results were pure magic. Inside the compound he could see more of the same, the Dyak standing with his hands across his chest, taking a whipping he had done nothing to deserve and which, by all the rules of human reactions, he should resent violently.

The fact that he did not resent the whipping, that he did not respond emotionally to it at all, was all the more remarkable in view of the additional fact that this same Dyak had not many months past been a jungle wild man, his most important occupation the taking and curing of certain unusual trophies which had given his tribe the name of headhunters.

Shaler's magic again, Kirkendall thought. He pushed open the no longer locked gate of the compound and entered. Shaler noticed him. The lash of the whip flicked out and cracked across his arm and naked back. Unlike the Dyak, Kirkendall reacted—instantly.

"Damn you, Shaler!" Kirkendall's fist lashed out and connected with Shaler's chin. The little scientist stumbled backward across the compound and fell. He sat up, rubbed his jaw and grinned.

"Well done, Kirky."

NOT until then did Kirkendall fully realize the purpose in Shaler's mind when the little man struck him

with the whip. "You were using me as a control!" he gasped. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I reacted before I thought."

"You did exactly what I wanted you to do," Shaler answered. He got to his feet, Kirkendall helping him, wiggled his jaw to make certain it was not broken, glanced at the Dyak. Tom had shown no interest in the fact that Shaler had been struck. No grunt of satisfaction had escaped him when his tormentor had been knocked down. For all the response he showed, white men, in his opinion, customarily greeted each other with a lash from a whip—to which the proper response was a blow from a fist.

"Kirky, it begins to look as if we have done what we set out to do," Shaler said. Satisfaction sounded in his voice. The "we" was pure altruism. The discovery brought to perfection here was his own invention. Kirkendall, as his assistant, had had no part in it except to help with the heavy work, nor any real understanding of the process.

The gun at Kirkendall's hip revealed his biggest job, that of guard and protector against the dangers of the surrounding jungle. Shaler had hired Kirkendall before they left the United States, selecting him with an eye toward his courage as his war record against the Japanese among these jungle islands revealed.

Furthermore extensive tests had revealed Kirkendall as possessed of a dogged loyalty and an IQ that did not spurt into the upward regions of the scale. Not that Kirkendall was stupid—far from it. He was above average in intelligence but he was no genius.

They had come to the island together. Shaler had hired a gang of natives from a neighboring island to hack the clearing out of the jungle and to erect the necessary huts and the compound. Then the natives had been sent home and Shaler, with Kirkendall's assistance, had begun his real work.

The two were the only white men on this lonely rain-soaked sun-drenched jungle island of the South Pacific. There

were two natives, Tom and his twin brother Freddie, along with one black leopard, all brought here by the trader, Garson, and sold to Shaler for the highest price the trader thought the traffic would bear.

The experiment in progress here on this island was what Jerome Shaler called an attempt to domesticate earth's last great wild animal. The dog, the horse, the pig, the elephant, the camel and the cow were all domesticated in prehistoric times.

Tamed, for uncounted centuries they have borne man's burdens, given him food, clothing, loyal companionship. But Earth's last great wild animal has never been tamed—man himself. Civilization has never done more than lay a thin veneer over him.

Under this veneer the great beast himself is always visible, quick to resent a fancied wrong and hot to avenge it in blood, quick to sniff out a bargain, eager to buy cheap and to sell dear, quick to grab a gun, a knife, a poisoned spear or an atom bomb and rush forth to hunt his greatest enemy, his own kind.

Jerome Shaler, a little man in a faded sun helmet, dirty white pants, no shirt and no hair on his chest, one of the world's great authorities on the functioning of the human nervous system, proposed to change all this. It was his simple purpose to domesticate the beast of the city. By profession he was a psychologist, a topnotch man in his field. By inclination he was a dreamer.

This was his dream, the abolition of war, of political parties and politicians, of fascism, communism and all other forms of totalitarianism, the elimination of poverty, of hunger and of want, the re-creation of Eden, Paradise, the Happy Isles, the building of a world where all men have enough and none too little and none too much.

In short, Shaler proposed to take the aggrandizing impulse out of the human race, the urge that leads men to try to accumulate more than they can use themselves. In addition, he proposed to

modify the aggressive ego drives of the individual, to still the whisper that men have been hearing since the beginning of time, "What's in it for me?"

He was a little man but his dream was no little thing.

How did he plan to accomplish his dream? He planned to short-circuit the aggrandizing and aggressive impulses within the brain itself. His dream sprang out of the observation that in the animal world the male wolf does not fight his mate, the dog does not snap at the bitch, the stallion does not shrill his challenge to the mare. Between the sexes some force seems to hold in check the aggressive drives of the male. This was Shaler's starting point.

If the males could be kept from fighting the females, why couldn't they be kept from fighting each other? He believed it could be done. The aggressive impulses rising within the primitive brain he proposed to short-circuit so that they were never reflected in hostile actions.

The method he used to accomplish this short-circuiting was his own closely-guarded secret but Kirkendall knew that it involved some subtle drug. Their purpose here on this island was to prove what this drug would do under the most difficult circumstances, using wild animals and headhunting savages as subjects.

When the tests were complete Shaler planned to begin using his drug in the water supply systems of the cities of the United States. The drug was tasteless and only the finest chemical analysis would reveal its presence. For obvious reasons he intended that no one should ever know the drug had gone into the water supply systems.

WORKING in secret Shaler was trying to save a world. The effect he hoped to achieve would be a gradual day-to-day lessening of the conflict between individuals. Years after it had happened somebody might discover that something *had* happened, that the world

had somehow become again another Eden.

But would the drug work? Kirkendall considered Tom, standing in the hot sun in the middle of the compound, the whip marks visible as red streaks on his back. If Shaler could turn a headhunter into a man who would submit to the whip, then Shaler could indeed work wonders. At the thought Kirkendall felt his pulses quicken. He was a man who had seen miracles. The whine of the black leopard outside the compound made him even more aware of the true nature of that miracle.

"Go rest now, Tom," Shaler spoke. The native stood staring at them as if he had not heard. Shaler had to speak again before the native moved submissively toward the hut. The gate was no longer locked and he could leave at any time he chose.

Outside was the jungle, his native habitat. He could slip into that jungle and follow again his old wild life, fishing on the reefs, hunting in the green tangle that reached with relentless fingers toward the little clearing. The point was—he did not choose to leave. Not even the whip could drive him away.

KIRKENDALL and Shaler pushed open the gate and stepped outside the compound. From the strip of jungle less than forty yards away a long slender object flashed toward them, passed between them and thudded home into the log fence behind them—a spear. Kirkendall snatched the revolver from his hip and fired three smoking shots at the spot from which the spear had come with no observable result.

Shaler grinned. "Freddie's getting better," he said.

Freddie was Tom's twin brother. Whereas Tom had been treated with Shaler's drug, Freddie had been left what he was originally, a savage. He was the control, the individual left untested for purposes of comparison.

Turned loose, Freddie had dived head-first into the jungle, from which he

planned and plotted his vengeance on the men who had brought him here. Probably nothing on Earth would have pleased Freddie more than the sight of Shaler's head drying nicely over a slow fire.

"That son-of-a-gun will kill us yet!" Kirkendall burst out. Freddie's ability with a spear or a knife or a sliver of poisoned bamboo thrust upward in a path so that the point was exactly where it would hit a careless walker in the leg was getting on the assistant's nerves.

"I've got you to keep him from potting us like sitting ducks," Shaler answered. Unaffected, he pulled the spear from the logs, examined the point. "Freddie has found a piece of iron somewhere and whetted it to a point on a rock," he said. "Ingenious devils, these natives."

"You sound pleased about him," Kirkendall complained.

Shaler's answer was another grin. In fact he was pleased. He liked Freddie. The native was an honest killer, an example of man in his natural state. The fact that Freddie has just tried to kill him and had almost succeeded in the attempt caused Shaler no concern. What else could you expect from a head-hunter? Besides, Freddie went a long way toward proving the success of his experiment.

To Jerome Shaler nothing else mattered. This experiment was the culmination of his life's work, of years of patient research, and the money that had gone into it represented his life's savings. He poked the handle of the spear toward the black leopard, pushing it hard against her, smiled when her only response was to move away from the irritation.

"What comes next?" Kirkendall questioned.

"Next?" Shaler paused, thought carefully. "I'd like to have at least one more native, preferably two, for testing. If that is successful, next comes—" His eyes went appraisingly over the six-foot bulk of his assistant.

"You don't mean *me*?" Kirkendall said hastily.

Shaler nodded.

"But that wasn't part of our contract."

"I know it wasn't and you don't have to participate if you do not wish to. I don't mean you alone, I mean both of us."

"Oh," Kirkendall said. This was different, this was something that required thinking.

In the back of his mind a voice whispered, "What's in it for you?"

"We will have to test the response of several people conditioned by civilized life," Shaler continued. "Both of us, of course—presuming you agree—will check the results day by day, perhaps hour by hour. I don't want to make any mistakes and most certainly I do not wish to do you any harm."

"Well—" Kirkendall hesitated. "What would I get out of it? I mean—"

"Get out of it?" Shaler was astonished as if this question had never occurred to him. "If nothing else—peace, a serene outlook, a freedom from the day-to-day hates and hostilities that arise in all of us and which create the conflicts that warp us from our true nature."

"I'll have to think about it," Kirkendall said. He was shocked, perhaps a little frightened. Supposing the experiment didn't work on him? What then? And if it did work—"What's in it for you?" the voice whispered in the back of his mind. "You don't need an answer right away?" he said.

"Of course not," Shaler answered promptly.

"Well—" Out at the entrance to the lagoon, visible from this slight elevation, a moving object caught his eye. He looked at it for several seconds before he realized that he was seeing it or what it was. A tramp schooner moved there. "Hello," he said. "Garson's back."

"Where? Oh," Shaler said. "Good. He's probably got some more specimens for us."

While they watched the schooner came

to anchor and a boat put out for the sandy beach.

GARSON was a great dough-belly of a man with drooping mustache and the furtive eyes of a wary rat. Clad in dirty whites, gun in the holster at his hip almost touching the floor, he sat on a folding camp stool and drank raw rum and talked evasively to Shaler.

Kirkendall sat at the end of the table and listened. It was obvious to him that Garson was curious about the activity here in this clearing in the rain forest. Or perhaps curious was too mild a word.

"How are things coming with you, Professor Shaler?"

"So-so," Shaler answered.

Garson spat tobacco at a beetle crawling on the floor. "What did you say was the nature of your work here?" he asked.

"I'm an anthropologist," Shaler answered.

"Anthro—what?"

"A student of man," Shaler explained. He took a cigarette from the long flat case he always carried, offered one to the trader, who shook his head. "We are studying the reactions of primitive peoples to certain—ah—stimuli," he continued.

"Oh," Garson said heavily. His eyes went furtively around the hut, rested for a moment on the metal trunk under Shaler's cot, then looked quickly away. "Well, every man to his own trade, I always say, and the devil for all." He laughed. "I have some more merchandise for you."

"Good. What do you have?" Since merchandise in this case meant wild animals or wilder humans Shaler was instantly interested.

"A couple of blacks from Borneo," Garson answered. "I've got them on the ship." He gestured toward the lagoon.

"Go see if they will serve our purpose, Kirk." Shaler spoke.

"Sure," Kirkendall answered. He was glad to get away. The presence of Garson always irritated him. The fellow was

actually a slave trader, carrying on a secret and illegal traffic among the islands.

As Kirkendall left the hut, Garson was saying, "These are extra special specimens, professor. I'll have to have a thousand dollars apiece for them, in gold of course."

The trader always demanded gold for his merchandise. No other form of currency was acceptable to him. In this section of the world gold was the only satisfactory medium of exchange. With it you could buy what you wanted, including copra, pearls, girls and men. In the trunk under his cot Shaler had almost eight thousand dollars in gold coin.

Moving along the path toward the beach Kirkendall saw that a boat with two men was waiting there. The men he vaguely remembered as being members of Garson's crew. They nodded to him as he came near.

"Mr. Garson said I was to inspect the—ah—merchandise," he said.

They grinned. "Yes, sir, cap'n. Step right in the boat, cap'n."

As he stepped into the boat there came, from the direction of the clearing the sudden hard explosion of a gun.

Kirkendall jerked around to stare toward the source of the sound.

As he turned, one of the men hit him across the back of the head with a short length of rubber hose that had been filled with lead. Without a sound, he pitched forward out of the boat and fell face downward in the sand of the beach.

How long he was unconscious he did not know but eventually he became aware of sharp popping sounds. Rolling over and sitting up he pried the sand out of his eyes. The boat was still on the beach but the two men were gone. From the path that led upward to the clearing there came the sharp explosion of a gun, which he vaguely recognized as the popping sound that had dragged him back to consciousness.

The gunshot was not repeated. Coming down the path toward him were three men. Garson and two of the trad-

er's crew. They saw him. One flung up what he thought was a hand to point at him. Only when the pointing hand suddenly exploded in smoke and a bullet whistled past him did he realize they were shooting at him. He dropped flat, reached for the gun in his own holster. His groping fingers found nothing.

After they had knocked him out the two men had gone up the trail to help Garson but they had taken the precaution of taking his gun with them.

He got to his feet, raced toward the jungle. Bullets whistled around his ears as he dived headfirst into the protection of the green tangle.

WHEN Kirkendall left the hut, Garson had asked the one question that he really wanted answered. "Of course, you can pay in gold?"

"Certainly," Shaler answered, "if the merchandise is satisfactory."

"Ah," Garson said. "Who is that coming up the path?" He glanced through the opening toward the beach.

Shaler turned to look. As he turned, Garson shot him in the head. Fortunately the bullet did not penetrate the brain but it gouged a groove across the top of the skull and knocked Shaler flat on his face, completely unconscious.

When he began to recover consciousness the first dazed thought in his mind was wonder at what had hit him. He was aware that he was hurt, that he must be very quiet or he would be hurt worse. From somewhere near him came heavy pounding sounds. Eventually, when he felt he could open his eyes a slit, he saw Garson in the act of beating the lock off the metal trunk that had served him as a safe.

He knew then that the trader had either shot him or slugged him. Garson was following a pattern as old as human history. Two white men and eight thousand dollars in gold on a lonely desert island. Mix in a slave-trading renegade, and there was only one answer. Too late, Shaler saw the inevitability of the pattern he had established here.

He was working to break up this identical pattern but his ultimate goal was ten thousand miles away in the United States. Maybe it was ten thousand years away too. Lying on the floor of that hut, watching Garson greedily pouring gold pieces into a stout canvas bag, Shaler had a premonition that the achievement of his goal was even farther than ten thousand years away.

When Garson finished sacking the gold he began feverishly to search the hut. The trader had never been satisfied with Shaler's explanation of their presence here. He apparently suspected there was something else of value hidden somewhere and was trying to find it.

Well, there *was* something else of value, three sheets of paper covered with formulae and explanations, but they were carefully hidden in the back of Shaler's cigarette case. They contained the secret of Shaler's drug for short-circuiting the aggrandizing and aggressive impulses of the human race.

Garson, with a look at Shaler, lifted the canvas sack and left the hut. Outside Shaler could hear the trader continuing his search. Shaler lifted himself on his hands, managed to sit up. A wave of giddy nausea swept over him at the movement.

Tenderly he explored the gash in his skull.

When the giddiness passed he tried to get to his feet, found his strength was not equal to the task.

"If I can't walk I'll crawl," he thought. With slow movement but with desperate purpose he began to crawl toward the cot. Under the pillow was a .45 Colt automatic. If he could get his hands on the gun he intended to use it.

Until now, he had not known that he was capable of such furious hatred. He could kill Garson now and never feel a qualm of conscience about it afterwards. But the question was—could he kill Garson? He did not know but when he got the Colt in his hands he knew he could try.

The trader had finished searching and

was moving down the path toward the lagoon when Shaler, holding the Colt in both hands, came stumbling out of the hut and started shooting at him.

Garson snapped a fast shot behind him, then ran. His men were coming up the path toward him. Shaler followed him.

For a few moments the quiet of the jungle was broken by blasts of gunfire. When the thunder stopped Shaler was down on the path and Garson and his two men were hurrying toward the boat that would carry them out to the schooner and thence to some place of refuge where no questions were ever asked about the origin of a man's wealth.

Shaler had a bullet through his left shoulder. He had another bullet through his left leg. The bone was broken and he could not walk. But he could crawl. And crawl he did. There was something indomitable about the little man. Leaving a trail of blood behind him he crawled all the desperate quarter of a mile back to the little clearing that had been hacked from the jungle growth.

"Kirk!" he called. His dazed mind did not recall that Kirkendall was not here. Only when the assistant did not answer him did he realize that he would have to do everything himself.

In the supply hut, locked in moisture and bug-proof metal lockers on the top shelf, were medical supplies, opiates to dull the jaggng streaks of fire-hot pain screaming through his broken leg, sulfa to sprinkle on his wounds, penicillin to stop the infection that he knew would shortly be raging through his body. Last of all there were bandages, splints to hold a broken bone in place while it healed.

He would be laid up for weeks but with the modern wonder drugs to stop infection and with proper care he would become a well man again. The affair with Garson would be only a strange interlude, a brief moment when the old drives of the human race had held sway. But would hold sway no longer once he got his magic drug into action!

The urge to live was a pounding rhythm in his body. He knew he could apply the medicine himself, perhaps he could even apply the splints.

"Kirkendall!" he called again. Where was the man, he wondered fretfully. Not until he had called a dozen times did he realize that his assistant was not here.

AT the cost of breath-taking agony he crawled to the supply hut, managed to push open the door, to wriggle his way inside. As he saw what faced him here he tasted the full meaning of complete despair.

The medicine boxes were on the top shelf. No matter how hard he tried there was simply no way he could reach them without help. If they had been back in the United States they could not have been farther out of his reach.

He lay there on the dirt floor of the hut and cursed Garson and Kirkendall and the whole human race. Then, as the door was pushed open again, and a face peered inside, he stopped cursing.

Tom stood there.

"Tom, help me."

The Dyak squatted down beside him, grinned like a friendly but slightly stupid ape.

Shaler gestured toward the medicines. "Boxes help longside me."

Tom made no move toward the boxes. It was not that he did not understand—he knew well enough what was wanted of him—it was simply that the treatment he had received and which had short-circuited all his aggressive and hostile impulses had also short-circuited all generous impulses too.

"Me hurt bad," Shaler said.

Tom shrugged. The whip had demonstrated his indifference to pain in himself.

He was equally indifferent to pain in somebody else. If Shaler was suffering, so what?

Tom wasn't getting even with the man who had whipped him. He was indifferent to revenge, as indifferent as he was to pain, to suffering, to death

itself. He was a docile, a tamed, but a mindless creature. He was a slave.

As he realized the truth there on the dirt floor of the hut, with the slow drip of his own blood turning the dirt to mud, Jerome Shaler came face to face with his failure to domesticate earth's last great wild animal. He hadn't done the job—he had failed.

Perhaps the job could be done—he did not know about that—but he knew he had not done it. He saw also the danger of the treatment he had devised. All he had done was to create a method of making a nation of docile super-slaves.

He tried to get the cigarette case out of his pocket in a last desperate effort to correct the mistake he had made. Not that anything could be done to change the formulae. All that could be done now was to destroy them. They were a source of danger potentially greater than the atom bomb.

Hours later, when Kirkendall finally got back to the clearing and found him, he was still trying to get the cigarette case out of his pocket.

"The cigarette case—burn it, Kirk," he whispered.

It was his last effort to undo his mistake. As he spoke he died.

Kirkendall found the sheets of paper in the back of the case. All night long he studied the formulae, the step-by-step process in the distillation of the drug Shaler had used on Tom. The process was clear—too clear. He could understand it.

He saw quite clearly the error Shaler had made, that the little psychologist had created a method of making slaves instead of free men. All night long a still small voice whispered to him, "Here's your big chance."

To give him credit he tried to fight against that voice but little by little it grew stronger. "You can be a king," it whispered. "You can start with a single little town somewhere, you can make yourself a boss. Slowly and steadily you can grow bigger. Pretty soon you will be boss of a county, then of a state, then—"

YOU CAN'T KILL

THE THING

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There was no limit to what he might be.

The voice kept coming back again and again to the idea of being a king. Perhaps the first man to discover how to control fire heard this same voice. Perhaps it whispered to the inventor who first learned how to chip flint into a knife, how to mold copper into a spearhead, how to melt and cast iron.

It whispered that if he used his discovery just right, he could become Mr. Big, with servants to wait on him and women to please him and his will law everywhere. All night long, with Shaler's body lying on the cot and Tom dozing in the corner, Ralph Kirkendall argued with the voice that whispered to him.

With the dawn he knew it had won.

Haggard-eyed, his face drawn, but flushed inside with dreams of what he would be, he stepped outside the hut. No Oriental potentate ever dreamed grander dreams of luxury than Ralph Kirkendall at this moment.

The power of Genghis Khan, of Tam-

erlane, was his and all men would be his servants.

As he stood there in the door, the poisoned spear struck him full in the chest.

Freddie was still on the job. Without knowing he had done it Freddie had cast perhaps the most important spear ever thrown by any head-hunter. . . .

In the months that followed the swift jungle growth lapped like a green tide over the clearing. Within a year it would have been hard to find the spot where Jerome Shaler had made his experiments.

Within two years the jungle had taken back its own.

In the depths of that jungle live two savages, one a proud and fearless hunter, the second a docile obedient slave—Freddie and Tom. Perhaps someday an outrigger canoe will land there and will take them away. Meanwhile Freddie's proudest possessions, to which Tom is completely indifferent, are two well-cured human heads.



Birthplace of Creation

A Captain Future Novelet by **EDMOND HAMILTON**

CHAPTER I

Citadel of the Futuremen

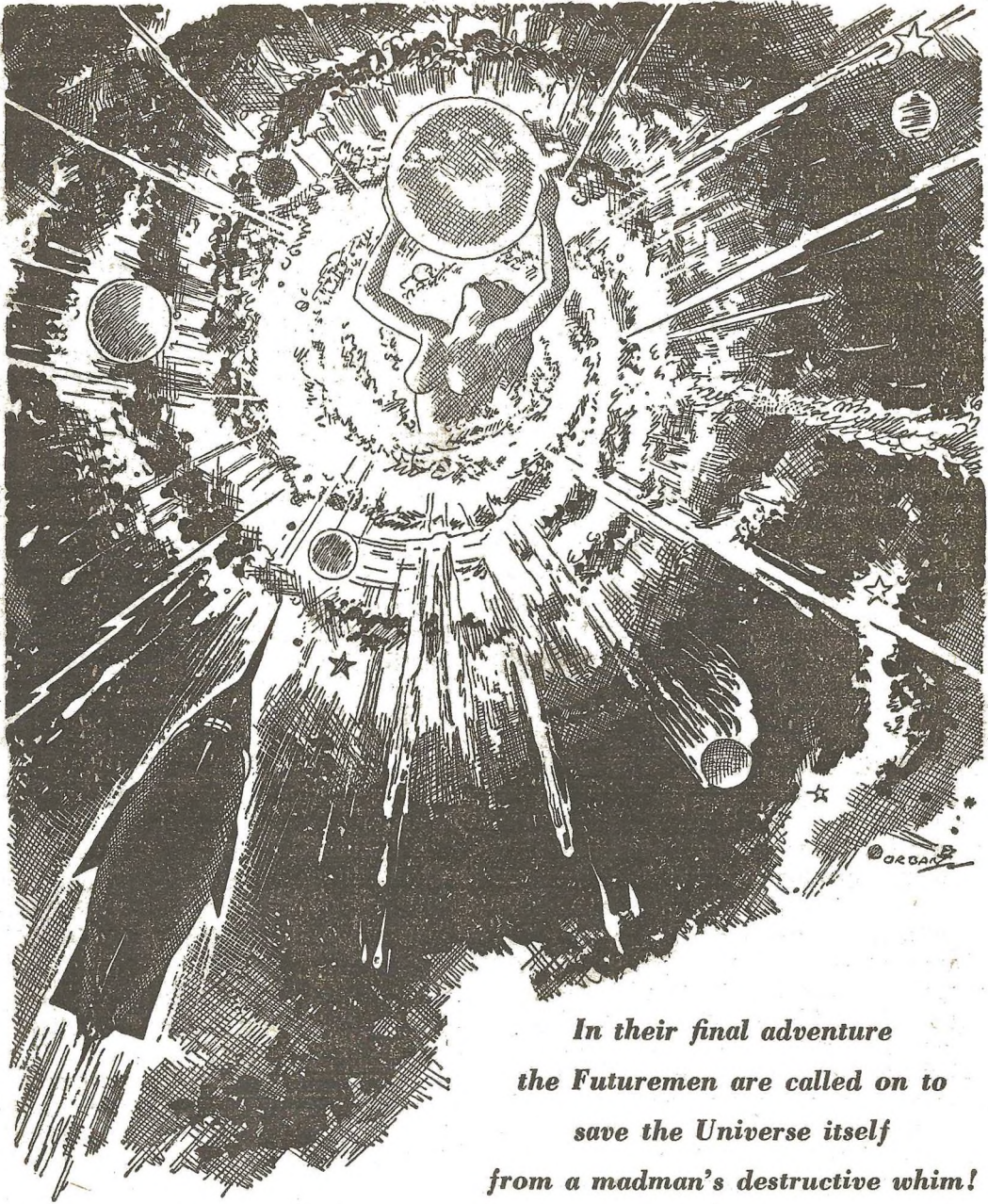
GARRAND watched the face of the Moon grow larger in the forward port of his small cruiser. A white and terrible face, he thought. A death's-head with meteor-gnawed bones and gaping crater-wounds, bleak and cruel and very silent, watching him come and thinking secret boding thoughts about him. A feeling of sickness grew in him.

"I am a fool and soon I will probably be a dead fool," he said to himself.

He was not a brave man. He was very fond of living and he did not think of death at all as a thing to be dared and laughed at. The knowledge that he was likely to die there on the Moon gave him qualms of physical anguish that made him look as white and hollow as the stony face that watched him through

the port. And yet he did not turn back. There was something in Garrand that was stronger than his fear. His hands trembled, but they held the cruiser grimly on its course.

The stark plains and mountain ranges took size and shape, the lonely mountains of the Moon that looked on nothing and the plains where nothing stirred, not even the smallest wind or whirl of dust. Men had gone out to other worlds and other stars. They had ranged far across space, founding colonies on asteroids and cities on the shores of alien seas. But they left the deathly airless Moon alone. They had looked at it once and gone away. There were only four who made the Moon their home—and not all of those four were men.



*In their final adventure
the Futuremen are called on to
save the Universe itself
from a madman's destructive whim!*

Tycho Crater widened out below the little ship. Licking dry lips metallic with the taste of fear, Garrand consulted a map, drawn carefully to scale and showing in that desolation one intricate diagram of a man-made structure. There

were ominous gaps in that diagram and Garrand was painfully aware of them. He made his calculations and set his ship down well beyond the outer periphery of defenses marked on the chart.

His landing was a clumsy nervous one.

White pumice-dust burst upward around the hull and settled slowly back again. Garrand cut his jets and sat for a moment looking out across Tycho, all ringed around in the distance with cliffs and spires and pinnacles of blasted rock that glittered in the light. There was no sign of the structure indicated on the chart. It was all below ground. Even its observatory dome was set flush, reflecting the Sun's unsoftened glare no more than the surrounding plain.

PRESENTLY Garrand rose, moving with the stiff reluctance of a man going to the gallows. He checked over the bulky shapes of a considerable mass of equipment. His examination was minute and he made one or two readjustments. Then he struggled into a pressure suit and opened the airlock. The air went out with a whistling rush and after that there was no sound, only the utter silence of a world that has heard nothing since it was made.

Working in that vacuum Garrand carried out a light hand-sledge and set it in the dust. Then he brought out the bulky pieces of equipment and loaded them onto it. He was able to do this alone because of the weak gravitation and when he was through he was able for the same reason to tow the sledge behind him.

He set off across the crater. The glare was intense. Sweat gathered on him and ran in slow trickles down his face. He suffered in the heavy armor, setting one weighted boot before the other, with the little puffs of dust rising and falling back at every step, hauling the sledge behind him. And fear grew steadily in him as he went on.

He knew—all the System knew—that the four who lived here were not here now, that they were far away on a distant troubled world. But their formidable name and presence seemed to haunt this lifeless sphere and he was walking now into the teeth of the deadly defenses they had left behind them.

"They can be beaten," he told himself, sweating. "I've got to beat them."

He studied his map again. He knew exactly how far he had come from the ship. Leaving himself a wide margin of safety he activated the detector-mechanism on the sledge. The helmet of his pressure-suit was fitted with ultra-sensitive hearing devices that had nothing to do with sonic waves but translated sub-electronic impulses from the detector into audible sound-signals.

He stood still, listening intently. But the detector said nothing and he went on, very slowly now and cautiously, across the dead waste until his footsteps in the dust approached the line of that outer circle on the map. Then the detector spoke with a faint small clicking.

Garrand stopped. He bent over the panel of the mechanism, a jumble of dials, sorters, frequency-indicators and pattern-indicators. Above them a red pip burned in a ground-glass field. His heart hammered hard and he reached hastily for a black oblong bulk beside the detector.

He thought, "I'm still far enough away so that the blast won't be lethal if this doesn't work."

The thought was comforting but unconvincing. He forced his hand to steady, to pick up the four-pronged plugs and insert them, one by one in the proper order, into the side of the detector. Then he dropped behind the sledge and waited.

The black oblong hummed. He could feel it humming where his shoulder touched the metal of the sledge. It was designed to pick up its readings from the detector, to formulate them, adjust itself automatically to the indicated pattern and frequency, to broadcast an electronic barrier that would blank out the impulse-receptivity of the hidden trap's sensor-unit. That was its purpose. It should work. But if it did not . . .

He waited, the muscles of his belly knotted tight. There was no flash or tremor of a blast. After he had counted slowly to a hundred he got up again and looked. The red pip had faded from the ground-glass screen. There was a white

one in place of it.

Garrand watched that white pip as though it were the face of his patron saint, hauling the sledge on slowly through that outer circle and through the ones beyond it that were only guessed at. Three times more the urgent clicking sounded in his ears and the dials and pointers changed—and three times the pip faded from red to white and Garrand was still alive when he reached the metal valve door set into the floor of the crater.

The controls of that door were plainly in sight but he did not touch them. In-

to the very threshold of this most impregnable of all places in the Solar System.

He did not relax his caution. A large mass of equipment went with him down the dark stairway, including the scanner. The valve closed automatically behind him and below in a small chamber he waited until pressure had built up and another door automatically opened. He found nothing more of menace except a system of alarm bells, which he put out of commission—not because there was anyone to hear them but because he knew there would be recorders and he

WELL DONE AND FAREWELL



AFTER starring in nineteen novels and seven novelets of this current series, Curt Newton and his faithful trio of comrades—Simon Wright, the Brain; Otho, the android; and Grag, the robot—are taking off on an indefinite leave of absence, doubtless for some star far from their secret fortress upon the dark side of the Moon.

Their recent return has been an exciting one, a happy one for all concerned—but it is time again for them to be on their galactic way. If their fortunes permit they may, in time, be back in the pages of this magazine to tend to their incredible affairs. So do not say good-bye but farewell.

—THE EDITOR

stead he hauled a portable scanner off the sledge and used it to examine the intimate molecular structure of the metal and all its control connections. By this means he found the particular bolt-head that was a switch and turned it, immobilizing a certain device set to catch an unknowing intruder as soon as he opened the valve.

Within minutes after that Garrand had the door open and was standing at the head of a steep flight of steps, going down. His heart was still thudding away and he felt weak in the knees—but he was filled with exultation and a great pride. Few other men, he thought, perhaps none, could have penetrated safely

wanted no signs, audible or visible, of his visit.

THE recorders themselves were relatively easy to detect. With an instrument brought for the purpose he blanked off their relay systems and went on across the great circular central chamber with the glassite dome through which the sunlight poured. He peered with a scientist's fascinated wonder at the laboratory apparatus of various sorts in that and the smaller chambers which opened off it until he came to what of all things he was looking for—the heavy locked door of a vault, sunk deep in the lunar rock.

Garrand worked for a long time over that door. The silence was beginning to get to him and the uneasy knowledge that he was where he had no right to be. He began to listen for the voices and the steps of those who might come in and find him.

They were far away and Garrand knew that he was safe.

But he was not a criminal by habit and now that the challenge to his skill was past he began to feel increasingly guilty and unclean. Personal belongings accused him, an open book, a pair of boots, beds and chests and clothing. If it had been merely a laboratory he would not have minded so much—but it was also a dwelling place and he felt like a common thief.

THAT feeling was forgotten when he entered the vault. There were many things in that vast lunar cavern, but Garrand had no more than a passing glance for any of them except the massive file-racks where the recorded data which related to voyages were spooled and kept.

Under the clear light that had come on of itself with the opening of the door Garrand searched the racks, puzzling out the intricate filing system. He had taken off his helmet. His hands shook visibly and his breathing was loud and irregular but these were only secondary manifestations.

His mind, faced with a difficult problem to solve, slipped by long habit into calculating-machine efficiency and it was not long before he found what he wanted.

He took the spool in his two hands, as tenderly as though it were made of the delicate stuff of dreams and apt to shatter at a breath. He carried it to the large table that stood by the racks and fed the end of the tape into a reader. His face had grown pale and quite rigid except that his mouth twitched a little at the corners. He set up his last piece of equipment beside the reader, a photosonic recorder used

to make copies of a master spool, synchronized them and then closed the switches.

The two spools unwound, one giving, the other receiving, and Garrand remained motionless over the viewer, seeing visions beyond price and listening to the voices that spoke of cosmic secrets. When the spool was finished it was a long time before he moved. His eyes were still busy with their visions and they were strangely dull and shining all at once, shining and far away.

AT last he shook himself and laughed, a small gasping sound that might well have been a sob. He replaced the original in the rack and put the second spool into a special pouch on his belt. In the vault he left everything exactly as he had found it and when he came out again onto the Moon's surface he reset the hidden trigger that guarded the outer door.

As he had penetrated the defences on the plain, so he went back through them again, in a double agony lest now, when he had the thing he had taken such incredible chances for, he should blunder and be killed. The shadows of the crater edge were crawling toward him, sharp and black. The last premonitory clicking of the detector, the last fading of the warning pip from red to white and he was safe, running toward the ship into the knife-edged darkness of the shadow.

Long before night came Garrand was gone, plunging across the narrow gulf to Earth. He did not know how to give vent to the wildness of his exultation, so he held it in but it burned in his face and eyes.

"Tomorrow," he said aloud to himself, over and over. "Tomorrow we'll be on our way." He laughed, addressing someone who was not present. "You said I couldn't do it, Herrick. You said I couldn't!"

Behind him the darkening face of the Moon looked after him.

CHAPTER II

Cosmic Secret

FOUR came home to the Moon after many days. Four, of whom only one was an ordinary man.

Curt Newton, the man—Otho, the android or artificial man who was human in everything but origin—Grag, the towering metal man or intelligent robot—and Simon Wright, he who had once been a man but whose brain only now lived on in a strange mechanical body.

Their ship came down like a thunderbolt of metal from the sky. The camouflaged doors of an underground hangar opened silently to receive it and closed as silently.

Into the great circular room beneath the observatory dome the four Futuremen came. Curt Newton paused by the wall to activate the recorder panel. It showed blank. It always showed blank.

He sat down slowly, a tall man with red hair and a bronzed face that looked now very tired.

"Do you think our work out there will stick, Simon?" he asked.

He addressed the small square metal case hovering on motor-beams before him, its strange "face" of lens-eyes turned toward him. The serum-case, in which Simon Wright's brain lived its life.

"I am confident," said Simon with his precise articulation of metallic artificial accents, "that there will be no more trouble between Uranus Mines and the natives."

Curt frowned and sighed. "I hope so. When will they learn how to deal with planetary primitives?"

Grag spoke up loudly. He was standing, a seven-foot giant of metal, with his head turned and his photoelectric eyes staring intently across the big room.

"Curt, someone's been here," his great voice boomed.

"No. I checked the recorders," Newton said without turning.

"I don't care," Grag persisted. "That chair by the vault door has been moved. I was the last one out when we left and I remember exactly where it stood. It's been moved a good three inches."

Otho burst into laughter. "Listen to Old Hawkeye. Three inches!" The android, so perfectly human in appearance that only something bright and strange lurking in his green eyes betrayed an inner difference, went on mockingly, "Are you sure it's not two and a half inches?"

Grag began to protest angrily in his foghorn voice. Curt swung around irritably to silence them. But Simon Wright said gravely, "Wait, Curtis. You know that the constitution of Grag's metal brain makes his memory absolutely photographic. If he says the chair has been moved it has been moved."

"But the recorders?"

"They *could* have been blanked, you know. It's theoretically possible."

"Only theoretically—" Curt began and then he stopped and swore. "Blast you, Grag! Why did you have to raise a doubt in my mind? Now I'll have to take down the recorders to check them and that's the devil and all of a job."

Irritation riding him, he went out of the big room and came back with tools. He scowled at Grag. "You'd better be right!"

Simon and Otho helped him in the delicate work of disassembling the recorders. They examined both the microfilm and the interior relay circuits bit by bit.

Curt's irritation left him suddenly. He looked sharply at the others. He had found it—the minute blurred line where the film had started to roll and been arrested. The relay circuits were a fraction of a decimal out of synchronization now.

Otho whistled softly. "Blanked!" he said. "And so beautifully done—nothing fused or blown out, the derangement so small that you'd never notice it unless

you were searching for it."

"So I was right?" Grag boomed triumphantly. "I knew I was right. When I see a thing that's changed I—"

"Shut up," Curt Newton told him. He looked, puzzled, at Simon. "No criminal did this—no ordinary criminal. The job of blanking these relays required tremendous scientific ability."

Simon brooded, hovering. "That's obvious. Only an expert in sub-electronics would be capable. But that seems incongruous. Why would a top scientist come prowling in here like a common thief?"

Curt turned. "Grag, will you see if anything else has been moved or taken?"

The metal giant started stalking through the rooms. Curt remained silent and thoughtful, the frown on his tanned face deepening.

Grag came back. "No. Nothing else has been tampered with."

"Yet it was," Curt said slowly. He looked again at Simon. "I've been thinking. An expert in sub-electronics . . . Do you remember the nuclear physics man down at New York Tech whom we met at Government Center a few months ago?"

"Garris? Garrand—some name like that? I remember. A nice little man."

"Yes, I thought so too—very eager about his work. But I remember now he asked me a question—"

CURT broke off suddenly. He went rapidly across the big room, unlocked the vault door and inside the silent lunar cavern he went straight to the files.

Simon had followed him. And when Simon saw the spool that Curt drew from the file his lens-eyes turned to Curt's face with a startled swiftness.

"Curtis, *no!* You don't think—"

"It was what he asked me about," Curt said. "The Birthplace."

The word went echoing solemnly back and forth around the cold rock walls. And Curt stared at Simon, not really seeing him, seeing uncanny awesome things that lived in memory, and a

strange look came into his face—a strange look indeed for the man Curt Newton. A look of fear.

Simon said, "How could he know of the Birthplace?"

That word had never been spoken to anyone. They hardly spoke it even among themselves. Such a secret was not for the knowledge nor the use of men and they had guarded it more carefully than the sum total of all other knowledge they possessed. Now the very sound of that name brought Grag and Otho to the door and wrought a sudden tension that filled the cavern with a waiting stillness.

Curt said heavily, "He connected the theoretical possibility with the work we did on Mercury. He's a brilliant man, Simon—too brilliant."

"Perhaps," said Grag, "he only looked for the secret and couldn't find it. After all, our filing system . . ."

Curt shook his head. "If he could get in here he could find what he wanted." He examined the spool. "He could make a copy of this and there would be no way of telling that it had been done."

He stood motionless for a moment longer and no one spoke. Otho studied his face and shot one quick bright glance at Simon. Simon moved uneasily on his gliding force-beams.

Curt replaced the spool and turned. "We've got to find out about this man. We'll go to New York, at once."

Very soon thereafter the *Comet* rose from the dark gap of the hangar-mouth and shot away toward the great green globe of Earth.

Not much later, at headquarters of the Planet Police in New York, old Marshal Ezra Gurney stared at Curt Newton in blank amazement.

"Garrand?" he said. "But he's a reputable man, a scientist!"

"Nevertheless," said Curt grimly, "I want all the information you can get and fast."

Simon spoke. "This is urgent, Ezra. We cannot afford delay."

The grizzled old spaceman glanced

from one to the other, and then to Otho. "Something really bad, eh? All right, I'll do what I can."

He went out of the office. Otho leaned against the wall and remained motionless, watching Curt. Simon hovered near the desk. Neither one of them was afflicted with nerves. Curt moved restlessly about, brooding, his hands touching things and putting them down again in wire-taut gestures. The intricate multichron on the wall whirred softly and the minutes slid away, on Earth, on Mars, on the far-flung worlds of the System. No one spoke and Ezra did not come back.

Simon said at last, "It would take time, even for Ezra."

"Time!" said Curt. "If Garrand has the secret we have no time."

He paced the small neat room, a man oppressed with heavy thoughts. The sound of the door opening brought him whirling around to face Ezra almost as though he were facing his executioner.

"Well?"

"Garrand took off from Earth on the twenty-first," said Ezra. "He flew a ship of his own, apparently an experimental model on which he has been working for some time in company with a man named Herrick, who is also listed as chief pilot. Destination, none. Purpose, cosmic ray research beyond the System. Because of Garrand's reputation and standing there was no difficulty about the clearance. That was all I could get."

"That's enough," said Curt. "More than enough." His face was bleak and the color had gone out of it under the tan. He looked very tired and in a way so strange that Ezra came up to him and demanded, "What is it, Curt? What did Garrand take from the laboratory?"

Curt answered, "He took the secret of the Birthplace of Matter."

Ezra stared, uncomprehending. "Is that a secret you can tell me?"

CURT said hopelessly, "I can tell you now. For it's known now to Garrand and this other man."

"What is it, then?"

"Ezra, it is the secret of creation."

There was a long silence. It was obvious from Gurney's face that the term was too large for him to understand. Yet Curt Newton did not continue as yet. He looked beyond them and his face was drawn and haggard.

"We'll have to go back there," he said, his voice low. "We'll have to. And I hoped never to go back."

Simon's expressionless eyes were fixed on him. Otho said loudly, "What's there to be afraid of? We ran the whirls before. And as for Garrand and the other one—"

"I am not afraid of *them*," Curt Newton said.

"I know," said Simon. "I was the only one who was with you in the shrine of the Watchers there. I know what you are afraid of—yourself."

"I still don't get it," Ezra said. "The secret of creation? Creation of what?"

"Of the universe, Ezra. Of all the matter in the universe."

A strange wonder came on Gurney's timeworn face. He said nothing. He waited.

"You remember," Curt told him, "when we came back from our first deep-space voyage? You remember that right after that we designed the electron-assembly plants that they've used ever since to replenish Mercury's thinning atmosphere? Where do you think we got the knowledge to do that, to juggle electrons into desired types of matter on a big scale?"

Gurney's voice was a whisper now. "You got that knowledge out in deep space?"

"In deep, deep space, Ezra. Near the center of our galaxy, amid the thick star-clusters and nebulae beyond Sagittarius. There lies the beating heart of our universe."

He made a gesture. "Back in the Twentieth Century the scientist Millikan first guessed the truth. The matter of the universe constantly melts away into radiation. Millikan believed that some-

where in the universe was a place where radiation was somehow built back into matter and that the so-called cosmic rays were the 'birth-cry' of the newborn matter. The fount of our material universe, the birthplace of material creation."

Awe was in Ezra's faded old eyes. "And you found that? And never told—never let anyone guess—"

"Garrand guessed," Curt said bitterly. "He connected our work at Mercury with our mysterious voyage. He tried to learn what I knew and when I would tell him nothing he came to the Moon and risked death to steal our records. And now he's gone to find it for himself."

Simon Wright said somberly, "He will only reap disaster if he tries to take it. I saw what almost happened there to *you*, Curtis."

"It's my fault," Curt said harshly. "We should have left no record. But I could not quite destroy it." He paused, then went on rapidly. "We've got to overtake him. What the other man, Herrick, may have in mind we can't tell. But Garrand is a fanatical researcher, who will tamper with the instruments of the Watchers as I did. He won't stop where I stopped!"

Ezra jumped to his feet. "I can have cruisers after him in an hour."

"They couldn't catch him now, Ezra. The *Comet* might. We'll have to make certain preparations and they'll take time. But even so we may catch him."

He turned, moving swiftly toward the door as though physical action were a relief from overpowering tension. Ezra stopped him. "Curt, wait! Let me go with you. I should, you know, if it's a case of catching a lawbreaker."

Newton looked at him. "No, Ezra. You're only trapped by the lure of this thing as I was. As I was . . . No."

Simon's metallic voice intervened. "Let him go with us, Curtis. I think we might need him—that *you* might need him."

A look passed between them. Then,

silently, Curt nodded.

Back to the Moon, with five instead of four, went the *Comet* on wings of flame. In the hours that followed, the closed hangar-doors in silent Tycho gave no hint of the desperate rushed activity beneath.

But less than twenty-four hours after its return from Uranus the ship left the Moon a second time. It went out through the planetary orbits like a flying prisoner breaking out through bars, poised for a moment beyond Pluto to shift into a new kind of motion, then was gone into the outer darkness.

CHAPTER III

The Birthplace

THE *Comet* was a fleck, a mote, a tiny gleam of man-made light falling into infinity. Behind it, lost somewhere along the farthest shores of a lightless sea, lay Earth and Sol and the outposts of familiar stars. Ahead was the great wilderness of Sagittarius, the teeming star-jungle that to the eye seemed crowded thick with burning Suns and nebulae.

The five within the ship were silent. Four were busy with the memories they had of the time they had come this way before, with the knowledge of what was still to be encountered. One, Ezra Gurney, could find no words to speak. He was a veteran spaceman. He had been a veteran when Curt Newton was born. He knew the Solar System from Pluto to Mercury and back again and he knew how the naked undimmed stars could shine.

But this was different—this voyaging of deepest space, this pursuing of the fleets and navies of the stars to their own harbor, this going in among them. In a way Ezra Gurney was afraid. No man, not even Curt Newton, could look at that flaming sky ahead and not be a

little afraid.

The *Comet* had come into the region of the great clusters. Mighty hives of gathered Suns blazed and swarmed, rolling across space and time, carrying after them sweeping trains of scattered stars. Between and beyond the clusters and their trailing star-streams shone the glowing clouds of nebulae, banners of light flung out for a million miles across the firmament, ablaze with the glow of drowned and captured Suns. And beyond them all—the nebulae, the clusters and the stars—there showed the black brooding lightless immensity of a cloud of cosmic dust.

The soul of Ezra Gurney shook within him. Men had no business here in this battleground of angry gods. Men? But was he here with men?

"One-point-four degrees zenith," came the metallic voice of Simon Wright from where he hovered above a bulky instrument.

"Check," Curt Newton said and moved controls slightly. Then he asked, "Dust?"

"Definitely higher than average interstellar density now," Otho reported, from his own place at the wide instrument panel. "It'll thicken fast as we approach the main cloud."

Ezra looked at them—at the square, hovering metal case of the living brain, at the lithe eager android peering forward into the abyss with burning green eyes, at the giant imperturbable metal bulk of the robot.

Not men, no! He was out here in the great deeps, rushing toward the mightiest secret of infinity, with creatures unhuman, with—

Curt turned, and smiled briefly and wearily at him. And the clamoring panic in Ezra was suddenly gone. Why, these were his oldest staunchest friends, unshakably loyal and true.

He drew a long breath. "I don't mind telling you that it's nearly got me down."

"You've got worse coming," Curt said uncomfortingly. "We'll hit the main cloud soon."

"The cloud?"

"The great cloud of cosmic dust that surrounds the Birthplace. That dust is born from the Birthplace—and flows out in mighty tides through our whole universe."

"To be born into new worlds?"

"Yes. Weizsacker fathomed that part of the cycle, long ago in the nineteen forties when he formulated his theory of the gathering of the cosmic dust into new planets."

Before them now rose a wall of Suns, glaring like cyclopean furnaces as the *Comet* seemingly crawled toward them. Almost it seemed that they could hear the clang and thunder of cosmic forges as their tiny craft approached and went between the flaming giants.

White and wild flared a far-flung nebula to the left beyond that rampart of stars. But ahead there gloomed farther still the black cloud that now seemed eating up the universe with jaws of darkness as they steadily approached it.

"No sign of any other ship outside the cloud," Otho reported coolly. "Our detectors won't range inside it, of course."

"They had too big a start," Curt said broodingly. "Too many days. Garrand and the other must already have been on the world of the Watchers for some time."

"Unless the whirls wrecked them," Otho suggested.

"Wishful thinking," Curt said. "We ran the whirls and so could they."

Simon said, "Curtis, you will not go into the shrine of the Watchers again?"

Curt Newton did not look at him. "I'll have to if that's where Garrand is."

"You don't have to, Curtis. We three could go."

NOW, Curt looked at Simon, his tanned face set and unreadable. "You don't trust me with the power of the Watchers?"

"You know what that power almost did to you before. It is for you to say."

Curt looked ahead and said doggedly,

"I am not afraid and I will go in there after him."

Ezra Gurney, puzzled by the tension between them, asked, "Who are the Watchers?"

"They have been dead for ages," Curt said slowly. "But long ago they penetrated the Birthplace and conquered its secret and set up instruments to wield its powers. It's why we have come. Gar-rand must not use those instruments."

"Nobody must use them," said Simon.

Curt said nothing to that.

Gurney, looking ahead, saw the black cloud widening out across the starry universe like a great tide of doom, steadily blotting out the stars. A fitting cosmic shroud for the greatest of cosmic secrets, he thought. Its fringes engulfed bright stars that shone wanly through the dimness like dying eyes.

"This dust," said Simon, "is newborn matter, spawned by the Birthplace and pumped outward by pressure of radiation to flow out to the whole universe."

"And the—the secret itself—is inside?"

"Yes."

There was no moment when the *Comet* plunged suddenly within the cloud. Rather the dust thickened steadily until all about the flying ship was a deepening haze, deepest and darkest ahead but drawing more and more veils behind them so that the stars back there shone like smothered witch-fires.

The ship began to tremble as it encountered flowing spatial currents of denser dust. Struts and girders protested with slight creakings and then more loudly. They strapped into the recoil-chairs at Curt's orders.

"Here it comes," said Grag in loud complaint. "I remember last time almost every bone in my body was broken."

Otho laughed. He started a caustic retort but had no time to voice it.

To Gurney the *Comet* seemed suddenly to have crashed. The tell-tales on the panel went crazy and the recoil-chairs screamed in outrage as the ship was

batted through the haze by unseen giant hands.

There was nothing they could do but hang on. There was nothing even for Curt to do. The automatic pilot and stabilizers had to do it all now or they were finished.

The mechanisms functioned staunchly. Again and again they snatched the buffeted little ship out of raging eddies of dust-currents and hurled it forward again. Now the whole hull was creaking and groaning from constantly changing stresses and the hiss of dust against its plates became a rising and falling roar.

Ezra Gurney felt a quaking dread. He had already seen too much, had come too far. Now he felt that a universe become sentient and hostile was wrathfully repelling them from its hidden heart, from its supreme secret.

The *Comet* fought forward, relentlessly impelled by its own mechanical brains, until the dust began to thin. It tore onward, still buffeted by swirling currents and drenched by radiation. And now, ahead, Ezra saw a vast hazy space inside the denser blackness of the cloud. And far away in this inner space, looming in vague gigantic splendor . . .

"Good God!" said Ezra Gurney and it was a prayer. "Then that—that . . ."

Curt Newton's eyes were alight with a strange glow. "Yes—the Birthplace."

The hazy space within the denser cloud was vast. And at its center bulked and gleamed and shifted an enigmatic glory—a colossal spinning spiral of white radiance. Its whirling arms spanned millions of miles and it uttered cosmic lightnings of radiation that lanced out through the haze.

Beating heart of the universe, fiery womb that spawned the stuff of worlds, awesome epicenter of cosmos! Cloaked and shrouded by the dense black cloud of its own making, safe behind its ramparts of terrible whirlpools and the wild tide-runs of untamed matter fresh from creation, it flamed across its millions of miles of space, shaped like a spiral

nebula, spinning, whirling, sending forth its seed to the farthest corners of the galaxy.

And to Ezra Gurney, cowering in his seat and staring at that far-off misty glory, it seemed that the eyes of men were not meant to see nor their minds to comprehend this shining Birthplace. "Surely," he whispered, "surely we're not going into *that!*"

Curt Newton nodded. He had still that strange look in his eyes, a look almost mystic, as though he could see beyond the wonder and the glory of the Birthplace to its innermost secret heart and glimpse there the hidden laws by which it worked and carried out its destiny.

"Yes," said Curt, "we're going in." He leaned forward over the controls, his face bathed in the misty radiance so that it seemed not his familiar face at all but the countenance of a being half god-like with the strange light flickering in his eyes.

"You see how it is, Ezra?" he asked. "How it spins like a great centrifuge, sucking in the spent energy of Suns and whirling it in currents of incalculable strength until, in some utterly undreamable way, the energy coagulates into electrons and protons which are thrown off in never-ending streams from the rim of the vortex.

"They form the shining haze that fills this hollow around the Birthplace. Then, farther out, they unite to form the atoms of cosmic dust. The pressure of radiation forces them on across the galaxy. And out of them new worlds are made."

Ezra Gurney shivered. He did not speak.

"Curtis!" Simon's voice was loud with a kind of warning and Curt Newton started, leaning back in his seat and turning again to the controls of the *Comet*. His face had tightened and his eyes were veiled.

cloud. And swift as its flight was it seemed only to creep slowly, slowly, toward the misty wheel of radiance. Pale witch-fires danced along its hull, growing brighter until the metal was enwrapped in veils of flame, tenuous, cold and having about them an eerie quality of life. The *Comet* was double-shielded against the radiation but even so Ezra Gurney could feel the echoes of that terrible force in his own flesh.

The flaming arms of the Birthplace reached wider and wider across space. The radiance deepened, became a supernatural brilliance that seared the finching eyeballs. The ship began to be shaken now and again by subtle tremors as the farthest edges of out-thrown currents touched it and passed by.

Ezra shut his teeth hard to keep from screaming. He had been driven once too close to the Sun and he had looked hard into the depths of the atomic furnace that was about to swallow him. He had not then known one tenth of the fear that he knew now.

Slitting his eyes against the glare he could make out the central sphere from which the spiral arms curved out, a gigantic vortex of flaming force, the wheel-hub of the galaxy. The *Comet* was plunging straight toward it and there was nothing he could do to stop it, nothing . . .

Curt sent the ship driving in between two of the sweeping arms. Tidal-waves, torrents of energy picked them up and flung them, a leaf in the cosmic mill-race, toward the grip of a curving arm that burned and seethed with all the ultimate fires of hell. And Curt fought the controls and tore away again, heading in, heading in . . .

The central sphere of force loomed up like a wall of flame higher than all the skies of space, and then they were in it.

It was as though a million Suns had exploded. The force and fire took the *Comet* and whirled it tumbling away through a blind and terrible violence. Ezra sagged half-conscious in his seat and he thought that he had come a long,

AND the ship sped on across that vast hollow in the heart of the dark

long way to die. No ship, no body, could live for long in this.

The forces of the cosmic centrifuge would tear their substance, powder it to atoms and then still down into the fine raw stuff of atoms, send it out to join with the black dust, to begin the timeless pilgrimage across the empty spaces, to be built at last into the foundations of some new world to circle an alien Sun. Human, robot and android, they would all be one in the end.

The *Comet* crashed suddenly clear of that hellish tempest of light and force into quiet space. Into a space enclosed by the spinning central sphere of the Birthplace itself, a calm at the very center of cosmic storm.

Dazzled, half-stunned, Ezra heard Simon saying, "In here at the center is only one world—the world of the Watchers, where—"

Curt Newton, leaning forward, interrupted with a strange low cry.

"Simon, look! *Look!* There are other worlds here now—worlds and Suns and —" His voice seemed strangled by a surprise and terror too great for utterance.

Ezra strained desperately to regain use of his dazzled eyes. As they began to clear he too peered tautly forward. At first what he saw did not seem so terrifying. Here, in the wide calm space at the heart of the Birthplace, there was a cluster of Suns and planets.

Ruby Suns, flaring like new blood, green and white and somber smoky-gold Suns! Planets and moons that circled the changing Suns in sweeping trains, themselves ever changing! Comets that shot in living light between the worlds, meteor swarms rushing and wheeling, an astronomical phantasmagoria enclosed within this comparatively little space!

"You said there were no worlds but one here," Ezra began, bewildered.

"There *were* none." Curt's face was deathly, and something in it struck at Ezra's heart. "There were none but that little blue world—that alone."

Ezra glimpsed it at the center of the strange, close-packed cluster—a little blue planet that was a geometrically perfect sphere.

"The powers of the Watchers are there—the instruments by which they could tap the Birthplace itself," Curt was saying hoarsely. "And Garrand has been there with those instruments for days."

A comprehension so monstrous that his mind recoiled from it came to Ezra Gurney. "You mean that Garrand . . ."

He could not finish, could not say it. It was not a thing that could be said in any sane universe.

Curt Newton said it. "Garrand, by tapping the Birthplace, has *created* the Suns and worlds and comets and meteors of that cluster. He has fallen victim to the old allurements, the strongest in the universe."

"As you almost fell victim once!" Simon Wright warned.

"Can a man make worlds?" Ezra felt shaken and sick inside. "Curt, no—this thing—"

"One who can harness the Birthplace can create at will!" Curt exclaimed. "And the instruments of the Watchers *do* harness it!"

A kind of madness had come over him. Under his hands the *Comet* leaped forward at terrible speed. Ezra heard him talking, whether to the others or himself he never knew.

"There is a balance of forces—always a balance! It cannot be tampered with too much. The Watchers left a warning, a plain and dreadful warning."

The ship rushed forward toward the distant small blue world, careening wildly through the unholy stars and worlds and comets whose creation had blasphemed against the natural universe.

NEXT ISSUE

THE WOMAN FROM ALTAIR

A Novelet by LEIGH BRACKETT

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER IV

Power of the Watchers

THE blue world shimmered in the light of the monstrous aurora, a perfect jewel, with no height of mountain nor roughness of natural growth to mar its symmetry. Its surface showed a gloss that made Ezra think of porcelain or the deep gleam of polished lapis.

"The Watchers made it long ago," said Curt. "They made it out of the forces of the Birthplace and it was their outpost in this universe, where they studied the secrets of creation. There exists a city . . ."

The *Comet* sped low across the curving plain. For a time there was nothing but the blank expanse of blue—what was it, glass or rock or jewel-stone or some substance new in the universe? Above them the little suns with their planets wheeled and shone, laced about with the fire of comets, and above those again was the golden sky of the Birthplace. Curt's face, bent forward toward the blue horizon, was intense and pale and somehow alien.

"There it is!" cried Otho, and Curt nodded. Ahead there were the tips of slender spires flashing in the light and a gleam and glow of faceted surfaces that made a web of radiance like the aura sometimes seen in dreams. The spires lifted into graceful height, shaped themselves into the form of a city.

Walls of the same translucent blue enclosed the towers and in the center, rising high above them all, there was a citadel, a cathedral-form as massive and as delicate as the castles that sometimes stand upon the tops of clouds on Earth. And it was dead, the blue and graceful city. The walls, the streets, the flying arches that spanned the upper levels of the towers, all were silent and deserted.

"Garrand's ship," said Curt and Ezra saw it on the plain before the city, an

ugly dark intruder on this world that had not been made for men.

Curt set the *Comet* down beside it. There was air on this planet, for the Watchers had been oxygen-breathers even though they were not human. The lock of Garrand's ship stood open but there was no life nor movement that Curt could see.

"It seems deserted," he said, "but we'd better make sure."

Ezra roused himself. He went out with the others and somehow the mere act of moving and the possibility of facing a human and comprehensible danger was a relief, almost a pleasure. He walked beside Curt with Otho beyond him. Their boots slipped and rang on the glassy surface. Apart from that there was no sound. The city brooded and was still.

They went through the open airlock into the other ship. There did not seem to be anything to fear, but they moved with the caution of long habit. Ezra found that he was waiting, hoping for action, for attack. He needed some escape valve for the terrors that had grown within him during this flight into the heart of the universe. But the narrow corridors were empty and nothing stirred behind the bulkhead doors.

Then, in the main cabin, they found a man.

He was sitting on the padded bench formed by the tops of the lockers along one wall. He did not move when they came in except to lift his head and look at them. He was a big man, of a breed that Ezra Gurney knew very well, having fought them all his life across the Solar System. But the hardness had gone out of him now. The strong lines of his face had sagged and softened and his eyes held only hopelessness and fear. He had been drinking but he was not drunk.

"You're too late," he said. "Way too late."

Curt went and stood before him. "You're Herrick," he said. "Are you alone?"

"Oh, yes," said Herrick. "I'm alone. There were Sperry and Forbin but they're dead now." Herrick had not shaved for some time. The black stubble on his jaw was flecked with white. He ran his hand across it and his fingers trembled. "I wouldn't be here now," he said, "but I couldn't run the whirls alone. I couldn't take this ship clear back to Earth alone. I couldn't do anything but sit and wait."

Curt said, "Where's Garrand?"

Herrick laughed. It was not pleasant laughter. "You know where he is. Go in and get him. Make him come out. That's how Sperry and Forbin died, trying to make him. I don't know why I'm alive myself. I don't know if I want to be alive after what I've seen."

HE GOT up. It was hard for him to rise, hard to stand. It was as though fear had eaten the bones away inside him, dissolved the strength from his muscles, leaving him only a hulk, a receptacle for terror. His eyes burned at them.

"You know me," he said. "You know my kind. You can guess why I came with Garrand to get the secret of the Birthplace, what I was going to do with it afterward. I didn't figure Garrand would get in my way. I needed his brains, all right, but there would come a time when I wouldn't need them anymore." He made a gesture, as of brushing away an insect with his hand. "As easy as that." He began to laugh again and it was more weeping than laughter.

"Stop it!" said Curt and Herrick stopped quite obediently. He looked at Curt as though a thought had just come to him, creeping through the fear-webs that shrouded his brain.

"You can get me out of here," he said. There was no threat in his voice, only pleading, the voice of a man caught in quicksand and crying for release. "It's no use going after Garrand. He'll die in there anyway. He won't eat or sleep, he's gone beyond those things, but whatever he thinks he is he's human and he'll

die. Just go! Take me aboard your ship and go!"

"No," said Curt.

Herrick sat down again on the bench. "No," he whispered. "You wouldn't. You're as mad as he is."

Simon said, "Curtis . . ."

He had remained in the shadowy background, listening, but now he came forward and spoke and Curt turned on him.

"No!" he said again. "I can't go away and leave a madman there to play with the forces of the Birthplace till he dies!"

Simon was silent for a time and then he said slowly, "There is truth in what you say but only part of it. And I am sorry, Curtis—for I am no more proof against this madness than you. Even less, perhaps, than you.

"I shall stay out here with Grag to guard the ships and Herrick." His lens-like eyes turned upon Ezra Gurney. "I think that you, of all of us, will resist the lure most strongly. You are like Herrick, a man of your hands—and Herrick, who came to steal the secret, felt only terror when he found it."

He said no more but Ezra knew what he meant. Simon was giving Curt Newton into his hands to save him from some destruction which Ezra did not understand. There was a coldness around Ezra's heart and a sickness in his belly and in his mind a great wish that he had never left Earth.

Curt said to Herrick, "Go to my ship and wait. When we leave you'll go with us."

Herrick shook his head. His eyes lifted slowly to Curt Newton's and dropped again. He said, "You'll never leave."

Ezra left the ship with Curt and Otho and he was sorry that Herrick had said those last three words.

They walked again across the ringing glassy plain, this time toward the city wall and the tall gateway that was in it. The leaves of the portal stood open and there was a look about them as though they had not been touched or closed for more ages than Ezra could think about. He and Otho passed through them, fol-

lowing Curt. Beyond, at a little distance, were two dark statues facing each other across the way. Ezra looked at them and caught his breath in sharply.

"The Watchers?" he whispered. "Were they like that? But what were they then?"

Otho said, "They came from another universe. Simon thought they must have been liquescent from the formless structure of their bodies."

Out of each amorphous figure stared two round yellow eyes, full of light from the glowing sky and uncannily lifelike. Ezra shuddered and hurried by, glancing as he did so at the strangely inscribed letters upon the bases of the statues. He assumed that that was the warning Curt had referred to and he did not want to enquire too closely into it.

"Go quietly," Curt said. "Two men have already died here. We want to get as close to Garrand as we can before he knows we're here."

"Where is he?" demanded Ezra for the city was utterly dead and still. Curt pointed to the citadel.

"In there."

They made their way as silently as they could along the blue translucent street. High above them the slender spires made soft bell-notes where the wind touched them and the crystal spans thrummed like muted harps. And the shimmering castle loomed close before them and the strange stars sparkled in the golden sky. Ezra Gurney was afraid.

There was a portal, tall and simply made, with an unknown symbol cut above it. They passed it, treading softly, and stood within a vast cathedral vault that soared upward until the tops of the walls were lost in a golden haze and Ezra realized that it was open to the sky.

The floor was of the same blue substance as the city and in the center of it, under the open vault, was a massive oblong block almost like a gigantic altar except that its top was set with hundreds of little, shining kegs. Beside this block stood Garrand. He was not look-

ing at it nor at the two men and the android who had entered. He was looking upward into that distant sky and through the opening Ezra could see the glittering of stars. Garrand was smiling.

Curt Newton walked out across the floor.

"Don't come any closer," said Garrand mildly. "Just where you are—that's close enough."

Curt stopped. Otho had begun to edge away along the curve of the wall very slowly, like a drifting shadow. Ezra stood a little behind Curt and to one side.

GARRAND turned toward them and for the first time Ezra saw his face quite clearly. Unshaven and deathly white, its cheeks and temples sunken with hunger and exhaustion, its eyes dark and burning, there was a beauty about it that had never been there before, something sublime and glorious and calm, as a sea is calm or a frozen river, with the potentials of destruction sleeping in it. And Ezra understood the danger that Simon had spoken of in regard to Curt. He understood now what the power that was here could do to a man.

"So, after all, you followed me," Garrand said. "Well, it doesn't matter now." He stepped behind the block that was like an altar, so that it was between him and Curt.

Curt said quietly, "You must leave here, Garrand. You'll have to leave some time, you know. You're only human."

"Am I?" Garrand laughed. His hand lightly caressed the bank of little shining kegs. "Am I? I was once. I was a little physicist who thought adding to scientific knowledge supremely important and I stole and risked my life to come here for more knowledge." His eyes lit up. "I came searching for a scientific secret and I found the source of godhead!"

"So now, because you've tampered with the Watchers' powers and tapped the Birthplace, you're a god?" Curt's

tone was ironic but Ezra could see the sweat standing out on his forehead.

Garrand took no offence. He was armored by an egocentric emotion so great that he merely smiled wearily and said, "You can go now—all of you. I dislike chattering. I dislike it so much that I will quite willingly call destruction in here to engulf you unless you go."

His fingers had ceased straying, had come to rest on certain keys. Ezra Gurney felt a slow freezing of his flesh. He whispered hoarsely, "You'll have to kill him, Curt."

He knew the swiftness with which Newton could draw and fire the weapon at his belt. But Curt made no move.

"Can I fire into that bank of controls?" Curt muttered. "Otho's speed is our only chance."

He flung up his hand, his fingers crooked. He said loudly, "Garrand, I warn you—"

His gesture had been both a feint to draw attention, a signal. A signal that sent Otho lunging toward the oblong altar.

The phenomenal swiftness of the android, the reaction speed of nerves and muscles that were not human, made Otho's movement almost blurring to the eye. But Garrand saw and with a low cry he pressed the keys.

To Ezra, in the next moment, the air around them seemed suddenly charged with power. The golden haze spun about him, darkened, thickened, all in a heartbeat. He felt the imminent materialization of an agency of destruction drawn from the great matrix of force about them.

He glimpsed through the thickening haze Otho pulling Garrand back from the altar. He saw Curt leaping in, his face desperate and raising the depressed keys.

And Ezra felt the half-materialized shadowy force around him melting back into nothingness. "What—" he stammered, still standing frozen.

"Death," said Curt. "As to the form of it who knows but Garrand? Anyway,

it's over now." His voice was unsteady and his hands shook on the keys. He looked down. Garrand had gone limp in Otho's arms. Ezra thought at first that he was dead and then he saw the shallow breathing, the faint twitching of the mouth.

"Hunger and exhaustion," said Curt. "Strain. He was already at the end of his rope. Get him back to the ship, Otho, and have Simon take care of him."

Otho lifted the unconscious man without effort but he did not yet move away. "Aren't you coming, Curt?"

"Not yet." He glanced upward through the opening at the brilliant stars that swarmed where no stars ought to be. "I can't leave this imbalance at the heart of the Birthplace. The Watchers were careful about that. They built their one small planet at the exact center of stress, where it wouldn't upset anything. But those creations of Garrand's—I don't dare leave them here, Otho."

Still Otho did not move and Curt said, "Go on, Otho. Garrand needs help."

SLOWLY and reluctantly the android turned and as he did so he looked at Ezra, a look of warning, a pleading look. Then he went out, carrying Garrand.

Curt Newton bent over the keys. "I haven't forgotten," he whispered to himself. "How could anyone ever forget?" He touched the gleaming keys, not pressing them, just touching them lightly and feeling the power that was in them, the unimaginable control of matter.

Ezra said hoarsely, "What are you going to do?"

Curt looked upward to where the little suns swam in the golden haze, the little suns that could create havoc in this cosmic womb where only the seed of matter belonged.

"Watch," he said. "I am going to dissolve what Garrand created."

Ezra watched. Slowly, carefully, Curt pressed a certain pattern on the keys and around a ruby star waves and bands of golden force began to flicker like faint auroras. They grew and strength-

ened and became streams of raw electrons, pouring their substance into the little Sun.

Ezra shielded his eyes, but not soon enough. The star had become a nova, but without the second, the collapsed stage of novas. The fury of electronic force launched upon it from outside in this universal vortex of such forces had swept away each fragment of the exploding atoms to return them to the parent cloud.

The ruby star had ceased to exist and its worlds had vanished with it.

Swifter now, more surely, Curt's hands flashed across the keys. And Ezra Gurney cowered beside the altar, blinded, stunned, shaken by the savage explosions of far-distant matter, riven and burst apart.

How long he crouched there while the great lights flared in the sky and the cosmic hammers beat he never knew. But there came a time when everything was still and he looked up and saw Curt standing there with his hands motionless on the keys and his head strained back so that he could search the farthest reaches of the sky.

He spoke and Curt did not answer. He touched him and spoke again, and it was like speaking to a statue except that under his fingers he could feel the subtle tremors of Curt's hard flesh, the taut quivering.

"*Curt!*" he cried out. And Curt very slowly lowered his head and looked at him with a kind of amazement in his eyes, as though he had forgotten Ezra Gurney.

"Is it finished, Curt?"

"Yes. It's finished."

"Then come away."

Newton's gaze, the unfamiliar gaze that did not see small things like men but looked on larger distances, slipped away to the banks of keys and upward to the sky again.

"In a moment," he said. "In just a moment."

Two red bars burned across the bones of his cheeks and the rest of his face

was like marble. Ezra saw in it the beginning of the exaltation, the terrible beauty that had marked the face of Garrand. Curt smiled and the sinews of his hands moved delicately as he stroked his fingers across the keys.

"The worlds that I could make," he whispered. "Garrand was only a little man. I could create things he never dreamed of."

"*Curt!*" cried Ezra in a panic. "Come away!" But his voice was swallowed up in dreams and Curt whispered very softly, "I wouldn't keep them. I would dissolve them afterward. But I could create . . ."

His fingers were forming a pattern on the keys. Ezra looked down at his gnarled old hands and knew that they were not strong enough. He looked at his gun and knew that he could not use it in any way. Searching desperately for a way to pierce through the dreams he cried, "Could you create another Earth?"

For awhile he was not sure that Curt had heard him, not sure but that he was beyond hearing. Then a vaguely startled look came into Curt's eyes and he said, "What?"

"Could you create another Earth, Curt? Could you put the mountains and the seas together and build the cities and fill them with men and women and the voices of children? Could you create another Otho or Grag or Simon?"

Curt slowly looked down at his fingers, curved and hungry on the waiting keys, and a kind of horror flashed across his face. He snatched his hands away and spun around, turning his back to the altar. He looked sick, and shamed, but the dreams were no longer shadowing his face, and Ezra began to breathe again.

"Thanks, Ezra," he said hoarsely. "Now let's go. Let's go, while I can."

THE black cloud lay behind them and the *Comet* fled away from it like a frightened thing, back through the great blazing clusters of Suns that had now

no terrors for them. Curt Newton sat silently at the controls and his face was so brooding that Ezra Gurney did not venture to speak.

Ezra looked ahead because he did not want to look back into the main cabin. He knew that what Simon was doing there was perfectly harmless and utterly necessary but there was something so uncanny about it that he did not want to see it being done.

He had looked in once and seen Simon hovering over the strange projector that Grag and Otho had rigged above the heads of the drugged unconscious Garrand and Herrick. He had come away from there quickly.

He sat unspeaking beside Curt, watching the great clusters wheel slowly past them until at last Simon Wright came gliding into the control-room.

"It is done," said Simon. "Garrand and Herrick will not wake for many hours. When they do they won't remember."

Curt looked at him. "You're sure that you expunged every memory of the Birthplace?"

"Absolutely sure. I used the scanner to block every memory-path on that subject—and checked by questioning them hypnotically. They know nothing of the Birthplace. You'll have to have a story ready for them."

Curt nodded. "We picked them up out here in deep space when their ship cracked up in cosmic ray research. That fits the circumstances—they'll never doubt it."

Ezra shivered a little. Even now the blocking of part of a man's memories, the taking away forever of a bit of his experience, seemed an eerie thing to do.

Curt Newton saw his shiver and understood it. He said, "It doesn't harm them, Ezra—and it's necessary."

"Very necessary, if the secret of the Birthplace is not to get out again," said Simon.

There was a little silence among them and the ship crawled on and on through the cosmic glare and gloom. Ezra saw

that the somber shadow on Newton's face deepened as he looked out through the wilderness of Suns and nebulae toward the far, far spark of Sol.

"But someday," Curt said slowly, "someday not too far in the future, many men will be pushing out through these spaces. They'll find the Birthplace sooner or later. And then what?"

Simon said, "We will not be here when that happens."

"But they'll do it. And what will happen when they do?"

Simon had no answer for that nor had Ezra Gurney. And Curt spoke again, his voice heavy with foreboding.

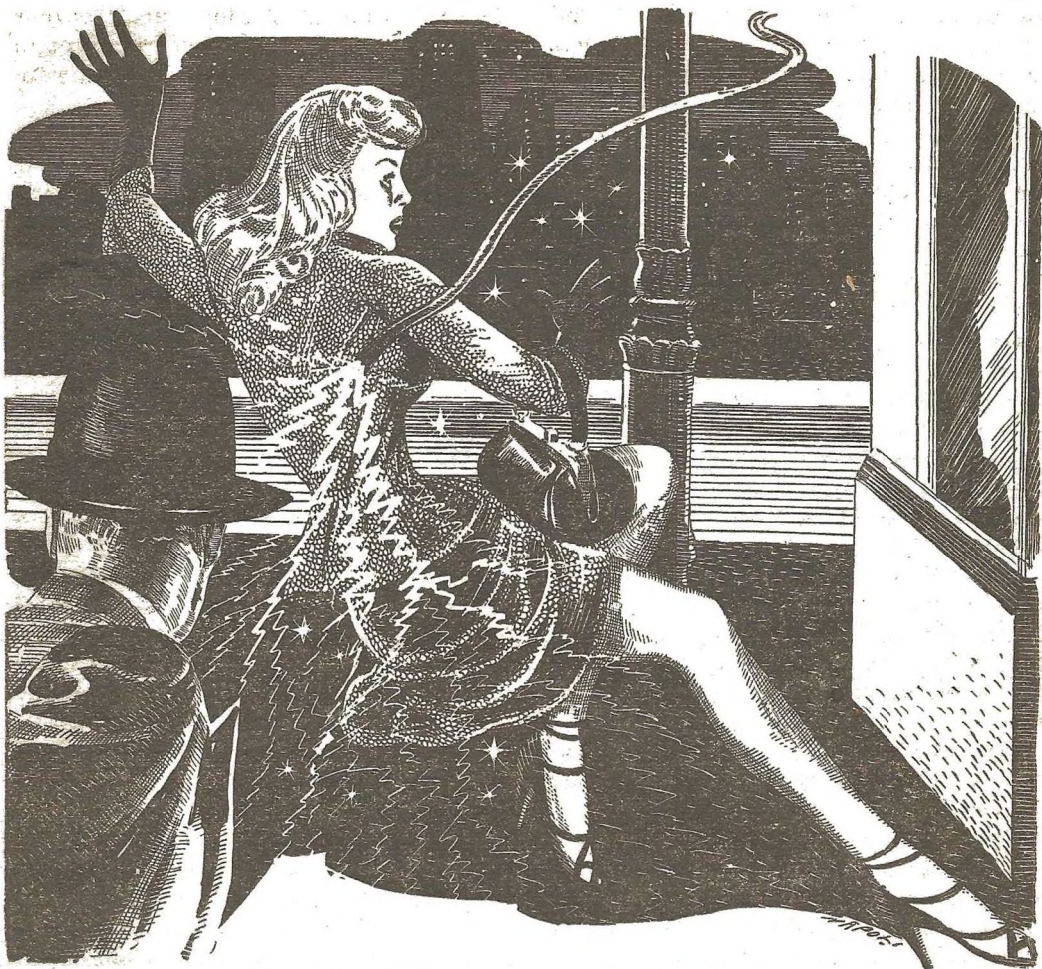
"I have sometimes thought that life, human life, intelligent life, is merely a deadly agent by which a stellar system achieves its own doom in a cosmic cycle far vaster and stranger than anyone has dreamed. For see—stars and planets are born from primal nothingness and they cool and the cooling worlds spawn life and life grows to ever higher levels of intelligence and power until . . ."

There was an ironical twist to Curt's lips as he paused and then went on ". . . until the life of that world becomes intelligent enough to tap the energies of the cosmos! When that happens is it inevitable that fallible mortals should use those energies so disastrously that they finally destroy their own worlds and stars? Are life and intelligence merely a lethal seed planted in each universe, a seed that must inevitably destroy that universe?"

Simon said slowly, "That is a terrible thought, Curtis. But I deny its inevitability. Long ago the Watchers found the Birthplace, yet they did not try to use its powers."

"We are not like the Watchers, we men," Curt said bitterly. "You saw what it did to Garrand and to me."

"I know," said Simon. "But perhaps men will be as wise as the Watchers were by the time they find the Birthplace. Perhaps they too will then be powerful enough to renounce power. We can only hope."



The broken strand of an electric cable swept downward

A Taxable Dimension

By SAMUEL MINES

If you want to make money, or want it made for you—keep your eyes open for the torn-out lining of an old tweed jacket!

DAVID HACKETT strolled down Center Street without a care in the world. Well, hardly, that is—there was the perpetual care of stretching a seventy-five dollar salary out of all

recognition each week, but this was a chronic worry he had grown so used to, he could almost disregard it. For all practical purposes David Hackett, aspiring commercial artist, was happy and

reasonably carefree.

He eyed, with more than professional interest a very callipygous girl walking just ahead of him. Some people get from place to place by walking—their movements are locomotion, nothing more. This girl's movements were a swaying symphony of motion, an enchantment of grace.

She was tall, stunningly shaped—with a wealth of lustrous brown hair cascading smoothly to her shoulders. He made bets with himself that if she turned around she would be (a) stunningly beautiful (b) possessed of a face that would stop clocks and crack mirrors.

Because he was looking at her he saw the whole accident from the beginning, though it happened in that part of a second it might take to draw a breath.

From somewhere overhead the broken end of an electric cable swept downward, spitting and crackling with the furious voltages pent up in it. The frayed end seemed barely to brush the girl, yet it swept her from her feet with a sound like ten thousand frying pans sputtering.

The next instant she was crumpled on the pavement, the live wire writhing and hissing beside her like some monstrous python. Blue sparks were leaping and crawling everywhere.

Someone screamed piercingly and in Dave Hackett's suddenly foreshortened vision the crowd bulked like a distant wall as people stopped, crowded, ran on the sidewalks. But his own reflexes operated instantly without giving him time to think.

He tore off his coat and holding it in his hands ran forward at a crouch. Voices shouted warningly but they conveyed no meaning. With clothmantled hands he dived at the writhing murderous snake, snatched it and gave it a strong yank to pull it free of the girl's body.

IT struggled as though it were alive. A warning dart of convulsive tremors shot through his arms. But the cable

came away from the girl's body. As the broken end swung through the air a five-foot stream of vicious blue flame leaped from it to some unseen metallic object in the sidewalk. The arc held like a bolt of lightning, jagged, each point tipped with flaring blue-and-yellow flames.

Hackett felt every hair on his head strain to stand straight up. The smell of ozone leaped upon him like sudden fog and the very air seemed to shimmer and distort in the power of the electric field. Then abruptly the arc broke with a hiss and a flare of heat.

He pulled it well away from the girl, let it slide to embrace a hydrant, which received and grounded it. As he swung back again he had time to wonder even then if this were really he, the mild bookish artistic David Hackett, who was acting with such speed and decision.

Nor was he finished yet. The same compulsion was upon him as he charged the crowd, which, safe now, had closed in upon the girl.

"Get back please, get back!" he ordered. And as instinctively as he had assumed command, so unthinkingly they obeyed.

"Give her air!" Hackett commanded, wondering if it were air she needed. He dropped his crumpled coat beside her and knelt down. She was lying partly on one side and he could see her face now. Irreverently he thought he'd have won bet (a). She was beautiful. But was she dead? He could see no flutter of breath and her pallor was frightening.

"I sent for an ambulance, mister," someone in the crowd volunteered.

Good head—an ambulance was needed. But meanwhile, there must be something—He remembered his scout training. Artificial respiration, that was it.

He rolled up his coat, pushed it under her head and turned her over on her stomach. Then he knelt astride her, put a hand on each of the short ribs and began to pump the air in and out

of her lungs.

He was still at it twenty minutes later when the siren of the ambulance cut through the crowd and a white-coated interne shoved his way to the scene. Babbling voices had already told the tale. Without hurry but efficiently he opened his bag and made ready a hypo while the driver brought up the oxygen and relieved Hackett.

"Good man," the interne said, nodding to him. "It was what she needed." He bared an arm, sank home the needle.

"Is—is she dead?" Hackett asked.

The interne shrugged. "Probably. Looks it. Let's see what the shot does for her."

Hackett felt suddenly weary and let down. What a pity for her to be dead now—after all his work.

The interne was busy with his stethoscope. Then he unlimbered himself and motioned to the driver. "Get the stretcher," he said. "We'll load her." To Hackett, as one colleague to another, he confided, "Got a heartbeat. She's not dead yet."

They loaded her onto the stretcher and into the ambulance. The interne was busy with pencil and notebook, then he looked around vaguely. "Anybody here belong to her, want to go along? You?" he jabbed the pencil at Hackett.

The artist started to deny any relationship. Then an impulse seized him. If she lived he had saved her life, so in a way she belonged to him. Why not? "I'll go along," he decided. He picked up his rumpled coat from the sidewalk.

Three hours later it was definitely established that Amy Patterson (she was so identified from a Social Security card and a department store charge account plate in her bag) would live.

She had regained consciousness. Though suffering from shock she had no loss of memory and she spoke to Hackett. "Come back and see me," she whispered, "so I can thank you."

She was very beautiful. Dave Hackett walked out of the hospital on a pink-tinted cloud. He looked down at his

hands, noting for the first time how blistered they were, and laughed aloud. He felt like a kid the night before Christmas. He felt so good that he disregarded his budget and took a cab home. He was tired anyway.

As the vehicle drew up before his door, he retrieved his still unworn and crumpled coat and fished in the inner pocket for his wallet. His groping fingers failed to locate it and his heart dropped suddenly and sickeningly.

He shoved his hand further into the pocket and encountered emptiness. There was no longer any bottom to the pocket, only a torn and gaping hole through which his wallet had obviously escaped!

A lot of thoughts, mostly unpleasant, flashed through Dave Hackett's mind as he sat frozen on the taxi seat with his hand thrust through the hole in the bottom of his pocket. Lunchless days, the shoes he was going to buy, the money he was sending home, the frayed collar of a shirt that needed replacing.

But closer still, far more real and immediate, loomed the face of the taxi driver. These embittered and disillusioned bandits of the streets had heard all the alibis and believed none of them. Dave Hackett's unpugnacious soul cringed at the thought of a noisy public brawl with a hackie who wanted his dough, now, see!

"Oh, Lord," he prayed silently, "if I only had a dollar—just one dollar to pay him off—I wouldn't worry . . ."

His unspoken words trailed off in unbelieving shock.

SOMETHING crisp and fresh crumpled in his fingers. Stiffly, unbelievably, he draw it forth and gazed upon the unmistakable form of a bright new dollar bill.

To say that Dave Hackett was frightened would be something of a masterpiece of understatement. He was paralyzed. He could only sit and stare at Washington's familiar face above the legend: ONE DOLLAR, IN SILVER

PAYABLE TO THE BEARER ON DEMAND.

"Lissen, bud," said the cab driver, "I don't mind you sittin' there if the seat's comfortable but lemme know and I'll start the meter again."

"Oh—uh—" Hackett came to life. He thrust the bill upon the driver, muttered something about keeping the change and fled from the cab up the stairs and into his furnished room.

With the door locked behind him he sat on his bed and tried to overcome his panic. He held up his coat and looked it over carefully.

The inside pocket of a man's coat is fashioned as part of the lining. In Hackett's tussle with the live wire this pocket had been torn and the gaping hole was clearly evident. It was through this hole that the wallet had obviously fallen sometime during the afternoon.

He thrust his hand into the pocket and on down through the hole—and received his second paralyzing shock of the day. His hand did not emerge again into the light!

Dave Hackett dropped the coat as though it had suddenly become red hot. When it fell to the floor he drew up his legs onto the bed and squatted there, cross-legged like a tailor, regarding the treacherous garment morosely. Things, he decided, were getting a little thick.

But he did not lack courage. And there were burning questions to be answered. He picked up the coat again gingerly and subjected it to a minute scrutiny. Nothing seemed changed about it. Even the torn pocket had the look of a normal tear. Yet when he again inserted his hand and moved it slowly down past the point where it should have merged through the hole it did not appear.

Dave Hackett withdrew his fingers and tried to do some thinking. His hand did not come out through the hole so where did it go? Was this strange tear a doorway, an opening into some other space, some other dimension? His college physics was hazy in his mind but

like any well-read American he had picked up a smattering of Einsteinian popularizations of science. Words like "spatial warp" and "fourth dimension" came easily to his lips.

He thought of the colossal electric arc that had leaped around him as he pulled the cable from Amy Patterson's recumbent form, of the way the air around him had seemed to shimmer and distort in the grip of that powerful electrical field.

This coat had been in his hands as he held the cable—presumably then it had been at the very core of the intense field. Had something happened to space at that moment—had he indeed broken through into another dimension with his torn pocket the doorway?

"But why an Arabian Nights dimension?" he puzzled. "Why grant my wishes like the djinn of the lamp?"

On an impulse he thrust his hand into the pocket, deep into that terrifying unknown space and wished aloud for a small white horse eight inches high.

Nothing happened. He felt a little disappointed. Then an idea struck him and he wished for a five-dollar bill.

The crisp touch of paper against his fingers startled him no less than it had before and he snatched his hand away. The bill came with it and fluttered to the floor in tangible proof of its existence, lying there with the honest face of Abe Lincoln regarding him somberly.

"So it works on money," Hackett whispered. "Why only money?"

He had the answer almost as soon as he had asked the question. That's where his wallet had gone—through, into that unknown dimension. Could it be that the beings of that world had found it and for some odd reason of their own were amusing themselves by duplicating the bills found in the wallet?

No, that was fantastic. There was one sure way. He scooped up the bill and his coat and let himself out of the

room. There was still time to make the bank.

He walked boldly into the First National and shoved the five-dollar bill across the window to the teller.

"Could you tell me if this is genuine?" he asked. "Somebody gave it to me and I'm a little suspicious of it."

The teller picked up the bill and examined it. He compared the serial numbers with a list on his desk. Then he slid it back.

"It's perfectly good, sir," he reported.

Hackett walked out of the bank with his head spinning. But a load had been removed from his mind. If the bills were good, wherever they came from, there was no moral inhibition to his spending them freely. And a sudden dazzling vista opened up before him.

WHEN Dave Hackett presented himself at the hospital the next day, he was resplendent in new gray-flannel slacks, forty dollar shoes, a custom shirt and hand painted tie. But he still wore his old coat, which he had merely had brushed and pressed. In a side pocket reposed a new pin-seal wallet, comfortably stuffed with United States currency. And in Dave Hackett's mind was being rehearsed his speech of resignation from his job.

Amy Patterson was sitting up in bed, looking ravishing. "I've been waiting for you," she greeted him. "I was too dizzy yesterday to make sense and I don't remember a thing after the wire hit me. I don't remember talking to you at all. They had to tell me what happened."

"Never depend on hearsay," said Dave, pulling up a chair and reaching for her hand. "Let me tell you what happened . . ."

Amazing how much confidence a new outfit and a few bucks gave a man!

". . . so I was thinking," he rattled on, "looking down at you lying all crumpled on the sidewalk, 'what a waste, what a pity, to kill something as pretty as this.'"

Amy laughed and said, "Go on, I like it."

They got along famously. And by the time Dave Hackett left the room he had another new interest in life.

He made a few further discoveries about the fountain of plenty in his pocket. He could always get the exact amount of money he needed, merely by thinking of it. But no individual bill was ever larger than ten dollars. He tried to remember and he thought there had been nothing larger than a ten in his wallet when it was lost.

Could it have fallen into some strange other-space where it was duplicated endlessly? But that didn't account for the extra-dimensional cashier, who doled him out the exact amount he asked for each time. It was weird. And Dave never got over the scalp-crawling sensation each time he plunged his hand into that torn pocket.

Where was the hand going? What lurid colored monster with three heads and eight arms might not seize his wrist and pull him through, like a man being squeezed through a keyhole? The prospect made him sweat all over and induced a stronger than usual tendency to indulge in Manhattans and side-cars and other stimulating beverages known to bolster shaky spirits.

Amy Patterson was released from the hospital on the third day. Hackett was on hand to bustle about her, solicitous as a mother hen, to bundle her into a cab and conduct her ceremoniously to the small apartment she occupied alone.

"Alone?" he queried. "No family?"

"Oh yes. A father and a mother and a brother. Small-town folk."

"I see. Country girl makes good in big city. At what?"

"Nothing in a big way. Civil Service job. Keeps me eating."

"I'll see you eat," he promised. "You belong to me by tribal law or something."

She wasn't coy. She smiled at him and said, "If you don't mean that you've

still got time to take it back."

"I'll raise my bid," Dave said and reached for her.

He had thought, the first time he had ever seen her, that she was shapely and would be a comfortable armful. He found the reality rather better than the prospect. She was soft and warm and solid and she nestled comfortably in his arms. When he kissed her she kissed back with enthusiasm. It was terrific.

"I quit my job this morning," he announced.

"*Dave!* Why?"

"That crummy little outfit I worked for offered about as much future as a buggy-whip factory. I'm going to free-lance, maybe go in for serious art."

"And what are you going to live on meanwhile? Or should I say 'we'—since you offered to feed me?"

"Oh there'll be no money worries," Hackett said confidently. "I've got all the money I need." He could not resist the temptation to brag a little. "I make these myself," he chuckled, showing her a crisp new five-dollar bill.

She laughed politely as though at a joke she did not understand.

In the weeks that followed Dave Hackett reveled in a new kind of life. Never before had he had the experience of being able to satisfy every possible want or whim. Always the smallest purchase had called for a rapid mental calculation as to whether or not he could afford it. Now money was literally no object.

He might walk past a window and see an expensive jeweled watch that he thought would look pretty on Amy's wrist. The price was \$150. He had merely to slide his hand into the torn pocket of the jacket to which he still clung, despite a growing wardrobe, and fifteen new ten-dollar bills caressed his fingers.

When it came to more expensive articles, like the convertible roadster which came in so handy in his courtship of Amy, the bundle of money became rather bulky. But it was there, which was the main point.

HE gave up his furnished room and found a duplex apartment with a terrace in one of the best apartment hotels, which was so luxurious that it awed him. Amy raised her eyebrows when she saw it and a little troubled frown grew between her brows. But Dave was too excited to notice.

He showered her with gifts, from nylons through flowers to candy. He took her to places he had never thought to see. And he observed with pleasure that her interest in where they went and what they did was always secondary to her interest in him.

"Dave," she asked, "is your family very rich?"

"Poor as church mice," he replied unthinkingly. Then realizing his blunder he tried to cover it. "Except for what I send them of course."

"But where—you didn't make it at your old job from what you tell me?"

"Oh no," he said and floundered. The hundred and one stories he had prepared for this emergency went glimmering as he met her level gaze. "I've got a gold mine," he finished lamely.

"Why is it," she asked, frowning a little, "that you always have these very fresh new bills?"

"Oh, I get 'em that way from the bank. I ask for them. I don't like dirty old money, always ask for new bills."

She didn't press the subject, to his relief. And if the puzzled little frown between her brows stayed there longer and longer Dave was too busy to notice. He was really living and if there were clouds on the horizon, he wisted not and wotted not.

The first serious rumble of thunder came one soft summer evening in July as he came to call for Amy. He had picked up a newspaper and he scanned the headlines as he waited in her living room while she did that last moment primping so dear to the feminine heart. The headline leaped out at him.

COUNTERFEIT BILLS FLOOD CITY

His heart stopped for a moment and

he looked around guiltily to see if Amy were coming. She was not in sight and he devoured the rest of the story.

An unusual quantity of counterfeit bills from \$1 to \$10 have appeared in this city, it was revealed by Treasury officials today. The forgeries are so skillfully executed that banks have been accepting them freely for weeks before it was established that they were actually counterfeit, J. J. Scrivens, district manager of the department announced.

The only error which resulted in their detection is that all bills of the same denomination bear the same serial number. The public is cautioned to watch for one dollar bills with the serial numbers . . .

Dave Hackett looked up, startled, to see Amy standing above him. Her face was drawn and sad with pain.

"You've read it?" she asked.

Two worlds crashed around Dave Hackett's ears. With one went his dream of wealth, his wonderful new life. His wonderful source of money was gone. Never again could he tap that un-failing spring. And with the other world went Amy. She thought him a counterfeiter or worse.

"Amy . . ."

"Dave"—she went on her knees before him, put her arms around him. "Forgive me, darling. I can't help it. I wish I were dead. But I've got to do it."

"Do what?"

She gave him a look full of misery. "To arrest you. I'm the law, Dave." There was a little gold badge in her hand. He could only goggle at it, speechlessly. Automatically he began to shrink away from her as from a viper.

"I didn't know," she said, "when we met. I didn't— Oh, what's the use!" She got up and went to the door. Turning she said, "Dave, you'll probably hate me. But believe me, I love you. If I can help you I will." Then she opened the door and said, "Come in, boys."

Two clean-cut individuals, looking like law clerks or shoe salesman, stepped in. "David Hackett?" said one.

Hackett bobbed his head, his vocal cords paralyzed.

"I'm Floyd Donner of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is Lester

Weinstein of the Treasury Department. Would you mind coming down to the department with us? There's a little matter of currency to discuss with you."

They were more than polite. In a trance Dave Hackett forced his paralyzed limbs to function. Somehow they raised him from the couch. He groped for his hat, found it, tottered to the door. Amy stood to one side, a picture of abject misery. "Dave," she whispered, "I'll be down to see you—later."

THE one thing that was clear in Dave Hackett's mind was that if he ever told these cool and efficient G-Men the simple truth they would pack him off to a psychopathic ward without further ado. Yet what could he tell them? So like any amateur in crime he stumbled and bumbled and made things completely messed-up all around.

"I didn't know this money was counterfeit," he insisted. "The bank told me it was good."

They hammered at him for hours. They brought in a miserable Amy, who avoided his eyes and was forced to testify that every bill Hackett had spent had been this same crisp new issue.

"If you didn't make it where did you get it?"

Dave spread his hands helplessly.

"Look," said Weinstein of the Treasury department. "Did you ever try this experiment with some of your money, Mr. Hackett?" He handed Dave one of the five dollar bills. "Tear it in half."

Listlessly Hackett took the note and started to tear it across. To his astonishment it wouldn't tear. He gripped it firmly, threw his muscles into it. It was as impossible to tear as though it had been a sheet of steel.

He stared at it. To the eye it was nothing but an innocent piece of paper. It crumpled in the hand. But—

"Nobody can tear it," Weinstein said. "And look." He flicked his cigarette lighter into flame, leaned forward and held it under a corner of the bill in Hackett's hand. The flame curled up

around the paper and nothing happened.

"Won't burn either," Weinstein said unnecessarily. "I might also add that it can't be cut with scissors, can't be damaged by acids, sheds dirt and seems to be virtually wearproof."

He clicked his lighter shut and restored it to his pocket. "Hackett, whoever did the counterfeiting on these bills has gone Uncle Sam one better. I venture to say they'd swap a complete pardon for the secret of that paper."

Dave Hackett swallowed. He had the sensation of the mule who sees the carrot dangling ever beyond his reach.

"I—I—" he said. "I didn't make those bills and I don't know the formula for the paper. I'm sorry. I don't know anything!"

They put him in the cooler to think it over. And here Amy came to visit him.

"Dave—Dave darling. Are you angry with me?"

This was a fine piece of understatement, he thought miserably. But no, he wasn't angry with her.

"Dave, I love you. Please, please tell them what you know so you can get out of this mess." She pressed herself against the bars, to get as close to him as she could. "Dave, don't hate me. It's my job. I'll resign. I'll wait for you."

He was touched. She was obviously suffering, obviously sincere.

"Amy. It's all right, darling." He came to the bars so he could kiss her, the cold steel pressing their faces like a reminder. "Amy, I'll tell them the truth—tomorrow. Do me a favor?"

"Anything, darling."

"Go to the apartment and get me my tweed jacket. You know, the old one I always wore?"

"I know. I'll bring it tomorrow. And Dave—"

"Yes, Amy."

"Don't worry. Tell them the truth and you'll see—they're not such bad guys. I'll be there to back you up."

The night was a sleepless and long one for Dave Hackett. At eight o'clock the jailor brought Amy. She carried the

tweed jacket on her arm.

"Here it is, Dave. What did you want it for now?"

"Amy, this jacket is the key to the whole business. It's the only way I can convince them that the crazy story I'm going to tell is the truth. It's the only—*Amy!*"

"What? What is it?"

He had unfolded the jacket as he spoke. To his horror the inside lining appeared smooth and unblemished.

"What happened? This isn't my coat!"

"Yes it is, darling. It was all torn inside, so yesterday before I brought it over I stopped in at the tailors and had a new lining put in."

The case against David Hackett came to nothing after all. Actual proof of counterfeiting could not be established. Possession of counterfeit bills, yes—but the same was true of scores of others in the city.

And the weird story Hackett told, partly backed up by special investigator Patterson, caused such a furore in the department that Weinstein was nearly demoted for saying he believed it. Weinstein's belief was based on the fact that the counterfeit bills were made of a new substance which was indestructible and which defied chemical analysis.

"Maybe Hackett's a liar or a nut," Weinstein said, "but wherever he got this stuff he didn't get it here on Earth."

So David Hackett was put on probation and released and he and Amy were married not long after. He went back to work as an artist for an advertising agency. The Treasury Department collected all the fake bills that could be found and sealed them up in an underground vault.

But somewhere in the city, if it hasn't been cut up for patches, there may yet be a torn lining from a man's coat with the potentialities for throwing the whole Treasury department into a new uproar. If the right person finds it, that is.

THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 6)

get out of our writers and presented so clearly and stirringly that mature readers, new to the field, will not be able to lay them down.

Whether we get them or not will depend, as always, upon whether or not our writers can deliver them—but we shall be looking for them. We want story-telling more along the lines of the current slick magazines, somewhere between the extremes of the Rover Boys and the lecture reports of the British Interplanetary Society. Only by obtaining and running such stories, we believe, will we be fulfilling our function, not solely as an editor but as a promoter of science fiction.

Contrary to widely-espoused current legend, the best pioneers have never been beardless youths. It takes a backlog of experience to meet new and unexpected conditions—as well as a maintained ability to adapt quickly and intelligently to them. It is in this latter fact that youth, through its malleability, can prod its elders most importantly. But pioneer movements have seldom if ever succeeded unless adult imaginations were actively aroused.

Youth alone simply lacks the resources—and the resourcefulness—to carry such movements through. They cannot alone carry the mail or even the famed Message to Garcia. Lieutenant Rowen, who actually did carry that famed message, was a man of about forty, a veteran of the Indian wars on our Frontier.

The ghastly fates of Joan of Arc and the Children's Crusade, both youth-led, still glow with a horrid phosphorescence on the darker pages of Western history. The more recent and less personally tragic humbling of "World Citizen" Garry Davis is also a sharp reminder of this truth—less personally tragic but perhaps more frightful still in its ultimate implications.

No, if science fiction is to accomplish anything at all it must stir the imaginations of adults—and quickly. And if there is anything in any way that we can do to further this purpose—well, count on us to give it a try.



OUR recent change in cover policy has drawn all-over reactions that we most naturally find pleasing—as, of course, does our carapace-

artist, Earle Bergey. Most amusing and enthusiastic of them all is a young lady not unknown to current science fiction readers, who sent us the following six cards, all of which we intend to run right now—

SEXTUPLETS by Betsy Curtis

Dear Editor: At last STARTLING has discovered that sex will never replace the Solar System! The January cover is in line with the eternal verities!—201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

Dear Editor: The January cover is really STARTLING! Even I am taken aback, thrilled etc. by the hotfoot jets! Jupiter's cruel leer in the background adds horror to the painful idea. Great!—201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

Dear Lemuel Mutton: There is nothing sheepish about the January cover. I hope this finds you as it leaves me—purged in proper Aristotelian fashion of pity and terror.—201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

Dear Ed: Another vote for the January cover!—201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

Dear Editor: Love that January cover!—201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

Dear Editor: In cramming the ballot box, please let us state, re the January STARTLING cover, that it is *the* real thing we've been waiting for. Our side will finally win at the polls (or pohls, if we're lucky).—201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

We get the idea, Betsy—and hope that in doing Mme. Dionne and Dr. Dafeo one better you are right. Incidentally, re the last parenthesis, readers, Mrs. Curtis' literary agent is Frederik Pohl, whose writings have appeared in this and other magazines under the byline of James MacCreigh among others.

MORE OF SAME by James Workman

Re: the Jan. SS cover: Why haven't you done this sooner? MORE! . . . *much* more!—P.O. Box No. 385, Monrovia, California.

We done it as soon as we could, massa.

HOPE, HOPE, HOPE by Charles Baird

Dear Editor: No doubt you're receiving hundreds of cards cheering the changed SS. I want more of the same type covers (Jan. '51). Everything is better—paper, illos and type have all im-

proved. I would like a 100-page novel (or more pages) each ish.

I sincerely hope this cover sells the magazine as much if not more than usual for this will decide what type of cover stays. This cover proved my theory that Bergey can paint *stf* covers with the best of *stf* artists. Hoping that the cover will be *stf* and that the paper continues to improve. I also liked TEV better this time.—661 Albermarle Street, Springfield, Massachusetts.

We got a few—and we shall try to keep on improving, Charles. Watch for something special on the July cover. Earle is at work on it right now.

THE OLD ALLURE by Edward Wood

Dear Editor: Compliments for not having an oversexed female on the cover. We live in a time of sophistication and I'm sure that the great mass of *stf* readers are more conservative than publishers (and editors) believe they are. While contents are the most important factor in *any* magazine, the luring of readers must be the format and neatness of the magazine. The time for the average pulp to "dress up" is now.—31 North Aberdeen Street, Chicago 7, Illinois.

Skipping your tie-up of conservative and sophistication (which has us scratching our crew-cut) and your reference to the "average pulp"—ahem—we say thanks, Herr Wood.

AT LAST! by Jack Safarik

Dear Ed: At last! A cover without a dame! What's SS coming to? More of same, please. Yukyukyukyuk! YIGGAR THROLG was darned good.

Answer yes or no—can you revive either CAPTAIN FUTURE or STRANGE or speed up the printing schedules of any of your mags?—Box #397, Genoa, Illinois.

Answer—NO!

CAP COLLECTOR by Jerry Pedersen

Dear Sir: I have quite a collection of Edmond Hamilton's CAPTAIN FUTURE magazines and stories but I'm missing a few yet. I want to get, one way or another, the ones I'm without. Would you be so kind as to send me a complete list of all CF stories ever published? Then I can check my own copies against it and find out which ones I'm lacking.—c/o General Delivery, Chicago, Illinois.

Altogether there have been nineteen CF novels, seventeen published in CF Magazine,

the other two in SS. They are—CAPTAIN FUTURE AND THE SPACE EMPEROR, CALLING CAPTAIN FUTURE, CAPTAIN FUTURE'S CHALLENGE, THE TRIUMPH OF CAPTAIN FUTURE, CAPTAIN FUTURE AND THE SEVEN SPACE STONES, STAR TRAIL TO GLORY, THE MAGICIAN OF MARS, THE LOST WORLD OF TIME, THE QUEST BEYOND THE STARS, OUTLAWS OF THE MOON, THE COMET KINGS, PLANETS IN PERIL, THE FACE OF THE DEEP, WORLDS TO COME, THE STAR OF DREAD, MAGIC MOON and DAYS OF CREATION in the seventeen published issues of CF Magazine. All but the last four are by Hamilton, with William Morrison taking up the wartime slack on these. It was Morrison again in RED SUN OF DANGER (SS, Spring, 1945) and Manly Wade Wellman in THE SOLAR INVASION (SS, Fall, 1946).

The more recent novelet series about Curt Newton and the Futuremen, which is concluded with the current story, BIRTHPLACE OF CREATION, is all Hamilton and includes in previous issues of SS—THE RETURN OF CAPTAIN FUTURE (January, 1950), CHILDREN OF THE SUN (January, 1950), THE HARPERS OF TITAN (September, 1950), PARDON MY IRON NERVES (November, 1950), MOON OF THE UNFORGOTTEN (January, 1951) and EARTHMEN NO MORE (March, 1951), making seven all-told of this series.

We hope this will help you and other CF addicts. Somehow the listing seems to belong in this issue, which contains his final appearance.

FROM KOREA by 2nd Lieutenant Charles L. Atkins

Dear Sir: This letter is very hasty and short. I have just finished reading in September's issue of SS THE CYBERNETIC BRAINS by Raymond F. Jones. I found it very good. It was a good novel and it was the first one I have read since my vacation on the Korean front (if one can call that a vacation).

Unfortunately I am not in a position to buy such magazines at will and I know that I have missed many good novels in SS. However, I do not plan to miss any more because I'm submitting a money order in hopes that your office will forward to me future issues of STARTLING STORIES.

I enjoy your novels very much and I would be very grateful if you would run a little want ad in your next issue of SS for any old copies that readers have finished. I would be more than glad to pay postage for such magazines if sent to me.

It is not my wish to take up valuable space in your issue to print this letter. All I'm asking is a little space for the ad. I have also heard a lot of comment about WINE OF THE DREAMERS (by John D. MacDonald, June, 1950, SS—Ed.) and I'd like very much to receive a copy of SS containing that novel if possible.—630 Ord Amo Co APO 973 c/o PM, San Francisco, California.

Well, people, how about it?

SIGNED MYSTERY by James Wills

Dear Sir: Your latest issue of *Startling Stories* has prompted me to write you a letter of commendation. I fully expected to find, when I bought the mag, a lurid sexy cover. Instead Bergey had resisted the impulse to put a Gaping Girl in Gold-foil G-string on it. Perhaps, I thought, Bergey is in honorable retirement in some cosy sanitarium while doctors rub their hands gleefully, as they strap him onto the operating table. But no, his famous little signature was there.

Pondering the mystery I bought the mag., took it home (and was unashamed to show it in the streets too, by the way) and read it. The amount of improvement in it persuaded me to write my second fan-letter. (The first was sent to—here a pause for the Editor to shudder—a rival magazine but it didn't get printed so is promptly nullified.) Your idea of enlarging the print in the letter column is good, even though it means fewer letters and mine probably won't get printed (sniff, slobber). Despite this keep it up. Another good idea is inserting little commentaries in the lead novel and novelets. Don't drop that.

Ahah! You let drop a hint that if the fans wanted more science-fiction and less sex-fiction on the covers we should tell you so. That is what I'm doing and I hope you other fen do the same.

This business off my chest, I shall follow the lead of all other letters and comment on the stories. Your lead-novel was darn good. It was well-written, well-plotted, and if the characterization slipped just a teeny weeny bit, who's to notice? Say, boy, did you notice that Gallun's been palming off a disjointed series on you? That Vita process for renewing life appeared in COFFINS TO MARS in TWS, and I can pretty well follow the continuation between the two stories. A last question. What does the Z in Raymond Z. Gallun stand for? Novel was worth eight out of ten.

The Cap. Future novelet was pretty good, but I'm annoyed with Hamilton because he went and used an idea that would have been twice as good in novel length. About five out of ten.

"The Odyssey of Yiggarr Throlg" was quite refreshing but I didn't die laughing as the little thing you stuck in front of it suggested. I agree with you that there is a place in stf. for fantasy. Eight out of ten.

The shorts hovered around six out of ten. I don't believe in spending much time with shorts.

I'm not writing my name but typing it because I don't want any treacherous proofreader to start forging it on checks. And by the way, if any fen have any of the following mags they wish to sell, could you drop me a line? *Startling Stories*, March,

May, July, Sept., Nov., 1947, March, Nov., 1948 and Jan., 1949. TWS Feb., Oct., Dec., 1948.—101 Beach Drive, Dollarton, British Columbia.

Take care of him after you get Lieutenant Atkins fixed up, students. And yes, we are well aware of Mr. Raymond Zebulon Gallun's *Vita* "series." It's all right with us as long as we like the stories and, more ultimately, you do likewise. Murray Leinster did much the same thing two-three years back when he followed the short STORY OF ROD CANTREL with his novel THE BLACK GALAXY. When an author gets an afterthought to a good idea experience has taught us that it may well prove to be a much deeper and better development of said idea. Many of our greatest books have had their origins in preliminary short stories, vignettes or other fragments.

IMPRESSED by Bob Silverberg

Dear Editor: Just got to read the January 1951 STARTLING STORIES, issue number 66. I was so impressed by the various changes in the mag that I've decided to break my silence of many, many moons.

The stories were up to the usual fine quality you mag has maintained since late 1946, with one dip in early 1948—but it's the format that interests me.

Probably through some mistake, my copy was printed entirely on a very fine semi-slick paper, of a quality you've never used before. Please continue same and (whisper this softly through the trees) trim the edges!

Then, Bergey's lovely Jupiter cover. I hope this issue is a complete sellout, that it breaks all STANDARD's records for single-issue sales. Why? Because I'd like the powers-that-be to see that a cover without a Bem and dame will sell better than one of the usual Bergey blotches. Pretty, pretty!

The new type for TEV is much appreciated. Thanks.

Dittos are in order for the Brackett yarn next issue. Wasn't that yarn of hers in that December TWS a dilly, though?

Y'know, Lin Carter's letter reminded me of the fact that STARTLING and TWS have published an awful lot of good stuff these past five years—though the stuff before that was pretty good. Material printed from 1941-44 was pretty ghastly, though—particularly in TWS.

The forte of the previous SS was the novel—you note the list of masterpieces which Carter quotes—while the short stories were well-nigh miserable. Since the present editor took over, there's been a fine balance of stuff—with the short stories equaling the novels since 1947.

Take stuff like TIME TRACK or ODYSSEY OF YIGGAR THROLG. Would it be accepted by the 1940 SS? No . . . "sorry, we must reject this story. Quality is too high to meet editorial standards."

Glad the incumbent editor has realized that there

was something else in the mag between the end of the novel and the beginning of the advertisements.

Please keep up the steady stream of fine novels (since LADY IS A WITCH you've printed top material every issue) and the interplanetary covers. Startling Stories is the top sf pulp mag now being printed.—760 Montgomery Street, Brooklyn 13, New York.

That paper was no mistake, bub—we mean, Bob. And we agree in your hopes anent reader reaction to the cover. Glad you like our short story policy—it has for some time been as much in line as we could make it with the policy outlined in the editorial of this issue.

NOTE FROM DOWN UNDER

by Nick Solntseff

Dear Editor: I would be very much obliged if you include the following announcement in the next TWS and/or SS.

The announcement is: The first Australian post-war fanzine has just been published. It is WOOMERA, a 12-page zine duplicated on semi-foolscap paper. It features articles by both Australian and foreign fans, and is of general interest to fans. Its price is one prozine for two issues or two copies. When sending your sub please state which you want. Also please note that surface mail takes about 2 months in getting to Australia from the US, so delay must be expected both ways.

The editor of WOOMERA is Nick Solntseff, address: 184 Girraween Road, Girraween, N.S.W., Australia.

Thank you for the above.

At the same time let me take the opportunity to make a few remarks on TWS and SS. I don't have to say that your magazines are my favourites. Although I haven't seen many, because of the dollar shortage and the ensuing lack of fantasy magazines on the market, it is the best all round sf magazine I have seen. A good story must take any number of re-readings, and the following are good examples: THE SHAPE OF THINGS, Ray Bradbury; THE IONIAN CYCLE, Tenn; AND THE MOON BE STILL AS BRIGHT, Bradbury; WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, van Vogt; MOUSE Fred. Brown; PROJECT SPACESHIP, van Vogt; MASK OF CIRCE, Kuttner; WHAT MAD UNIVERSE, F. Brown; HISTORY LESSON, Clarke; these are all of classic variety.

I hope you are going to continue in a like vein as the improvement, both in the quality of material and makeup, has been remarkable. With the trade barriers between our countries lifted, Australia will, I think, be a good market for TWS & SS. I know that as soon as subscriptions are once more available to Australian fan, I will be among the first to write for a sub.

Thanks again for publishing this letter; I wish you all the best of luck with your magazines.

Please have more stories by A. E. van Vogt. I enjoyed both of the stories that I have in my collection.—184 Girraween Road, Girraween, N.S.W., Australia.

We'll run more van Vogt as soon as he gets off his dianetics kick and sends us some stories. Best of luck to your fanzine—for many moons to come.

WE WISH WE KNEW

by Carol Rae McKinney

Dear Editor: I very seldom write to magazines—but this time I wanted to let you know how much I like the cover of the January SS. Why not more of the same type—the kind no one would be ashamed to show Grandma or dear old Aunt Prudence?

However, I can't say the same for the story it illustrated, PASSPORT TO JUPITER. It was okay—but, well, the kind I wouldn't go out of my way to read again. In order, this is the way I rate the January stories—

- 1.—TIME TRACKexcellent
- 2.—MOON OF THE UNFOR-
GOTTENexcellent
- 3.—CRITERIONgood
- 4.—PASSPORT TO
JUPITERfairly good
- 5.—REPLICAfair
- 6.—THE ODYSSEY OF YIGGAR
THROLGno comment

By the way, if this letter happens to see print, I'd appreciate it if some other young married girl would drop me a line or two (I'm twenty-one), especially if they happen to live outside the U.S.A. When are you going MONTHLY?—3500 Shelden Street, Del Paso Heights, California.

Sorry you didn't like PASSPORT TO J. too well, Carol, not to mention your views upon poor YIGGAR THROLG. But for the rest, hurrah. We wish we could tell you we were going monthly soon—but no such plans are existent at present.

WE SUGGESTED THIS?

by Noah W. McLeod

Dear Lem: This is a letter in the correspondence you suggested on the subject of dictatorship and power in your comments on my letter in the current (Jan.) issue of STARTLING STORIES.

I have not read Korzybski—all that I know of his work is through the popularizations by Stuart Chase and by Hayakawa. The only story by van Vogt which I have read which dragged his theories of government into the foreground was "The Weapon Shops of Isher." I hope someday, under more favorable conditions, to get Korzybski's works if they are not all burned by the F.B.I. in the meantime.

A professor of Political Science, I forget who, has recently divided dictatorships into totalitarian and authoritarian, the difference being that in a totalitarian dictatorship the whole life of the people is regulated by government decree and there are no generally recognized rules in the dealings of the government with the individual. In an authoritarian dictatorship, while policy is determined by a small

group at the top, the state does not claim to control the whole life of the people and the dealings between the government and the people proceed according to tradition or law.

Now it may strike a student as a curious thing but nearly all of the absolute monarchies in the past have been authoritarian rather than totalitarian. There were good reasons why the power of a government had severe limitations, most of them hidden in nature. One of the most outstanding arose from the fact that, except in a few commercial centers, the only acceptable medium of exchange was gold and silver.

That meant that the king's army would have to be paid in gold or silver or it would mutiny. Philip II of Spain had a number of experiences of that kind. War supplies like ammunition also had to be paid for in precious metals. The supply of gold and silver is even today rather limited and in the past it was still more so.

Therefore, the ambitious ruler who wanted to make himself an absolute despot ran up against an obstacle. There was an upward limit to his war-making power, based upon the fact that his supply of money was sharply limited. The reason why Philip II of Spain could even dream of World-wide absolute monarchy was that he had two-thirds of the silver production under his thumb.

Another hidden limitation of the absolute monarchs of the past lay in the character of their chief officers, who were mostly wealthy noblemen able to act independently in a pinch. On several occasions Louis XIV and Frederick the Great ordered their generals to burn down cities, only to find that the generals had resigned and left on a world tour.

On the whole the Russian czars and the Turkish sultans were more successful at despotism than the Western European monarchs—but even they encountered considerable opposition as seen by the fact that Peter the Great figured in Russian folklore as anti-Christ for more than two centuries and several Turkish sultans were forced to change their policy by military mutiny.

Another important factor in the success or failure of a totalitarian state is the previous degree of regimentation of the people. The Germans and Russians were pushovers for dictators because they were accustomed to taking orders. And both nations have a very nasty strain of mysticism that makes them fall for double-talk without detecting what's wrong. You can tell a Russian or a German that starvation is prosperity and he will accept it as mystical paradox. Try to tell the same thing to a Scotchman and he will call a psychiatrist.

But while I'm on the subject, and before I close, I want to touch on the subject of truth, Russian version, called "Pravda." The Russians at an early stage seem to have got the screwball idea that truth can be reached by governmental decree. In other words, Joe Stalin could, by merely taking a piece of paper and a pencil, determine the diameter of the Universe by writing it down as so many miles.

This, more than anything else, was behind the Lysenko business—the determination of truth by governmental decree. What Lysenko's theories were and whether they were true or false and to what degree they were true or false are relatively minor details for our purposes. The main thing is that in the Russian world view, truth is determined not by experience but by governmental decree.

This obviously makes a Russian very easy to regiment. And because the Russians are easy to regiment, they are ideal tools for an ambitious dictator. With these incomplete and somewhat disorganized thoughts I will leave you. A reply, if possible, would be appreciated—*Apt. 5—571 Otsego St., Havre-de-Grace, Maryland.*

You seem to have stated your case very concisely, Noah, and at the moment we have little to add. Of course George Orwell (that man again) carried the theory of truth via decree to its ultimate conclusions in *1984* (that book again). When his Big Brother said war was peace, et cetera, people had to agree or else. So for the most part they did.

The theme of anarchy has always been strong in this country even though the current trend, thanks to the complications inflicted upon us by the Industrial Era in which we are trapped, is quite the other way. And, oddly enough, the very folk who shouted most loudly against "anarchists"—the successful rugged individualists of the last three generations—are those who have practised it to the fullest degree.

Our "conservative" Republicans are still fighting a desperate rear guard action in favor of no government regulation, no income taxes, personal or corporate, and virtually no military or police forces. If this isn't anarchy we don't know what anarchy is. Yet to them the very word is as much anathema as is the present unmentionable—communism.

The only trouble with the above *laissez faire* lads and lassies is that they do not believe in any conditioning of the individual to prevent him from working against the welfare of the community in which he or she exists. With them it is survival of the fittest and damn all the rest. Unfortunately or otherwise there are too many of the rest to enable them to triumph again at the polls.

What the ultimate answer is we do not profess to know—but it surely isn't a pretty problem however you look at it. At least, however, it is not dull. For dullness is death.

SICKENING BLOB by Joe Gibson

Dear Lem: That was a lousy trick!

For five whole days, I was left wondering if you'd gone out of business. Kept going down to the newsstand and looking for that familiar, fun-lovin' filmy-clad Bergey gal and she wasn't there! I was getting lonesome!

And what do I find after discovering you print titles on the covers? A sickening blob of yellow with an ugly birthmark, presumably intended to be Jupiter. The least you coulda done was to make

it Venus! But no! You had to go spoil the whole issue for me!

If it hadn't been for Liddell's YIGGAR it would've been spoiled too. Gallun's novel was good in spots but who likes a spotty novel? But I suppose the truth is that I'm the one who's spoiled, as far as interplanetary covers are concerned. I have seen Bonestell's prints in CONQUEST OF SPACE! I've lived, man—*lived!*

Bergey is a good commercial artist. If he's going to do good interplanetary scenes have him study the subject with an eye to dressing it up in sensational style best-suited to his own talents. If Jove had been a crescent, now—with shades and hues from day-side to night-side—and there was a bit more starlight like in that lower left corner; not too "realistic" perhaps, but good in his own style.

Bonestell can't draw human figures either!

Type-size in the letter column was fine. Commentaries inserted in the longer stories are a neat touch. To make 'em neater, try to place all of them in a box on the second page of the story as you did with Gallun's novel. Try, also, to stick to speculative commentary; don't try to "sell" the story. I can't help resenting the commercial cliché of an editor telling me I'm going to enjoy a yarn—that's for me to decide. But he can do it subtly, speculating on the yarn, showing how and why he enjoyed it, and darned if I won't too!

Your editorial sounded slightly familiar. Have I read something like this before? Say, in my last letter, perhaps? Lem, please—when you're composing such deathless prose, kindly desist from broadcasting it so loud on my telepathic wave-length! I keep picking up your mutterings and thinking they're my own ideas!

But now, let's go a step farther with it. Science-fiction vs. hoss-and-buggy thinking, I mean. Right now the situation stands somewhat like this: people once thought stf to be mere "Buck Rogers" foolishness—rocket ships, rayguns, crazy things that could never happen. But crazy things did happen. For many people, it caused the bottom to drop out of their innocent little "status quo" world. That seems to have altered their opinion of stf quite considerably. Gradually, stf has become more and more popular. And still is!

But what of the future—the next decade or so, the next generation? Agreed: it won't be quite so shocking, with more people versed in science-fiction, when those "crazy things" happen. But suppose this had been true in the past; suppose stf were popular twenty years ago? A lot of those "crazy things"—like Hiroshima, for example—were not good. If we had thought about such things before they happened, we might have avoided some of them. Today, instead of atomic bombs and fanatics trying to conquer the world, we might have atomic power plants and a good world government.

It's true that most people don't think any more than they have to—but it's also true that most people enjoy a good story. And it seems just possible that if we get some good stf in the works while the iron is hot, the effect of this literature on our future is going to be rather gratifying. And *not* merely with "gadgets"!

As you say, "there is room for humor, fantasy, romance, drama and heavy science"—so long as it stretches the imagination into the purely speculative (and, by gad, mentally healthful) realm that we call

science-fiction.—24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City 4, N. J.

Now who's writing whose editorial—and who gets paid for it? Seems to us we've already answered most of your paragraphs in the opening pages of this department. And don't worry about Bergey. We made him buy a copy of CONQUEST OF SPACE some little time ago and he is beginning to show the effects.

As for "plugging" the story in our little boxes—well, we agree and believe that with one or two exceptions we have kept clear of same. But another nudge in the right direction is always appreciated.

VOICE FROM THE PAST by Chad Oliver

Dear Editor: I might mention that I am in complete agreement with your editorial remarks in the new STARTLING generally and your preface to the Liddell story in particular (That was a lovely yarn, too).

It seems to me that too many stfans are so close to their subject that they lose all perspective on science fiction. The usual stock definition of science fiction as fiction growing out of scientific theories or backgrounds would apply just as well to Sinclair Lewis' ARROWSMITH as to the wildest space opera.

I believe that science fiction is essentially fantasy and that the difference lies more in the writing techniques involved than in any radically new concepts. The old "fantastic voyage" of literature is put on a spaceship instead of a windjammer or Swift's magnetic floating sky-island is modernized—but the idea is the same.

Fantasy which does not violate any known (or subsequently-to-be-disproved) scientific fact is very closely allied to s-f. In one you imagine a land where people are two feet tall—in the other you postulate a planet where such and such an environment produced—guess what?—people two feet tall. A pretty thin dividing line, methinks—but a fascinating one.

Three long, loud cheers for Bergey's space cover! More?—1706 Nueces, Austin, Texas.

Or, as in the Frank R. Stockton story we believe we have previously mentioned in this space, the smallest giant and the tallest dwarf turn out to be exactly the same size—that of an ordinary man. As for those folk who seek exact definitions for science fiction, a pox upon them as sub-cretins.

Even if such a definition could be made it would be of a highly ephemeral nature. Recall—in Fredric Brown's WHAT MAD UNIVERSE (SS, September, 1948) how what was stf in one world rated merely an adventure-story label in another which had space-flight

licked? More and more we find ourselves thinking that this craze for exact definition where obviously none can exist is strictly padded-cell fodder. We don't even know why anyone wants to put such restrictions on items where they *can* be applied.

They even talk of "exact science"—which is said either in satire or utter idiocy. And we doubt that these creatures have a sense of humor—which in turn is no more than a sound sense of relative values (note our deliberate lack of exactness).

OUCH—THAT SPECIFIC! by Dee M. Groff

Dear Sir: In the January issue you specifically ask for reader comments on the cover. It gives me great pleasure to offer mine. I believe the best compliment I can give it is this—it made me proud to carry the magazine out of the store face up, where people could see it.

Secondly my husband of less than two years, whom I have been slowly converting into a fan (he never read stf before on account of the covers—thought it must be trash like Gory Detective and Free Love) thought this cover was beautiful and said so in the store as soon as I picked it up. He even called the proprietor's attention to it!

Sure I'm an old fan of 15 years' standing—I know stf is good reading so I'll buy magazines regardless of rotten covers. But I'm also a business-woman and I know that the life-blood of business is in constantly increasing consumer demand—especially with present rising production costs. To do this you must interest the so-far untrapped majority of purchasers whose initial purchase depends on visual appeal.

At my favorite store, which is a very busy one, copies of magazines featuring this type of cover are sold out three days at most after display. Those featuring the usual garish covers can be obtained as late as two or three days before the new issue is received. Besides I've noticed that many dealers prominently display those with the better covers.

This should be reason enough for any business house to change its policy, *n'est-ce pas?* Loyal fans, the "slicks" and book publishers have made great strides in giving stf popular appeal. The pulps can help stf and themselves by cooperating and presenting better covers such as this one to capture the general public's eye and interest.—957 Boulevard East, Weehawken, New Jersey.

Thanks a million, Dee, for the most thoughtful commentary received on the above subject. We hope you and your husband and your store manager continue to like our packaging job.

MORE DARN COMMENT! by Gerry de la Ree

Dear Editor: Unless I miss my guess, you'll receive more enthusiastic comments on the cover for

the January, 1951 STARTLING than you have for any other single piece of art work since the magazine's inception. It's not that Bergey is comparable to Chesley Bonestell when it comes to astronomical art, but merely the idea that the girl and the BEM are missing. I know it's too much to expect but let's see a few more conservative covers in the near future.

While on the subject of art, what's happened to Finlay? His interior work has added much to SS and TWS in the past few years and his absence leaves something to be desired. Orban isn't bad but at best he's a poor sub for Finlay.

The lead novel this month proves hard to classify. I didn't consider it bad, nor could I rave over it. Gallun held my interest in several spots but lost it in others. These dream machine yarns are almost as common as the current cybernetic craze. MacDonald used the dream machine idea to better advantage in "Wine of the Dreamers" than did Gallun in "Passport to Jupiter."

The larger type in the letter section is a welcome change, but it's unfortunate you've had to cut down on the number of letters. Lin Carter's rating of SS novels he's enjoyed over the past decade brings up one point—would he enjoy the same stories today that he liked 10 years back? I've found that yarns I read and thought terrific when I was 16 years of age today leave me cold upon re-reading.

An exception would be Weinbaum's "The Black Flame." This stood up quite well under re-reading as did "Dawn of Flame."

I agree in large with Carter's list, however. The first eight or ten novels printed in SS were very readable. During the war years the quality (and length) dropped off considerably and it has only been fairly recently that you've started to pick up again.

Among the top SS novels that stick out in my mind are these: The Black Flame, Twice in Time, Fortress of Utopia, Prisoner of Mars, The Blue Flamingo, Flight Into Yesterday and Wine of the Dreamers. Oh yes, Leinster's Laws of Chance was another fine one.

I still have some back issues of SS, TWS and many other science fiction magazines for sale if any of your readers are interested.—277 Howland Avenue, River Edge, New Jersey.

As you doubtless know by this time, Gerry, Manly Wellman's TWICE IN TIME is currently making a reappearance in WONDER STORY ANNUAL. We agree, it's a grand piece of work. It's odd that both Gallun and MacDonald should come up with "dreamer" yarns so close together. But apparently all science fiction authors prime themselves at the same pump simultaneously.

We have consulted with a number of editors of other stf magazines and they all suffer the same thing. When our authors are overloading us with space opera, theirs are doing likewise—or it might be tales of time travel, multiple worlds, pathological infants with horrid alien friends or even Chinese checkers. This is one of the several phenomena that come close to

putting stf in the mystery field.

All we know is that we wish it were different.

ON BENDED KNEE

by R. A. Anderson

Dear Editor: Thanks! A million times thanks! On bended knee I say thank you. For that cover on STARTLING, of course. I always did say Bergey was a good artist when he wanted to be! I haven't read *any* of the stories yet but if I wait to do that before writing maybe I won't write at all.

Not that I expect them to be bad stories—in fact, they look good. But I'm 'way behind on my reading and it might take so long to get 'em all read that it will be too late to congratulate you on the cover.

I still can't understand why you want to be anonymous—but maybe the ordinary reader isn't supposed to. Anyway, both of your magazines—TWS and SS—are just about on the top of the list of current magazines. Up until now the only complaint I had was the covers.

Now, if you'll only keep up that policy on the covers as evidenced by the latest issue of SS, I won't have *any* complaints. The situation will be terrible. But please *don't* consider that a suggestion that you go back to the Guy, the Gal and the Bem.—828 Montrose Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee.

We'll be running, beginning with the July SS, more straight space—though we have no intention of eliminating beautiful girls as long as we can fit them in with space stuff and they are beautiful or at least pretty or at any rate attractive. Oh, and on bended knee you're welcome, R.A.

PAT ON THE BACK

by Ed Butenhof

Dear Sir: You can give yourself and Bergey a pat on the back from me. Why? The January cover, it was wonderful. If you keep this tone of cover on the magazine from now on it will be your greatest stride forward since you gave the heave-ho to Sgt. Saturn. No, by golly, it's an even greater advance than that.

The issue itself was average (can I help it if you've gone and established yourself a high average?) Passport to Jupiter was well written with nicely unfolding action but it cannot be called great by any means. The Odyssey of Yiggar Throlg came next but Liddell tried too hard, at least that was my impression. It seemed somewhat stilted. Liddell is a good writer though. I've read a couple other stories of his that were very well done.

The shorts and the Cap Future novelet were poor. I've only read one (1) Cap Future store that I liked and I've read all of this latest series and about six of the older stories. That one was Par-don My Iron Nerves and it was very good. One reason, I guess was that Curt was not in it. Written as it was from Crag's point of view it was

refreshingly different and really funny. Funny, that is, in a different manner from Curt's absurdities.

In your note to my last letter you expressed wonder at my omission of several stories in my list of Best. The reason is this—when I listed best I meant *best*, not just the good ones or even the excellent or marvelous ones. Those you named I consider very, very good stories but not as good as the four I named as best.

If you want a more complete list here it is: BEST in both magazines since 1946—AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT, THE SEA KINGS OF MARS, WINE OF THE DREAMERS, CYBERNETIC BRAINS, THE VALLEY OF CREATION, FLIGHT INTO DARKNESS, WHAT MAD UNIVERSE. THE LURE OF POLARIS, ATOMIC, THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER, JERRY IS A MAN, THE SHADOW MEN and THE CITY AT WORLD'S END. These are not in order except for the first one.—172 East Vista, Daly City 25, California.

Which would seem to settle our hash for the nonce, Ed. Yiggar was meant to seem stilted, man—that was a large part of its charm. When you were a gnome didn't you feel stilted?

IS EUROPE?

by Les & Es Cole

Dear Old Snark: Hmm—the larger type *is* nice, but by not printing that postcard of ours you have put us in a most embarrassing position. People are asking questions. From far and wide they come, to wit: "Are the Coles fallen from grace? Why is Sylvia's hair like the night? Is Europe?" Only time and general semantics will tell.

Meanwhile, we had a nice visit in L. A. not long ago. Dropped in at RKO where they're making "Who Goes There!" We seem to remember, in the dim past of our youth, having claimed that we were partly responsible for the filming. May we state here, without stint of fear and unequivocally, that we had absolutely no *einfluss*? They hadn't started filming it—shooting began 23 October and ended about X-mas—but we did get a look at the script and architect's plans for the sets.

It will be called "The Thing." Unfortunately, we swore an oath in blood not to reveal what's what. Durn it, the only fun in having confidential knowledge is being able to share it with other people. And no one seems to know when it will be released. We have been promised a copy of the script when—heh, heh—the shooting is all over. Depending upon how we feel next September, we may put it up at the Nawlans auction. One other thing of interest—apparently John W. Campbell will have nothing to do with the picture (unfortunately!); he just got some jack for the story rights.

This one will kill ya! In our estimation, the January cover is the finest cover ever to appear on STARTLING. It's certainly the most mature. Bergey has unplumbed depths. And, to gild the lily, that cover was the sexiest you've ever put out. No further comment needed!

OK, we were nice to you. Now, duck! You have consistently implied, these last three years, directly or indirectly that you were striving for a more adult magazine. At least, you have flayed and flagellated (There's a pun there, if you know what we mean!) us with that idea in TEV. Yet, to our mind, TEV is probably the only thing which has shown a marked improvement. We'll never see eye to eye on this, old dear, but apparently you enjoy reading what might have been. So, we shall repeat:

The name of the magazine is very poor. Why the devil don't you change it to "Startling Science-Fiction"? Moreover, instead of that lurid spread across the top of the cover, why not print it in small letters? Your ad department has missed the boat; your selling psychology is poor. If you want to appeal to mature people, you can't do it with a screaming title. We may not be mature, but we find the title offensive to the eye.

Your inside illos are terrible and, we note, still designed for the adolescent. "We're striving for a more adult magazine," you say! Why must you have titles on the illos? If they ain't good enough to stand alone, they ain't good enough to be there—which is precisely what we maintain.

The blurbs—the pre-story and table-of-contents blurbs—are written for idiots, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing. They either give the story away or completely mislead the reader. How about cleaning up that little item?

Your department names are straight out of the comic books. Look at the list! "The Ether Vibrates," "Looking Ahead," "Stranger Than Fiction." Real eye-catchers, those! All the maturity of a three year old and with far less potential.

And while we are at it, let us discuss that intellectual giant, the people's cherch, the great lover, the one-and-only Captain Future. We wonder about him. Here he has been going around with the dimpled-darling of the spaceways, Joan Randall, for some ten years, and he has yet to make an honorable woman of her. We think he should—and then retire. Permanently.

Here's one reason why you are lacking a mature magazine. This latest horror, which we could not finish, places the scene on Europa. Fine. So what have we? Homo cf. sapiens—but we won't go into that. Also, and get this anyone with even a grammar school scientific background, earthian ecology. The not-so-odd thing about this, Anonymus, is that we couldn't have complained if Hamilton had set the scene on another planet in a different star system. (At least, we couldn't have complained about those particular things!)

But speaking psychologically, we could have predicted all this. You see, Fig Newton grew up on the Moon, surrounded by inept fatheads. Never having had a chance to resolve his oedipus, the kid was bound to be a pervert. The Futuremen series has over the year, shown abysmally poor plotting, no scientific background and phony, artificial characters. In case you didn't get us the first time, we repeat: Captain Future is a vacuous, vapid idiot. And that goes for his ghoulish, moribund crew, too!

You've never really understood the stand we take on stf vs. fantasy (By the way, can't anyone think of a good, handy abbreviation for "fantasy"?), so we'll go into that again. We like fantasy. We like

science-fiction. However, we also like chocolate. And we like sardines. But we doubt very much whether we would care for chocolate-covered sardines. Thus, we do not like a pot-pourri of science-fiction and fantasy. All we ask is that you keep the two separate.

Twell, we see that we have really raked you over the Coles. We are in a pair of terrible moods today, both of us having coles in the head. Don't give up; just let thy hair turn a little more grey, and remember that we really do like you. Maybe someday as a Christmas present you'll give us a story set on Mars with no H. cf. saps and a real Martian atmosphere.—3040½ Adeline St., Berkeley 3, Calif.

Very well, luckless ones, *we* repeat—the very idea that science fiction should be considered in anyway scientific (whatever in hades *that* is) is to us a shocking contradiction of terms, double-semantics or misspellings in the alphabet soup. It is supposed to be fiction, perhaps with a dab of pseudo-science inserted as a sop to such drears as yourselves, perhaps based entirely upon the inversion or extension of some very real scientific theory. This variation must hinge entirely upon the demands of the story as fiction.

Do anything else with it and you limit the field to almost immediate extinction, homo saps. on Europa notwithstanding. If you want science, go soak your unlovely heads in the amassed works of Albert Einstein!

WHO'S A SHARPY? by Earl Newlin Jr.

Dear Editor: A week ago the January, 1951, issue of STARTLING hit the stands. I have now recovered sufficiently from the shock to write you a letter without babbling about "no semi-unclotted dames, no pained stiff expressions on the cover, etc." My enthusiasm was immediately dampened—or should I say drenched—by the face-lifting suffered by TEV. My ghoodness, Ed., just because you print a decent cover doesn't mean you have to go high-hat. Establishing a snooty letter-policy is merely limiting the scope of your import.

Although I have seemed to disagree with you in the past I realize that my weak voice can hardly stand up to your methods. Our editor is a pulenty sharp operator and of course knows more about running a mag than any letter-writer and most editors. Still, I can hope that my opinions, coupled with a few more equally non-effective opinions of others, will gradually sink in. Maybe you too will see that it is better to print serious letters with corny letters, rather than nothing but beastly sincere epistles and those whose humor is equal to that of James Thurber.

Of course, it could be that the main reason I object to this new policy is because it'll mean you won't print any more letters from guys like me. Oh well . . . I don't care . . . much. . .

I had some witty entertaining and noteworthy comment to make but somehow when you know your letter will do nothing but line the wastebasket, you aren't too enthusiastic about it.—103 Peck Avenue, San Antonio 10, Texas! ! !

We have recently received a number of highly professional and eminently sincere advices to cut the letter department to a top of no more than six epistles on the ground that you ha—excuse us, artistes, do not provide sufficient entertainment for the bulk of our readers. So far, however, we have not acceded, nor do we intend to as long as the paper holds out and we get a belt out of you. So tell us all is forgiven—please! Then go and line your own wastebasket.

THE END
by **Rodney Palmer**

Dear Editor: Today I'm not capable of refining and polishing. I wouldn't want to detract from the pure emotionalism, the unashamed emotionalism that drives me to write this. What I feel is inexpressible and I know I'm in the same view with all other true understanders and lovers of science-fiction everywhere.

Why is it that all good things must die? Is the secret in avoiding perfection like the plague? I don't believe so. A prodigy like **STARTLING**, which produced fictional miracles when even young, now having drained itself in excess of plain perfection ("And the Moon Be Still As Bright,"—from *Wonder* inclusive—and "Yesterday's Doors" and "World Beyond") begins to display the withering at its roots.

But nobody killed it. It was too great to be killed—it had to die by the poisoned sacredness of its own blood. With a terrible astonishment I saw another magazine go the same way though by a different route. And because magazines are as alive as you are or I am, they live by right and force and honor.

It's over, I'm over, it's done—Fate hated us because—we were having too much fun!—226 West 60th Street, Chicago 21, Illinois.

To which all we can say is, "Wha hopenen, wha hopenen, Rodney?"

And on this note, with Palmer sinking slowly below the horizon, we bid farewell to the zany shores of *TEV* until, two months hence, it comes time to revisit these same zany shores once again. In short, so long, folks.

—THE EDITOR.

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THE CONTINENT MAKERS

A Travesty of the Future

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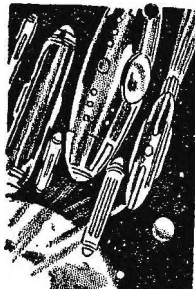


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**THRILLING WONDER
STORIES**

VANDALS OF THE VOID

A Space War Novel

By **J. M. WALSH**



featured in the Spring
**FANTASTIC STORY
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TWICE IN TIME

A Brilliant Fantasy

By **MANLY WADE WELLMAN**

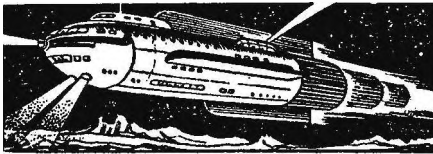


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REVIEW OF THE CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

MOST interesting "special" to reach us this item out is the beautifully printed A CHECKLIST OF AUSTRALIAN FANTASY (to 1937), put out by S. L. Larnach of the Futurian Press, Sydney. Although the list is understandably brief, running to approximately a hundred titles, it contains a number of surprises—among them the name of James Morgan Walsh, along with his VANDALS



OF THE VOID, currently reappearing in our companion magazine, FANTASTIC STORY QUARTERLY. Annotation is terse but informative and printing, as implied above, a joy to the eye.

Another item deserving of special attention is a neat reprint of Clark Ashton Smith's fine daemological poem, THE GHOUL AND THE SERAPH, published by Michael De-Angelus for Gargoyle Press. It is a grisly but singularly effective bit of work, which wears well the twenty-eight years since it was first printed.

Which brings us to the listings. Nothing spectacular this time out for some reason—but some good solid fan-fare for all that. Our top ten are the following:

THE CRICKET, 201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York. Editors, Betsy & Ed Curtis. Published spasmodically. No price listed.

A nicely printed and thoroughly delightful jam session with les Curtises, in which they discuss almost everything from Atlantis to Jabberwocky in French. Also—for shame!—a considerable plug for a new shiny competitor of ours. Good fun and thought provoking for those whose mental age is above four and a half.

FANTASY ADVERTISER, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, California. Editor, Roy A. Squires. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 75c per annum.

Editor Squires laments the fact that his lead article fell [Turn page]

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through this time but his is still the class of this particular branch of the field—on all fronts. An enclosed note announces the fact that the April issue will be by way of a fifth anniversary edition. Surely a notable mark for any fanzine.

FANTASY-TIMES, 137-05 32nd Avenue, Flushing, New York. Editor, James V. Taurasi. Published twice monthly. 10c per copy, 12 copies \$1.00.

The best thing we can say for this king of newszines is that while we are in a position to get fast word of prozine doings we frequently find our sources beaten by F-T. Perhaps a living proof that stf may one day supplant baseball if not the two-platoon system.

THE JOURNAL OF SPACE FLIGHT, 10630 South St. Louis St., Chicago 43, Illinois. Editor, Wayne Proell. Published monthly. 25c per copy, \$2.25 per annum.

Highly technical stuff on a field vital to stf. Herman Bartenback leads off this time with *Celestial Mechanics and Rockets*, which should give you some idea of what goes on here. Better know your penthouse math if you plan to take this one.

NEW ENTERPRISE REVIEW, P.O. Box #83, Gravesend Station, Brooklyn 23, New York. Editor, Ronald Friedman. Published monthly. No price listed.

A recent appearance and a sprawling job, containing stuff good and bad on just about every subject apt to interest fans. It borrows liberally from its colleagues but manages to supply considerable entertainment. But the listing of Kuttner's pennames is pitifully incomplete. We can add half a dozen without even soft-boiling an egg.

ODD, 1302 Lester Street, Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Editor, Duggie Fisher, Jr. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 2 copies 25c.

A fine cover by Jack Gaugan leads a moderately amusing and determinedly sub-sophomoric 'zine. Top features include a fine irate open letter by Richard Elsberry and a cyute cartoon page by Ray Nelson, who doubles as "art" editor. This one should improve with age.

QUANDARY, 101 Wagner Street, Savannah, Georgia. Editor, Unlisted. Published monthly. 10c per copy, \$1.00 per annum.

Some topflight material assembled in Issue #6, headed by Bob "Wilson" Tucker, who demands more pro-attention by fanzines and also more ink. Others present and in reasonable form include Redd Boggs, Cerry de la Ree, Harry Warner, Sam Basham, R. J. Banks Jr., J. T. Hoffman and several more. On the upbeat.

RHODOMAGNETIC DIGEST, 2524 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley 4, California. Editor, Donald Baker Moore. Published monthly. 25c per copy.

Presently the best and by far the most adult of all

fanzines. In this issue we found Don Fabun's two articles, one about precognition in ESP, the other anent Destination Moon promotion, along with Editor Moore's prozine reviews, tops. But Ken Slater was on hand with a report of fan-doings in England and George Blumenson and Bob Connel take up everything from Man's perilous future to saucers flying that is). And David C. Spencer tackles the redoubtable Anthony Boucher himself in a nice piece of profile-axis.

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS LETTER, Box #260, Bloomington, Illinois. Editor, Bob Tucker. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy.

This one gets better and better, combining the most complete thumbnail reviews of current stf books published with ample and interesting pro-gossip. Artwork and printing also rate a couple of platinum stars.

SPACE MAGAZINE, 1228 15th Street, NW, Washington, D.C. Editor, Clyde T. Hanback. Published quarterly. 15c per copy.

A watchfob-sized 'zine with somewhat too-brief features and rather superior fanfiction contributed by Jeffrey James Carter and James R. Adams. A new one that will bear watching.

And that makes ten—which brings us to the slightly sadder sacks and the briefer notations.

ADOZINE, 2058 East Atlantic Street, Philadelphia 34, Pennsylvania. Editor, W. C. Butts. Published bi-monthly. 5c per copy.

ALEPH-NUL, 32 Park Place, R.D. #4, Pittsburgh 9, Pennsylvania. Editor, Bill Venable. Publisher bi-monthly. 15c per copy.

BABEL, 415 Simpson Avenue, Aberdeen, Washington. Editor, T. Daniel. Published monthly. No price listed.

BEM, 942 Scribner NW, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Editor, Unlisted. Published irregularly. 15c per copy.

CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION, Box #83, Gravesend Station, Brooklyn, New York. Editor, Ron Lyons. Published 5 times per month. 5c per copy.

BIZARRE, 315 Dawson Street, Wilmington, North Carolina. Editor, Tom Covington. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy.

FANVARIETY, 420 South 11th Street, Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Editor, W. Max Keasler. Published monthly. 10c per copy.

THE IMAGINATIVE COLLECTOR, 203 Wampum Avenue, Louisville 9, Kentucky. Editors, Russell Watkins & Bill Wentworth. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

IMPOSSIBLE, 3933 15th Avenue, Seattle 5, Washington. Editor, Burnett R. Tosky. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

PHANTASMAGORIA, 41 Compton Street, Dudley Hill, Bradford, Yorkshire, England. Editors, Derek & Mavis Pickles. Published quarterly. 1 shilling per annum.

STFCARD, Box #6, Helena, Montana. Editor, Walter A. Coslet. Published Weekly. 20 issues 50c.

SCIENCE FICTION DAILY, P.O. Box #83, Gravesend Station, Brooklyn 23, New York. Editor, Ron Friedman. 5c per copy.

SCIENCE FICTION WEEKLY, 1475 Townsend Avenue, New York 52, New York, Editor, Allan H. Pesetsky. Strictly a gag oneshot.

STF NEWSSCOPE, 43 Tremont Street, Malden 48, Massachusetts. Editor, Lawrence R. Campbell. Published monthly. 5c per copy.

TABLE OF FAN VELOCITY, 3046 Jackson Street, San Francisco 15, California. Editors, Tellurian Sciencefictioneers. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

UNIVERSE, P.O. Box #83, Gravesend Station, Brooklyn 23, New York. Editor, Ron Friedman. Published twice yearly. 10c per copy.

WYLDE STAR, 129 Edgemere Street, Fayetteville, New York. Editor, Alan M. Grant. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy.

And that, infants, does it. Not a strong two months on the whole, though a lot better than several like periods in the past. We hope the next review will be better—thanks to better material. So long.

—THE EDITOR.



SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

JOURNEY TO INFINITY, edited by Martin Greenberg, Gnome Press, New York (\$3.50).

ANOTHER fat and worthwhile anthology of science fiction stories, this one introduced by Fletcher Pratt and cut along an unusual editorial bias. Containing an even dozen stories, a number of them far longer than is usual in volumes of this genre, Mr. Greenberg has sought to assemble a history of humanity in the cosmos, a history of past and future to which the present is as the near-proverbial lemon-drop.

Beginning with the collapse of a pre-Atlantic civilization thanks to atomic antics on the



Moon that result not only in that sub-planet's present desolate condition but in what has come down to us as the "Flood"—the collection spends comparatively little time on how we get there as it does with interplanetary, interstellar and intergalactic Man.

Since the book on the whole has been cleverly contrived and since the authors involved include A. B. Chandler, Doc Smith, Fredric Brown, Ted Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, John D. MacDonald, Isaac Asimov, C. L. Moore, Fritz Leiber Jr., Cleve Cartmill, Judith Merril and Eric Frank Russell, it emerges as an always entertaining collection if not one destined to shake any pillars of world thought.

DRAGONS IN AMBER by Willy Ley, the Viking Press, New York (\$3.75).

OUR "romantic naturalist" of *Lungfish, Do-do* and *Unicorn* fame is back again with a discussion of weird flora and fauna, alive and extinct, how it got started and how it got

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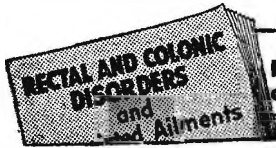
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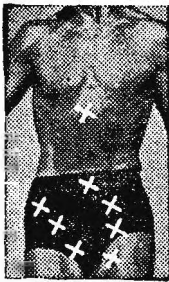


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wherever it did. He begins with an exhaustive if intriguing study of amber and the various legends and misconceptions this strange fossilized rosin gave birth to, winds up with what really happened at Krakatao in the mightiest of all recorded volcanic eruptions back in 1883.

In between such varied items as camels, bachtrian and otherwise, cycads, Japanese beetles and gingkho trees come under the microscopic Ley regard. If at times the author reveals his German background in an insistent fondness for detail undemanded by his subject matter, his interest and his choice of material are unbounded and keen.

If Mr. Ley's curiosity is not stepped on severely the word layman will ultimately be spelled with an *e* in place of the first *a*. He seems not only to want to know about everything but to be in a fair way to finding out—and passing along his multifarious specializations in thoroughly readable prose.

I, ROBOT by Isaac Asimov, Gnome Press, New York (\$2.50).

A SERIES and a very good one if you like to toy with the problems of robots in a human civilization. Under the guidance of a frail female with a whim of chilled steel and heart of robot—Dr. Susan Calvin by name—robots overcome early resistance to their uses and become a vital factor in abetting the rise of Man through the planets and so on.

These stories have been written with the painstaking pseudo-realism that has become the hallmark of Asimov. About the best thing we can say for it is that, though we are left singularly gelid by the whole robot-idea, we yet found the book excellent reading all the way.

THE MOON IS HELL! by John W. Campbell Jr., Fantasy Press, Reading, Pennsylvania (\$3.00).

ONE of the most important names in science fiction here appears on a volume whose major portion is taken up with a pseudo-diary of the first Moon expedition—their landing, their pioneering experiences, their ultimate defeat and final rescue.

But stuck away in the pygidium of the book is a totally unexpectedly short novel called THE ELDER GODS, which won us from the start where THE MOON IS HELL did not. This is strictly a symbolic tale of the importance of spiritual values in what seems to be a twilight world, as told through the adventures of a gallant sea captain employed as a tool by a set of deities who are something a bit more and at the same a bit less than gods. This is the best bit of Campbell we have yet come across.

LOOKING AHEAD

A
Forecast
of
Good
Reading



WALLACE WEST for the first time takes over the lead novel spot in our July issue with a swift and stimulating story of intergalactic intrigue entitled **THE DARK TOWER**. Basically this is a story of a human or humanoid civilization, the Centaurian, whose mastery of the appalling problems of interstellar communication and empire-building has caused its leaders to build within themselves the seeds of their own downfall.

Thanks to the time-space elements involved they have developed a sort of super-longevity that amounts almost to immortality. Although this condition is necessary, it is far from ideal, for the fallability and confusions of human memory create all sorts of difficulties. This results is the "memory bank"—which is supposed to enable long-living humans to begin afresh and well-conditioned every century or so while storing their experiences in a central pool.

Perhaps in theory, the bank is a dismal if carefully concealed flop in actuality. It proves impossible to select important threads of thought from the welter of Pepsysian non-essentials with which all human minds are cluttered. So when a vigorous race of outlanders, possessed of some crude but effective powers of attack, begin to move in the Centaurians are all but helpless.

These outlanders, the barbaric Sirians, are a fascinating study in their own right and look to have the cards of conflict stacked their way. But one young Centaurian space-officer, too broke to afford the bank-treatment which means loss of memory, knew their leader, Rolph, from university days, and is able bit by bit to rally the Centaurian defenses.

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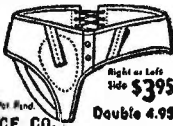
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rank and grade and some very strange and interesting human emigres from Earth. It is a combination problem and action novel that should prove one of the high points of the SS year.

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Our second lead for July will be a novelet of high suspense and stf interest as well as fine romantic excitement. In THE WOMAN FROM ALTAIR we believe that Leigh Brackett has written one of her most perfect stories. Simple in theme—as a spaceman kidnaps an alien bride—its excitement rises steadily.

For by kidnaping her the spaceman has given his bride a purpose as deadly, as subtle and as persevering as humans have ever seen. She intends to give her life to destruction of her husband and all who are close to him. With a full array of short stories to match—July looks like an exciting month.

—THE EDITOR.

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A FRANK STATEMENT ON A "DELICATE" SUBJECT: CONSTIPATION

FOREWORD: *This is an outspoken attempt to discuss, with complete frankness, a condition that has become one of the world's most widespread human maladies...constipation. A delicate subject at best, it has been under medical and scientific scrutiny for years. We believe we owe it to those who suffer from it, to publish these pertinent facts.*

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The pace of modern living is blamed for many things. And those who blame it are often right.

Our lives have become so filled with daily problems, it is no wonder we long for the days of the caveman, who ate his food raw, and "got plenty of roughage" in his diet.

Doctors know that the digestive system is strongly influenced by proper food, regularity and rest. They say: (a) Eat a balanced diet at regular hours; (b) Drink plenty of water daily; (c) Get at least 8 hours' sleep; (d) Take regular exercise; (e) Always obey the urge to eliminate waste; (f) Don't worry over problems you cannot immediately solve.

Few of us obey these rules.

Hence: Constipation!

More Than One Type of Constipation

Actually, there are several types of constipation. Two basic types are common:

1. The organic type, requiring medical care.
2. The "functional" type, requiring wise mechanical correction.

The second type, in which the intestines fail to do their work properly, can often be justly blamed on the nerve-wracking life we lead.

The end of each day leaves us so tense, so nervously exhausted, that every muscle feels tight—**INCLUDING THE INTESTINAL MUSCLES. IN FACT, IT HAS BEEN SAID, THE WHOLE HUMAN DIGESTIVE SYSTEM CAN BE ALMOST LITERALLY "TIED IN A KNOT" BY SHEER NERVOUS TENSION.**

Be Careful of "Fast-Acting" Laxatives

Stop and think how you spend an average day. Strain, pressure, rush, hurry. Your whole body tense—not only from physical hustle and bustle but from mental wear and tear as well.

Sooner or later, you begin to notice your intestines are not working as they used to. So you take a "quick-acting" laxative. *And you get 2 kinds of results.*

You get quick action, of course.

But the faster you get it, the more likely the laxative you took contains harsh chemicals, scratching particles or purges that may seriously derange the intestinal tract, thus often aggravating the condition you are trying to relieve.

Such laxatives, *designed for fast one-time action*, can eventually start the vicious circle of dosage and more dosage. Millions know how difficult it is to break this vicious circle. *Harsh laxatives cannot do it.*

It is proper, of course, to class Saraka in the so-called laxative field.

But, in fact, Saraka does not (in the publicly accepted sense) give the laxative type of results.

Saraka is not simply designed to quickly overcome a temporary condition.

Saraka is designed to provide while it is being taken, the mass plus gentle urging which permits the intestines to function with the regularity to which they were accustomed before the fast pace of modern living threw them off the track.

New Scientific Idea

Saraka is an entirely different kind of laxative based on an original scientific idea...the use of an amazing vegetable bulk producer, bassorin *plus* a mild pure vegetable aid to elimination, cortex frangula.

Bassorin forms bland, gliding "softage." 20 times its original bulk, which with gentle persistence allows the intestinal muscles—weakened, irritated or tensed-up from constant purging—to get back to work as soon as they are able to do so.

Cortex frangula helps in activating the bowel muscles to respond to bowel bulk. In other words, it provides gentle extra stimulation that bulk alone often cannot give.

Here are the facts about Saraka; facts of importance to those afflicted:

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3. It leaves no exhausting after-effect; you are "happy about the whole thing."
4. It usually acts with greater promptness than products that depend solely on bulk, mass or roughage for effect.
5. Because of its expansion and efficiency, it is amazingly economical to use.

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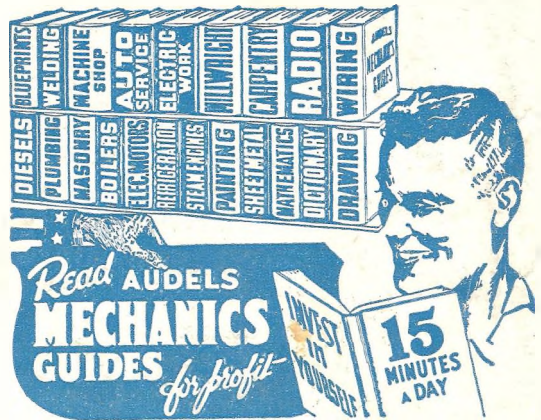
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