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ASTONISHING STORIES

JUNE

STORM CLOUD ON DEKA
A "VORTEX BLASTER" NOVELETTE
by E.E. SMITH, PH.D.

THE CRYSTAL CIRCE
by HENRY KUTTNER

OUT OF THE SEA
by LEIGH BRACKETT

ALFRED BESTER
R.M. WILLIAMS
AND MANY OTHERS

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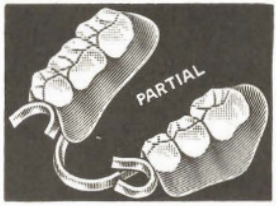

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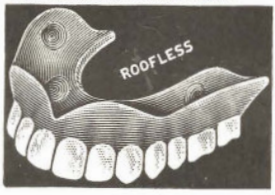

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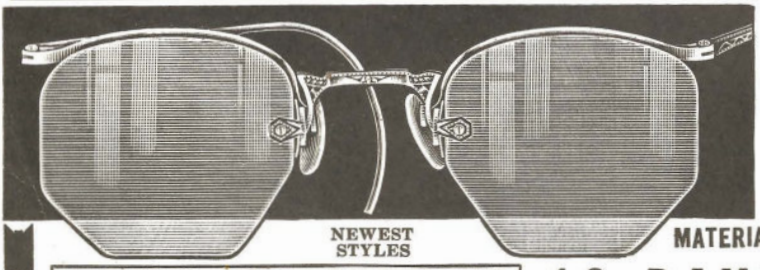

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Established 27 Years

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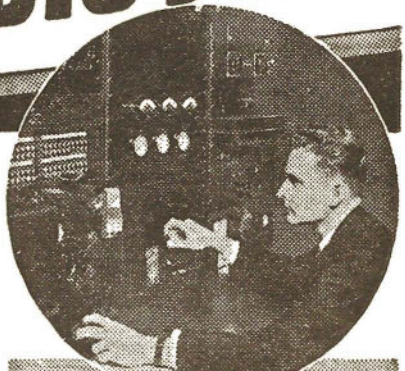


BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. FIXING RADIO SETS, a booming field today, (lower illustration) pays many Radio Technicians $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week extra in spare time.

I Trained These Men

Makes $50 a Week

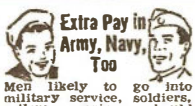
"I am making around $50 a week after all expenses are paid, and I am getting all the Radio work I can take care of, thanks to N. R. I." H. W. SPANGLER, 126½ S. Gay St., Knoxville, Tenn.

$5 to $10 Week in Spare Time

"I am engaged in spare time Radio Work. I average from $5 to $10 a week. I often wished that I had enrolled sooner because all this extra money sure does come in handy." THEODORE K. DuBREE, Horsham, Penn.

Sergeant in Signal Corps

"I am now a Sergeant in the U. S. Army, Signal Corps. My duties cover Radio operating, maintenance of Army Transmitters and Receivers, operating Teletypes, handling duties of the Chief Operator in his absence." SERGEANT RICHARD W. ANDERSON, U. S. Army (Address Omitted for military reasons.)



Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon NOW! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times a private's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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ALL STORIES NEW

VOL. 3 JUNE, 1942 NO. 4

NOVELETTES

SHORT STORIES

SPECIAL FEATURES

Cover by Virgil Finlay, illustrating scene from "The Crystal Circe"

Inside illustrations by Bok, Giunta, Morey, J. B. Musacchia

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE JULY 1

Published quarterly by Fictioneers, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter September 17, 1941, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.
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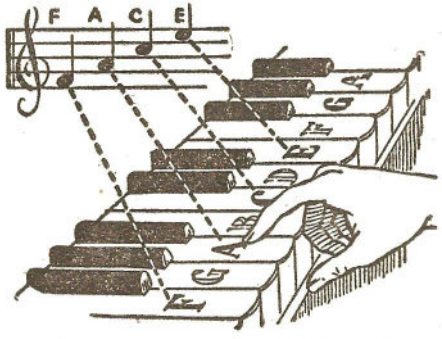

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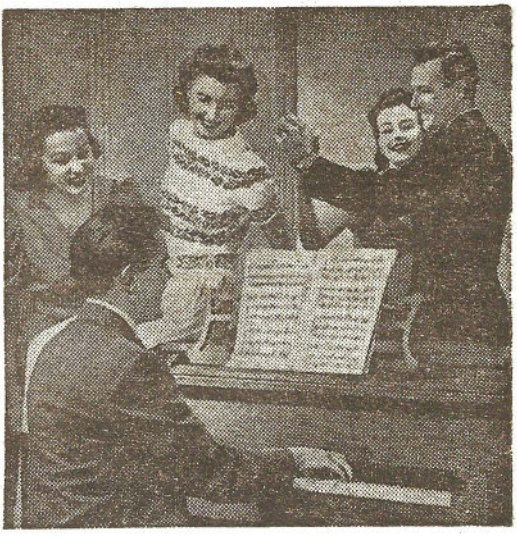

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☐ Check here if under 16 years of age.

Editor's Note: It is the intention of this department to publish news and information about fans and their activities, plus interesting sidelights about the professionals who write, edit or draw for the science fiction magazines. Viewpoints will be open to, and serve as the voice of, all readers and fans who care to make use of it. All items should be addressed to ASTONISHING STORIES, Fictioneers, Inc., 210 East 43 Street, New York City.

Doughnut Specialist Smith Blasts Vortices in His Spare Time

THE vivid personality of "Skylark" Smith blasts its way into Fictioneers pages after one of the most distinguished and hectic careers that any man ever had.

Fifty-four year old E. E. Smith's mind has grown keener with the years, his imagination more vast. With a background of lumbering, railroading, mining and surveying in his youth, Smith was finally induced to attend prep school by his older sister and brother. He took the course at the University of Idaho in his stride and then went on to win a scholarship at the College of Engineering, where he was graduated a chemical engineer.

He worked for the Bureau of Chemistry in Washington, and at the same time took a course in organic and food chemistry at George Washington University, emerging as a cereal technologist. He procured an M. S. degree at Harvard and John Hopkins and got his Ph. D. at George Washington U.

Smith married in 1915 and now has three children, and an unspecified number of grandchildren.

He was known as Doughnut Specialist Smith during his years as Director of Research for the Dawn Doughnut Company of Jackson, Michigan. Many's the startling innovation his great imagination has pioneered in the more efficient production of doughnuts.

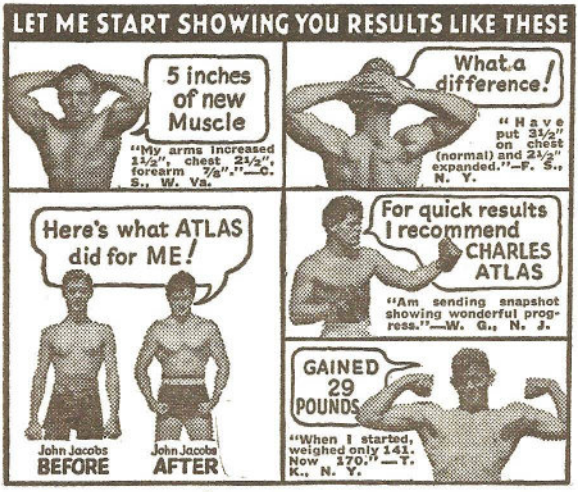
If you new writers think that you're having a tough time getting started in writing, just listen to the tale of Skylark Smith.

One hot day during World War I, betwixt a discussion of things particularly cool, E. E. chanced to remark that outer space was a prime example of efficient refrigeration. One thing led to another and finally Smith was to write "The Skylark of Space," aided and abetted by Lee Hawkins Garby, who was to do the love interest.

It wasn't until 1919 that work really began upon this epic classic, and after its completion it was kicked back in record time by every editor who would even remotely consider publishing a fantascience adventure. Five years passed before acceptance by the first science-fiction magazine on the American market, and two more years elapsed before it was published.

(Continued on page 8)

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*



CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

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I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—**my way.** I give you **no gadgets or contraptions to fool with.** When you have learned to develop your Strength through *"Dynamic Tension"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No **theory**—every exercise is **practical.** And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

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In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83T, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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(Pleas print or write plainly)

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(Continued from page 6)

The appearance of "The Skylark of Space" in 1928 caused a veritable sensation.

It has appeared on every fans' list of the ten best science-fantasies of all time ever since.

"Skylark Three," a sequel, followed a few years after the first story, and then, in quicker succession, "Space Hounds of the IPC," "Triplanetary," "Skylark of Valeron," "Galactic Patrol," the Grey Lensman series and finally Smith's latest "Vortex Blaster" stories, of which "Storm Cloud on Deka" is the second.

E. E. Smith hopes to do more writing in the future than he has done in the past, and his much appreciated stories should be appearing more frequently now than ever before.

Another novelette, the third in the Vortex Blasters series, is scheduled for publication in this magazine soon.

Incidentally, we were a little dubious about the Gray Lensmen references in the present story, inasmuch as the series in question had appeared in another publication. But the Galactic Patrol stuff is so essentially a part of the present series that it did not seem practical to remove or change in any way.

Did You Know?

THAT the creators of the now world-famous "Superman" strip, Jerry Seigel and Joe Shuster, once published their own fan magazine known as *Science Fiction?*

That famous fantasy authors Manly Wade Wellman, Robert A. Heinlein (who writes under the names of Anson MacDonald and Lyle Monroe), L. Ron Hubbard, and John Victor Peterson have all been called to various branches of the army and navy?

That such famous fantasy authors, past and present, as Thomas P. Kelley and Chester D. Cuthbert are Canadians; Allen Connell is Australian, and A. L. Burkholder resides in the Philippines?

That an old-time science-fiction fan magazine called *Fantasy Magazine* once ran a huge novel called "Cosmos" which was written round-robin style by the following authors: A. Merritt, Edward E. Smith, Ph. D., David H. Keller, M. D., Ralph Milne Farley, Arthur J. Burks, Otis Adelbert Kline, E. Hoffman Price, P. Schuyler Miller, Rae Winters, Edmond Hamilton, John W. Campbell, Jr., Francis Flagg, Bob Olsen, J. Harvey Haggard, Raymond A. Palmer, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, Abner J. Gelula and Eando Binder!

War and the Pacificon

THE Pacificon, the fourth in the series of World Science Fiction Conventions, which had been planned for 1942 is now indefinitely postponed. Los Angeles was to have been the home of the convention this year, but, as you know, Los Angeles is on the West Coast and subject to many stringent air-raid precautions, which unquestionably would affect the proper conducting of a convention. The committee also points out that there is no way of knowing what restrictions may be placed on travel before the summer or fall of 1942, or the percentage of science-fictionists who may be drafted. They are, therefore, leaving it up to the science-fiction fans.

They have suggested several alternatives. One, to go ahead as if nothing had happened and they'll see it through to the best of their ability. Two, postpone the convention for the duration. Three, move the convention site to some inland city which might not be as severely affected by war conditions. Mail your choice into the Pacificon Committee, c/o Box 6475, Met. Station, Los Angeles, Calif., and enclose a three cent stamp for their special bulletin covering the situation.

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NO MONEY DOWN 10 DAY TRIAL

Easy Terms—10c a Day

Liberal Allowance on your old Machine

No obligation to buy. See machine on wide open 10 day trial. Pay me no money until you test, inspect, compare, and use this Underwood Noiseless. *You judge for yourself.* When you are convinced that this is the biggest typewriter bargain you have ever seen then say, "I'll buy." Send only 70c a week or $3.00 a month until term price of only $48.85 is paid. **There is no red tape or investigation—My offer is exactly as I state it.**

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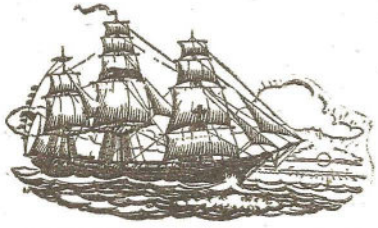
Discover "Rocking Chair's" smoother flavor inspired by Keg-Rocked whiskeys of old!

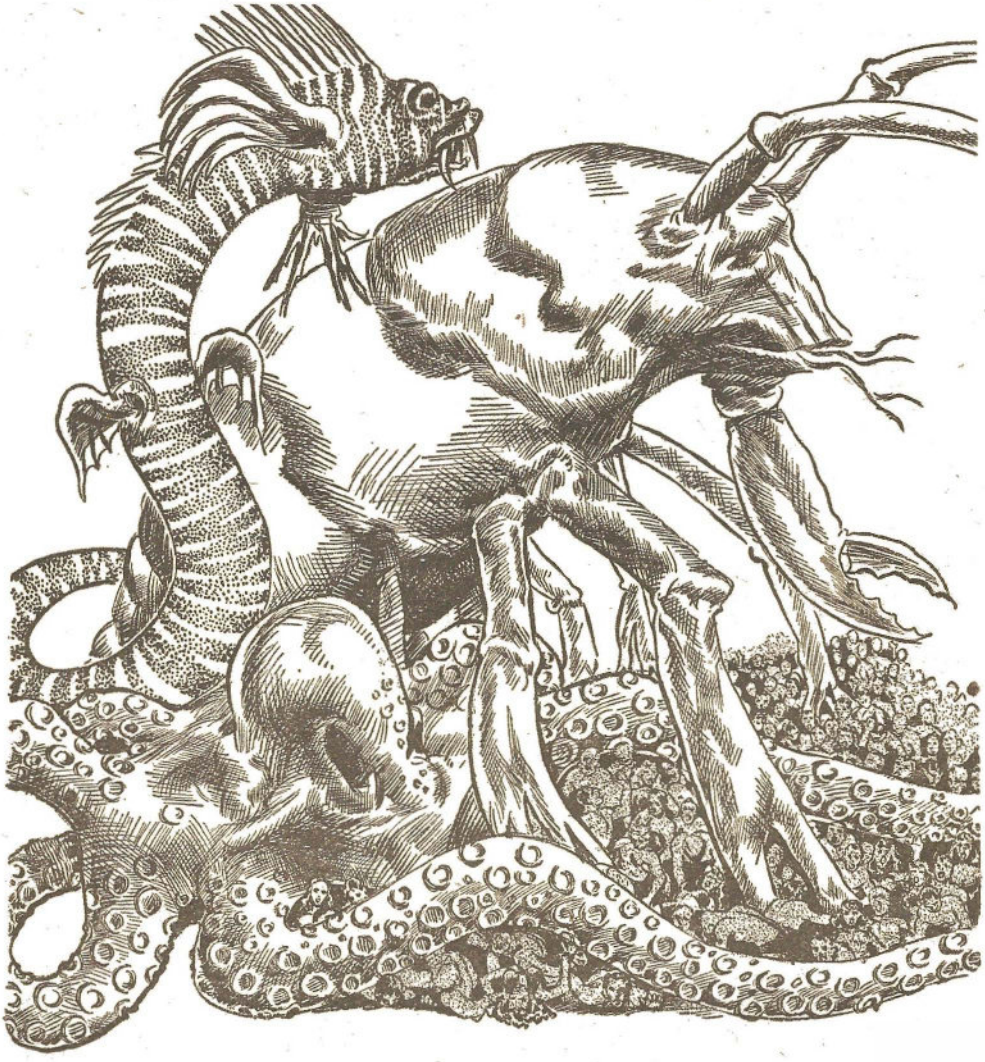


TALES OF SEA and shore-rocked whiskeys impressed Mr. Boston! So today he achieves the superb flavor of Rocking Chair by *controlled agitation in a special blending process.*

GET A BOTTLE of Mr. Boston's Rocking Chair Whiskey today! Discover the mellow flavor that made those old "rocked in the keg" whiskeys so famous! The *thrifty price* will please you!

MR. BOSTON ROCKING CHAIR BLENDED WHISKEY

85 Proof • 75% Grain Neutral Spirits • Ben-Burk, Inc., Boston, Mass.



OUT OF THE SEA

By Leigh Brackett

"This is evolution, Fallon. So shall we be, a million years from now. Take it—or turn back forever. In an hour it will be too late!"

CHAPTER ONE

The Hordes from Below

ANYONE but Webb Fallon would have been worried sick. He was down to his last five dollars and quart of Scotch. His girl Madge had sketched him categorically in vitriol, and

married somebody else. His job on the Los Angeles *Observer* was, like all the jobs he'd ever had, finally, definitely, and for all time, cancelled.

Being Webb Fallon, he was playing a fast game of doubles on the volley-ball court at Santa Monica Beach, letting the sun and the salt air clear off a hangover.

When he came off the court, feeling fine and heading for the water, big Chuck Weigal called to him.

"So the *Observer* finally got wise to you, huh? How come?"

Fallon grinned, his teeth white against the mahogany burn of his hard, lean oval face. His corded body gleamed in the hot sun, and his slanting grey-green eyes were mockingly bright.

"If you must know," he said, "I was busy drowning my sorrows on the night of the big quake, two weeks ago. I didn't know anything about it until I read the papers next morning. The boss seemed to think I was a little—er—negligent."

Weigal grunted. "I don't wonder. A quake as bad as the 'Frisco one, and you sleep through it! Phew!"

Fallon grinned, and went on. About half-way down the beach a bright yellow bathing suit caught his eye. He whistled softly and followed it into the water. After all, now that Madge was gone. . . .

He knew the girl by sight. Fallon had an eye for blonde hair and Diana-esque figures. That was one thing Madge and he had fought about.

The girl swam like a mermaid. Fallon lengthened his stroke, came up beside her, and said, "Hello."

She blinked salt water out of sapphire blue eyes and stared. "I know you," she said: "You're Webb Fallon."

"I'm flattered."

"You needn't be. I know a girl named Madge, too."

"Oh." Fallon's grey-green eyes narrowed. His lean face looked suddenly ugly, like a mean dog. Or more like a wolf, perhaps, with his thin straight lips and slanting eyes.

"What did Madge tell you about me?" he asked softly.

"She said you were no good." The blue eyes studied his face. "And," added the girl deliberately, "I think she was right."

"Yeah?" said Fallon, very gently. He hadn't yet got over his cold rage at being jilted for a dull, prosperous prig. The girl's face was like a mask cut out of brown wood and set with hard sapphires. He made a tigerish, instinctive movement toward it.

A wave took them unawares, knocked them together and down in a struggling tangle. They broke water, gasping in the after-swirl.

Then, quite suddenly, the girl screamed.

It was a short scream, strangled with sea-water, but it set the hairs prickling on Fallon's neck. He looked past the girl, outward.

Something was rising out of the sea.

WEBB FALLON, standing shoulder-deep in the cold water, stared in a temporary paralysis of shock. The thing simply couldn't be.

There was a snout armed with a wicked sword. That and the head behind it were recognizable as those of a swordfish. But the neck behind them was long and powerful, and set on sloping shoulders. Members like elongated fins just becoming legs churned the surface. A wholly piscene tail whipped up gouts of spray behind the malformed silver body.

Fallon moved suddenly. He grabbed the girl and started toward shore. The Thing emitted a whistling grunt and surged after them.

Waves struck them; the aftersuck pulled at their legs. They floundered, like dreamers caught in nightmare swamps. And Fallon, through the thrashing and the surf and the sea-water in his ears, began to hear other sounds.

There was a vast stirring whisper, a waking and surging of things driven up and out. There were overtones of cries from unearthly throats. Presently, then, there were human screams.

Fallon's toes found firm sand. Still clutching the girl, he splashed through the shallows. He could hear the wallowing thunder of creatures behind them, and knew that they had to run. But he faltered, staring, and the girl made a little choked sound beside him.

The shallow margin of the sea was churned to froth by a nightmare horde. The whole broad sweep of the beach was invaded by things that, in that stunned moment, Fallon saw only as confused shadows.

He started to run, toward the hilly streets beyond the beach. The creature with the swordfish snout was almost on them. A fish, out of the sea! It reared its snaky neck and struck down.

Fallon dodged convulsively. The sword flashed down and buried itself in the sand not five inches from his foot.

It never came out of the sand. A tailless, stub-legged thing with three rows of teeth in its shark-like jaws fastened onto the creature's neck, and there was hot mammalian blood spilling out.

They ran together, Fallon and the girl. The summer crowds filling the beaches, the promenade, the hot-dog stands and bath-houses, were fighting in blind panic up the narrow streets to the top of the bluff. It was useless to try to get through. Fallon made for an apartment house.

Briefly, in clear, bright colors, he saw isolated scenes. A starfish twenty feet across wrapping itself around a woman and her stupefied child. A vast red crab pulling a man to bits with its claws. Something that might once have been an octopus walking on four spidery legs, its remaining tentacles plucking curiously at the volley-ball net that barred its way.

The din of screaming and alien cries, the roar of the crowds and the slippery, thrashing bodies melted into dull confusion. Fallon and the girl got through, somehow, to the comparative safety of the apartment house lobby.

They found an empty place by a bay window and stopped. Fallon's legs were sagging, and his heart was a leaping pain. The girl crumpled up against him.

They stared out of the window, dazed, detached, like spectators watching an imaginative motion-picture and not believing it.

THERE was carnage ouside, on the broad sunlit beach. Men and women and children died, some caught directly, others trampled down and unable to escape. But more than men were dying.

Things fought and ate each other. Things of mad distortion of familiar shapes. Things unlike any living creature. Normal creatures grown out of all sanity. But all coming, coming, coming, like a living tidal wave.

The window went in with a crash. A woman's painted, shrieking face showed briefly and was gone, pulled away by a simple marine worm grown long as a man. The breeze brought Fallon the stench of blood and fish, drowning the clean salt smell.

"We've got to get out of here," he said. "Come on."

The girl came, numbly. Neither spoke. There was, somehow, nothing to say. Fallon took down a heavy metal curtain rod, holding it like a club.

The front doors had broken in. People trampled through in the blind strength of terror. Fallon shrugged.

"No way to get past them," he said. "Stay close to me. And for God's sake, don't fall down."

The girl's wet blonde head nodded. She took hold of the waistband of his trunks, and her hand was like ice against his spine.

Out through broken doors into a nar-

row street, and then the crowd spread out a little, surging up a hillside. Police sirens were beginning to wail up in the town.

Down below, the beaches were cleared of people. And still the things came in from the sea. Fallon could see over the Santa Monica Pier now, and the broad sweep of sand back of the yacht harbor was black with surging bodies.

Most of the yachts were sunk. The bell-buoy had stopped ringing.

The sunlight was suddenly dim. Fallon looked up. His grey-green eyes widened, and his teeth showed white in a snarl of fear.

Thundering in on queer heavy wings, their bodies hiding the sun, were beasts that stopped his heart in cold terror.

They had changed, of course. The bat-like wings had been broadened and strengthened. They must, like the other sea-born monsters, have developed lungs.

But the size was still there! Five to ten feet in wing-spread—and behind, the thin, deadly, whip-like tails.

Rays! The queer creatures that fly bat-like under water—now thundering like giant bats through the air!

There were flying fish wheeling round them like queer rigid birds. They had grown legs like little dragons, and long tails.

A pair of huge eels slid over the rough earth, pulled down a man and fought over the body. Policemen began to appear, and there was a popping of guns. The sirens made a mad skirling above the din.

Some of the rays swooped to the crowded beach. Others came on, scenting human food.

Guns began to crack from the cliff-tops, from the windows of apartment houses. Fallon caught the chatter of sub-machine guns. One of the rays was struck almost overhead.

It went out of control like a fantastic plane and crashed into the hillside, just behind Fallon and the girl. Men died shrieking under its twenty-foot, triangular bulk.

It made a convulsive leap.

The girl slipped in the loose rubble, and lost her hold on Fallon. The broad tentacles on the ray's head closed in like the horns of a half moon, folding the girl in a narrowing circle of death.

FALLON raised his iron curtain rod. He was irrationally conscious, with a detached fragment of his brain, of the girl's sapphire eyes and the lovely strength of her body. Her face was set with terror, but she didn't scream. She fought.

Something turned over in Fallon's heart, something buried and unfamiliar. Something that had never stirred for Madge. He stepped in. The bar swung up, slashed down.

The leathery skin split, but still the feelers hugged the girl closer. The great ray heaved convulsively, and something whistled past Fallon's head. It struck him across the shoulders, and laid him in dazed agony in the dirt.

The creature's tail, lashing like a thin long whip.

Webb Fallon got up slowly. His back was numb. There was hot blood flooding across his skin. The girl's eyes were blue and wide, fixed on him. Terribly fixed. She had stopped fighting.

Fallon found an eye, set back of one of the tentacles. He set the end of the iron rod against it, and thrust downward. . . .

Whether it was the rod, or the initial bullet, Fallon never knew, but the tentacles relaxed. The girl rose and came toward him, and together they went up the hill.

They were still together when sweating volunteers picked them up and carried them back into the town.

Fallon came to before they finished sewing up his back. The emergency hospital was jammed. The staff worked in a kind

of quiet frenzy, with a devil's symphony of hysteria beating up against the windows of the wards.

They hadn't any place to keep Fallon. They taped his shoulders into a kind of harness to keep the wound closed, and sent him out.

The girl was waiting for him in the areaway, huddled in a blanket. They had given Fallon one, too, but his cotton trunks were still clammy cold against him. He stood looking down at the girl, his short brown hair unkempt, the hard lines of his face showing sharp and haggard.

"Well," he said. "What are you waiting for?"

"To thank you. You saved my life."

"You're welcome," said Fallon. "Now you'd better go before I contaminate you."

"That's not fair. I am grateful, Webb. Truly grateful."

Fallon would have shrugged, but it hurt. "All right," he said wearily. "You can tell Madge what a little hero I was."

"Please don't leave me," she whispered. "I haven't any place to go. All my clothes and money were in the apartment."

He looked at her, his eyes cold and probing. Brief disappointment touched him, and he was surprised at himself. Then he went deeper, into the clear sapphire eyes, and was ashamed—which surprised him even more.

"What's your name?" he asked. "And why haven't you fainted?"

"Joan Daniels," she said. "And I haven't had time."

Fallon smiled. "Give me your shoulder, Joan," he said, and they went out.

CHAPTER TWO

Catastrophe—or Weapon?

SANTA MONICA was a city under attack. Sweating policemen struggled with solid jams of cars driven by wild-eyed madmen. Horns hooted and

blared. And through it all, like banshees screaming with eldritch mirth, the sirens wailed.

"They'll declare martial law," said Fallon. "I wonder how long they can hold those things back?"

"Webb," whispered Joan, "what *are* those things?"

Strangely, they hadn't asked that before.

They'd hardly had time even to think it.

Fallon shook his head. "God knows. But it's going to get worse. Hear that gunfire? My apartment isn't far from here. We'll get some clothes and a drink, and then . . ."

It was growing dark when they came out again. Fallon felt better, with a lot of brandy inside him and some warm clothes. Joan had a pair of his slacks and a heavy sweater.

He grinned, and said, "Those never looked as nice on me."

Soldiers were throwing up barricades in the streets. The windows of Corbin's big department store were shattered, the bodies of dead rays lying in the debris. The rattle of gunfire was hotter, and much closer.

"They're being driven back," murmured Fallon.

A squadron of bombers droned over, and presently there was the *crump* and roar of high explosives along the beaches. The streets were fairly clear now, except for stragglers and laden ambulances, and the thinning groups of dead.

Fallon thought what must be happening in the towns farther south, with their flat low beaches and flimsy houses. How far did this invasion extend? What was it?

it? And how long would it last?

He got his car out of the garage behind the apartment house. Joan took the wheel, and he lay down on his stomach on the back seat.

His back hurt like hell.

"One good thing," he remarked wryly. "The finance company won't be chasing me through this. Just go where the traffic looks lightest, and shout if you need me."

He went to sleep.

It was morning when he woke. Joan was asleep on the front seat, curled up under a blanket. She had spread one over him, too.

Fallon smiled, and looked out.

The first thing he noticed was the unfamiliar roar of motors overhead, and the faint crackling undertone of gunfire. They were still under seige, then, and the defenders were still giving ground.

They were parked on Hollywood Boulevard near Vine. Crowds of white-faced, nervous people huddled along the streets. The only activity was around the newsboys.

Fallon got out, stiff and cursing, and went to buy a paper. An extra arrived before he got there. The boy ripped open the bundle, let out a startled squawk, and began to yell at the top of his lungs.

A low, angry roar spread down the boulevard. Fallon got a paper, and smiled a white-toothed, ugly smile. He shook Joan awake and gave her the paper.

"There's your answer. Read it."

SHE read aloud: "Japs Claim Sea Invasion Their Secret Weapon!

"Only a few minutes ago, the Amalgamated Press recorded an official broadcast from Tokyo, declaring that the fantastic wave of monsters which have sprung from the ocean at many points along the Western Coast was a new war-weapon of the Axis which would cause the annihilation of American and world-wide democratic civilization.

"The broadcast, an official High Command communique, said in part: 'The Pacific is wholly in our hands. American naval bases throughout the ocean are useless, and the fleet where it still exists is isolated. In all cases our new weapon has

succeeded. The Pacific states, with the islands, come within our natural sphere of influence. We advise them to submit peacefully.' "

Joan Daniels looked up at Fallon. At first there was only stunned pallor in her face. Then the color came, dark and slow.

"Submit peacefully!" she whispered. "So that's it. A cowardly, fiendish, utterly terrible perversion of warfare—something so horrible that it . . ."

"Yeah," said Fallon. "Save it."

He was leafing through the paper. There was a lot more—hurried opinions by experts, guesses, conjectures, and a few facts.

Fallon said flatly. "They seem to be telling the truth. Fragmentary radio messages have come in from the Pacific. Monsters attacked just as suddenly as they did here, and at about the same time. They simply clogged the guns, smothered the men, and wrecked ground equipment by sheer weight of numbers."

Joan shuddered. "You wouldn't think . . ."

"No," grunted Fallon. "You wouldn't." He flung the paper down. "Yah! Not an eyewitness account in the whole rag!"

Joan looked at him thoughtfully. She said, "Well. . . ."

"They fired me once," he snarled. "Why should I crawl back?"

"It was your own fault, Webb. You know it."

He turned on her, and again his face had the look of a mean dog. "That," he said, "is none of your damned business."

She faced him stubbornly, her sapphire eyes meeting his slitted grey-green ones with just a hint of anger.

"You wouldn't be a bad sort, Webb," she said steadily, "if you weren't so lazy and so hell-fired selfish!"

Cold rage rose in him, the rage that had shaken him when Madge told him she was through. His hands closed into brown, ugly fists.

Joan met him look for look, her bright hair tangling over the collar of his sweater, the strong brown curves of cheek and throat catching the early sunlight. And again, as it had in that moment on the cliff, something turned over in Fallon's heart.

"What do you care," he whispered, "whether I am or not?"

For the first time her gaze flickered, and something warmer than the sunlight touched her skin.

"You saved my life," she said. "I feel responsible for you."

Fallon stared. Then, quite suddenly, he laughed. "You fool," he whispered. "You damned little fool!"

He kissed her. And he kissed her gently, as he had never kissed Madge.

They got breakfast. After that, Fallon knew, they should have gone east, with the tense, crawling hordes of refugees. But somehow he couldn't go. The distant gunfire drew him, the stubborn, desperate planes.

They went back, toward the hills of Bel Air. After all, there was plenty of time to run.

Things progressed as he had thought they would. Martial law was declared. An orderly evacuation of outlying towns was going forward. Fallon got through the police lines with a glib lie about an invalid brother. It wasn't hard—there was no danger yet the way he was going, and the police were badly overburdened.

Fallon kept the radio on as he drove. There was a lot of wild talk—it was too early yet for censorship. A big naval battle east of Wake Island, another near the Aleutians. The defense, for the present, was getting nowhere.

Up on the crest of a sun-seared hill, using powerful glasses from his car, Fallon shook his head with a slow finality.

The morning mists were clearing. He had an unobstructed view of Hollywood, Beverly Hills, the vast bowl of land sloping away to the sea. The broad boulevards to the east were clogged with solid black streams. And to the west . . .

TO THE west there were barricades. There were clouds of powder smoke, and fleets of low-flying planes. And there was something else.

Something like a sluggish, devouring tide, lapping at the walls of the huge M-G-M studios in Culver City, swamping the tarmac at Clover Field, flowing resistlessly on and on.

Bombs tore great holes in the restless sea, but they flowed in upon themselves and were filled. Big guns ripped and slashed at the swarming creatures. Many died. But there were always more. Many, many more.

The shallow margin of the distant ocean was still churned to froth. Still the things came out of it, surging up and on.

Fighting, spawning, dying—and advancing.

Joan Daniels pressed close against him, shuddering. "It just isn't possible, Webb! Bombers, artillery, tanks, trained soldiers. And we can't stop them!" She stiffened suddenly. "Webb!" she cried. "Look there!"

Where the bombers swooped through the smoke, another fleet was coming. A fleet of flat triangular bodies with batlike wings, in numbers that clouded the sun. Rays, blind and savage and utterly uncaring.

Machine guns brought them down by the hundred, but more of them came. They crashed into heavy ships, fouled propellers, broke controls.

Joan looked away. "And there are so few planes," she whispered.

Fallon nodded. "The whole coast is under attack, remember, from Vancouver to Mexico. There just aren't enough men, guns, or planes to go round. More are coming from the east, but . . ." He shrugged and was silent.

"Then—then you think we'll have to surrender?"

"Doesn't look hopeful, does it? Japan in control of the Pacific, and this here. We'll hold out for a while, of course. But suppose these things come out of the sea indefinitely?"

"We've got to assume they can." Joan's eyes were dark and very tired. "What's to prevent Japan from loaning her weapon to her friends? Think of these things swarming in over England."

"War," said Fallon somberly. "A hell of a long, rotten war."

He leaned against the car, his grey-green eyes half closed. The breeze came in from the sea, heavy with the stench of amphibian bodies. The radio droned on. The single deep line between Fallon's straight brows grew deeper. He began to talk, slowly, to Joan.

"The experts say that the Little Brown Brothers must have some kind of a movable projector capable of producing rays which upset the evolutionary balance and cause abnormal growth. Rays like hard X-rays, or the cosmic rays that govern reproduction.

"California Tech has dissected several types of monsters. They say that individual cell groups are affected, causing spontaneous growth in living individuals, and that metabolism has been enormously speeded, so that life-cycles which normally took years now take only a few weeks.

"They also say that huge numbers—the bulk of these creatures—are mutants, new individuals changed in the egg or the reproductive cell. All these monsters are growing and spawning at a terrific tempo. Billions of eggs, laid and hatched, even with the high mortality rate.

"They're evolving, at a fantastic rate of speed. They're growing legs and lungs and becoming mammals. They're coming out of the sea, just as our ancestors did millions of years ago. They're coming fast, and they're hungry."

He fixed the girl suddenly with a bright, sharp stare.

"Do you think a thing as big as that is man-made?"

THERE was a grim, stony weariness in her face. "The Japanese say so. What other explanation is there?"

"But," said Fallon, "why not South America, too?"

"They were probably afraid the monsters might get out of hand and tackle their own people," said Joan bitterly.

"Maybe." Again Fallon's eyes were distant. Then he clapped his hands sharply and sprang up. "Yes! Got it, Joan!"

The quick motion ripped at the wound across his back. He swayed and caught her shoulder, but he didn't stop talking.

"Einar Bjarnsson! He was my last job. I interviewed him the day before the quake. I want to see him, Joan. Now!"

She took his wrists, half frightened. "What is it, Webb?"

"Listen," he said softly. "Remember the radio calls from the islands? The monsters came out of the west here, didn't they? Well, out there—*they came out of the east!*"

Fallon explained, as he sent the car screaming perilously along winding mountain roads. Einar Bjarnsson was an expert on undersea life. He had charted tide paths and sub-sea 'rivers,' mapped the continental shelves and the great deeps.

Bjarnsson's recent exploration had been in the Pacific, using a specially constructed small submarine. His findings on deep-sea phenomena had occupied space in scientific journals and the Sunday supplements of newspapers throughout the world.

Two days before the big quake Einar Bjarnsson returned to the place he called home—a small bachelor cabin on a hilltop, crammed with scientific traps and trophies of his exploring. Webb Fallon drew the assignment of interviewing him.

"I was pretty sore at Madge, then," Fallon confessed, "and I had a ferocious hangover. The interview didn't go so well. But I remember Bjarnsson mentioning something about a volcanic formation quite close to the Pacific coast—something nobody had noticed before. It was apparently extinct, and the only thing that made it notable was its rather unusual conformation."

Joan stared at him. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Fallon shrugged. "Maybe nothing. Only I recall that the epicenter of the recent quake was somewhere in the vicinity of Bjarnsson's volcano. I remember that damned quake quite well, because it cost me my job."

Joan opened her mouth and closed it again, hard. Fallon grinned.

"You were going to tell me it wasn't the quake, but my own bad character," he said mockingly.

There was something grim in the upthrust lines of her jaw. "I can't make you out, Webb," she said quietly. "Sometimes I think there's good stuff in you—and then I think Madge was right!"

Fallon's dark oval face went ugly, and he didn't speak again until Bjarnsson's house came in sight.

CHAPTER THREE

Bjarnsson's Submarine

FALLON stopped the car and got out stiffly, feeling suddenly tired and disinterested. He hesitated. Why bother with a crazy hunch? The rolling crash of gunfire was getting closer. Why not forget the whole thing and go while the going was good?

He realized that Joan was watching him with sapphire eyes grown puzzled and hard. "Damn it!" he snarled. "Stop looking at me as though I were a bug under glass!"

Joan said, "Is that Bjarnsson in the doorway?"

For the third time Fallon's hands clenched in anger. Then he turned sharply, white about the lips with the pain it cost him, and strode up to the small rustic cabin.

Einar Bjarnsson remembered him. He stood aside, a tall stooped man with massive shoulders and a gaunt, cragged face. Coarse fair hair shot with grey hung in his eyes, which were small and the color of frozen sea-water.

He said, in a deep, slow voice, "Come in. I have been watching through my telescope. Most interesting. But it gets too close now. I am surprised you are here. Duty to your paper, eh?"

Fallon let it pass. He might get more out of Bjarnsson if the explorer thought he was still with the *Observer*. And then the thought struck him—what was he going to do if his hunch was right?

Nothing. He had no influence. The statesmen were handling things. Suppose Japan did take the Pacific States? Suppose there was a war? He couldn't do anything about it. Let the big boys worry. There'd be a beach somewhere that he could comb in peace.

He made a half turn to go out again. Then he caught sight of a map on the far wall—a map of the Pacific.

Something took him to it. He put his finger on a spot north and east of the Hawaiian Islands. And even then he couldn't have said why he asked his question.

"Your volcanic formation was about here, wasn't it, Bjarnsson?"

The tall Norseman stared at him with cold shrewd eyes. "Yes. Why?"

"Look here." Fallon drew a rough circle with his fingertip, touching the Pacific Coast, swinging across the ocean through the Gilberts and the Marshalls, touching Wake, and curving up again to Vancouver.

"The volcanic formation is the center of that circle," Fallon said. "It was also the epicenter of the recent quake, according to Cal-Tech seismologists. That's what gave me the hunch. The monsters seem to be fanning out in a circle from some central point located about there."

"That is already explained," said Bjarnsosn. "The Japanese may have their projector located there. And why not?"

"No reason at all," Fallon admitted. "You mentioned, in your interview, something about a Japanese ocean survey ship coming up just as you left. That ship might still have been near there at the time of the quake, mightn't it?"

"It is possible. Go on." There was a little sharp flame flickering in Bjarnsson's eyes.

Fallon said, "Could these super-evolutionary rays be caused by volcanic action?"

Bjarnsson's grey-blond shaggy brows met, and the flame was sharper in his eyes. "Fantastic. But so is this whole affair. . . . Yes! If an area of intense radioactivity were uncovered by an earth-shift, the sea and all that swims in it might be affected."

"Ah!" Fallon's lips were drawn in a tight grin. "Suppose the officers of the Japanese ship saw the beginnings of the effect. Suppose they radioed home, and someone did some quick thinking. Suppose, in short, that they're lying."

"Ja," whispered Bjarnsson. "Let us think."

"I've already thought," said Fallon. "Two weeks would give them time to arrange everything. The important thing is this—if the force is man-made, even destroying the projector won't do any good. They'll have others. But if it were a natural force, the psychological aspect of the thing alone would be tremendous. There'd be a chance of doing something."

The explorer's deep light eyes glinted. "Our people would fight better if it was something they *could* fight." He swung to the big telescope mounted in the west windows. "Bah! It gets worse. Those creatures, they don't know when they are dead. And the way they come! We must go soon."

HE SWUNG back to Fallon. "But how to find out if you are right?"

"You have a submarine," said Fallon.

"So has the Navy."

"But they're all needed. Yours can go where the big ones can't—and go deeper. These monsters are all heading for land, which means they gravitate to the surface. You might get through below."

"Yes." Bjarnsson strode up and down the cluttered room. "We could take a depth charge. If we found the volcano to be the cause, we might close the fissure.

"Time, Fallon! That is the thing. A

few days, a few weeks, and the sheer pressure of these hordes will have forced the defenders back to the mountains and the deserts. Civilian morale will break."

He stopped, making a sharp gesture of futility. "I am forgetting. The radiations, Fallon. Without proper insulation, we would evolve like the sea-things. And it would take many days to make lead armor for us, even if we could get anyone to do the work."

"Radiations," said Fallon slowly. "Yeah. I'd forgotten that. Well, that stops that. Projector or volcano, you'd never reach it."

He brushed a hand across his eyes, all his brief enthusiasm burned away. He was getting like that. He wished he had a drink.

"Probably all moonshine, anyway," he said. "Anyhow, there's nothing we can do about it."

"Nothing!" Joan Daniels spoke so sharply that both men started. "You mean you're not even going to try?"

"Bjarnsson can pass the idea along for what it's worth."

"You know what that means, Webb! The idea would be either laughed at or pigeonholed, especially with the Jap propagandists doing such a good job. The government's got a war on its hands. Even if someone did pay attention, nothing would be done until too late. It never is."

She gripped his arms, looking up at him with eyes like sea-blue swords.

"If there's a bare chance of saving them, Webb, you've got to take it!"

Fallon looked down at her, his wolf's eyes narrowed.

"Listen," he said. "I'm not a fiction hero. We've got an Army, a Navy, an air force, and a secret service. They're getting paid for risking their necks. Let them worry. I had a hunch, which may not be worth a dime. I passed it along. Now I'm going to clear out, before anything more happens to me."

Joan's face was cut, sharp and bitter, from brown wood. Her eyes had fire in them, way back.

"Your logic," she whispered, "is flawless."

"I saved your life," said Fallon brutally. "What more do you want?"

The color drained from the brown wood, leaving it marble. Only the angry fires in her eyes lived, in the pale hard stone.

"You're remembering how I kissed you," said Fallon, so softly that he hardly spoke at all. "I don't know why I did. I don't know why I came here. I don't know . . ."

He stopped and turned to the door. Bjarnsson, very quietly, was picking up the phone. Fallon took the knob and turned it.

"I am sorry," said a quiet, sibilant voice. "You cannot leave. And you, sir—put down that telephone."

A SMALL neat man with a yellow face stood on the threshold. He was holding a small, neat, efficient-looking automatic. Fallon backed into the room, hearing the click of the cradle as the phone went down.

"You are Einar Bjarnsson?" The question was toneless and purely rhetorical. The black eyes had seen the whole room in one swift flick. "I am Kashimo," said the man, and waited.

"Fallon," Webb said easily. "This is Miss Daniels. We just dropped in for a chat. Mind if we go now?"

"I am afraid . . ." said Kashimo, and spread his hands. "I have been discourteous enough to eavesdrop. You have an inventive mind, Mr. Fallon. An inaccurate mind, but one that might prove disturbing to our plans."

"Don't worry," grunted Fallon. "I have no business whatsoever, and I attend to it closely. Your plans don't matter to me at all."

"Indeed." Kashimo studied him with black, bright eyes. "You are either a liar or a disgrace to your country, Mr. Fallon. But I may not take chances. You and the young lady I must, sadly, cancel out."

"And I?" Bjarnsson asked.

"You come with us," said Kashimo. Fallon saw four other small neat men outside, close behind their leader in the doorway.

He said, "What do you mean, 'cancel out'?" He knew, before Kashimo moved his automatic.

Kashimo said, "Mr. Bjarnsson, please to move out of the line of fire."

No one moved. The room was still, except for Joan's quick-caught breath. And then motion beyond the west windows caught Fallon's eye. A colder fear crawled in his heart, but his voice surprised him, it was so steady.

"Kashimo. Look out there."

The bright black eyes flicked warily aside. They widened sharply, and the cords went slack about the jaw. Fallon sprang.

He had forgotten the wound across his back. The shock of his body striking Kashimo turned him sick and faint. He knew that the little man fell, staggering the others so close behind him.

He knew that Joan Daniels was shouting, and that Bjarnsson had caught up an ebony war-club and was using it. Shots boomed in his ears. But one sound kept him from fainting—the thunder of slow relentless giant wings.

He got up in unsteady darkness. A round sallow face appeared. He struck at it. Bone cracked under his knuckles, and the face vanished. Fallon found a wall and clung to it.

Hands gripped his ankle—Kashimo's hands. Bjarnsson was outside mopping up. Fallon braced himself and drew his foot back. His toe caught Kashimo solidly under the angle of the jaw.

"Joan," said Fallon. The wings were thundering closer. Joan didn't answer. A sort of queer panic filled Fallon.

"Joan!" he cried. "Joan!"

"Here I am, Webb." She came from beyond the door, with a heavy little idol in her hand. It had blood on it. Her golden hair was tumbled and her neck was bleeding where a bullet had creased it.

Fallon caught her. He felt her wince under his hands. He didn't know quite what he wanted, except that she must be safe.

He only said, "Hurry, before those things get here."

The throb of wings was deafening. Bjarnsson came in, swinging his club. His cragged face was bloody, but his pale eyes blazed.

"Good man, Fallon," he grunted. "All right, let's go. There's a cave below here. Take their guns, young lady. We'll need them."

The sky beyond the west windows was clogged with huge black shapes. Fallon remembered the smashed windows of the department store in Santa Monica. "Joan," he said, "come here."

He put his arm around her shoulders. He might have walked all right without her, but somehow he wanted her there.

THEY dropped down the other side of the hill into a little brush-choked cleft. There was a shallow cave at one end.

"There go my windows," said Bjarnsson, and cursed in Swedish. "In with you, before those flying devils find us."

They were well hidden. Chances were the rays would go right over them—after they'd finished off Kashimo and his men. Bjarnsson said softly, "What did they want with me, Fallon?"

"There's only one thing they couldn't get from somebody else," returned Fallon. "Your submarine."

"Yes. The mechanisms are of my own design. They would need me to operate

it. Does that mean we are right about the volcano?"

"Maybe. They'd have made plans to control it, of course. Or they may want your ship merely as a model."

There was silence for a while. Outside, heavy wings began to beat again. They came perilously low, went over, and were gone.

Einar Bjarnsson said quietly, "I'm going to take the chance, Fallon. I'm going to try to get my ship through."

"What about the radiations?"

"If Kashimo was planning to use the ship, he'll have arranged for that. Anyway, I'm going to see." His ice-blue eyes stabbed at Fallon. "I can't do it alone."

Joan Daniels said, "I'll go."

Bjarnsson's eyes flicked from one to the other. Fallon's face was dark and almost dangerous.

"Wait a minute," he said gently.

Joan faced him. "I thought you were going away."

"I've changed my mind." Looking at her, at her blue, unsympathetic eyes, Fallon wondered if he really had. Perhaps the stunning shock of all that had happened had unsettled him.

Joan put both hands on his shoulders and looked straight into his eyes. "What kind of a man are you, Webb Fallon?"

"God knows," he said. "Where do you keep your boat, Bjarnsson?"

"In a private steel-and-concrete building at Wilmington. Some of the improvements are of interest to certain people. I keep them locked safely away. Or so I thought."

Fallon rose stiffly. "Kashimo didn't come in a car, that's certain. He'd have been arrested on sight. Any place for a plane to land near here?"

The explorer shook his head. "Unless it could come straight down."

Fallon snapped his finger. "A helicopter! That's it."

He led the way out. They found the 'copter on a small level space beyond the shoulder of the hill. Fallon nodded.

"Ingenious little chaps. The ship's painted like an Army plane. Any pilot would think it was a special job and let it severely alone." He turned abruptly to Joan.

"Take my car," he told her. "Get away from here, fast. Find someone in authority and make him listen—just in case."

She nodded. "Webb, why are you going?"

"Because there isn't time to get anyone else," he told her roughly. "Because there's a story there . . ."

He stopped, startled at what he had said. "Yes," he said slowly, "a story. My story. Oh hell, why did you have to come along?"

He put his hands suddenly back of her head and tilted her face up, his fingers buried in the warm curls at the base of her neck.

"I was all set," he whispered savagely. "I knew all the answers. And then you showed up. If you hadn't, I'd be halfway to Miami by now. I'd still be sure of myself. I would't be so damned confused, thinking one way and feeling another . . ."

She kissed him suddenly, warmly. "I'll make somebody listen," she said. "And then I'll wait—and pray."

Then she was gone. In a minute he heard the car start.

"Come on," he snarled at Bjarnsson. "I remember you said you fly."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Dead Man Comes Back

IT WAS a nightmare trip. The battle below was terribly clear. Twice they dodged flights of the giant rays, saved only because the scent of food kept the attention of the brutes on the ground.

The harbor basin at Wilmington was

choked with slippery, struggling beasts. There was hardly a sign of shipping. Bjarnsson made for the flat top of a square building, completely surrounded.

A flight of rays went over just as they landed. A trap door in the roof raised and was slammed shut again.

"Now," said Fallon grimly, and jumped out.

They were almost to the trap when a ray sighted them. Fallon shot it through the eye, but others followed. Bjarnsson wrenched up the trap. A surprised yellow face peered up, vanished in a crimson smear.

Bjarnsson hauled the body out and threw it as far as he could. The rays fought over it like monstrous gulls over a fish head.

Fallen retched and followed Bjarnsson down.

There were three other men in the building. One tried to shoot it out and was killed. The others were mechanics, with no stomachs for the guns.

They looked over the sub, a small stubby thing of unusual design, and Bjarnsson nodded his gaunt shaggy head.

"These suits of leaded fabric," he said. "One big, for me. The other smaller, for Kashimo, perhaps. Can you get into it?"

Fallon grunted. "I guess so. Hey! Look there."

"Ha! A depth charge, held in the claws I use for picking specimens from the ocean floor. They have prepared well, Fallon."

"You know what that means!" Fallon was aware of a forgotten, surging excitement. His palms came together with a ringing crack.

"I was right! Kashimo was going to hold you here until the Government capitulated. Then he was going out to shut off the power. There's no projector, Bjarnsson. It *was* the volcano. If we can close that fissure while there's still resistance, we'll have 'em licked!"

Bjarnsson's ice-blue eyes fixed Fallon with a sharp, unwavering stare, and he spoke slowly, calmly, almost without expression.

"It will take about three days to get there, working together. One fit of cowardice or indecision, one display of nerves or temper may destroy what slight chance we have."

"You mean," said Fallon, "you wish you had someone you could depend on." He smiled crookedly. "I'll do my best, Bjarnsson."

They struggled into the clumsy lead armor and shuffled into the small control room of the submarine. Everything had been prepared in advance. In a few seconds, automatic machinery was lowering the sub into its slip.

Water slapped the hull. Bjarnsson started the motors. They went forward slowly, through doors that opened electrically.

Ballast hissed and snarled into the tanks.

Bjarnsson said, "If we can get through this first pack, into deep water, we may make it." He pointed to a knife-switch. "Pull it."

Fallon did. Nothing seemed to happen. Bjarnsson sat hunched over the controls, cold blue eyes fixed on the periscope screen. Fallon had a swift, horrible sense of suffocation—the steel wall of the sub curving low over his helmeted head, the surge of huge floundering bodies in the water outside.

Something struck the hull. The little ship canted. Fallon gripped his seat with rigid, painful hands. Bjarnsson's armored, unhuman shoulders moved convulsively with effort. Fallon felt a raw panic scream rising in his throat . . .

HE CHOKED it back. Heavy muffled blows shook the submarine. The motors churned and shook. Fallon was afraid they were going

to stop. Sweat dripped in his eyes, misted his helmet pane.

The screws labored on. Fallon heard the tanks filling, and knew that they were going deeper. The blows on the hull grew fewer, farther between. Fallon began to breath again.

Einar Bjarnsson relaxed, just a little. His voice came muffled by his helmet. "The worst, Fallon—we're through it."

Fallon's throat was as dry as his face was wet. "But how?"

"Sometimes, in the deeps, one meets creatures. Hungry creatures, as large even as this ship. So I prepared the hull. That switch transforms us into a travelling electric shock, strong enough to discourage almost anything. I hoped it would get us through."

Thinking of what might have happened, Fallon shut his jaw hard. His voice was unnaturally steady as he asked, "What now?"

"Now you learn to operate the ship, in case something should happen to me." Bjarnsson's small blue eyes glinted through his helmet pane. "Too bad there is not a radio here, Fallon, so that you might broadcast as we go. As it is, I fear the world may miss a very exciting story."

"For God's sake," said Fallon wearily, and he wasn't swearing. "Let's not make this any tougher. Okay. This is the master switch . . ."

In the next twenty-four hours, Fallon learned to handle the submarine passably well. Built for a crew of two, the controls were fairly simple, once explained. Nothing else was touched. The only extra switch that mattered was the one that released the depth charge.

For an endless, monotonous hell, Fallon stood watch and watch about with Bjarnsson, one at the controls, one operating the battery of observation 'scopes, never sleeping. They saved on oxygen as a precaution, which added to the suffocating discomfort of the helmet-filters.

Black, close, nerve-rasping hours crawled by, became days. At last, Fallon, bent over the 'scope screen, licked the sweat from his thin lips and looked at Bjarnsson, a blurred dark hulk against the dim glow of the half-seen instrument panel.

Fallon's head ached. The hot stale air stank of oil. His body was tired and cramped and sweat-drenched, and the wound across his shoulders throbbed. He looked at the single narrow bunk.

There was nothing out there in the water but darkness. Even the deep-sea fish had felt the impulse and avoided the sub. Fallon got up.

"Bjarnsson," he said, "I'm going to sleep."

The explorer half turned in his seat. *"Ja?"* he said quietly.

"There's nothing out there," growled Fallon. "Why should I sit and glare at that periscope?"

"Because," Bjarnsson returned with ominous gentleness, "there might be something. We will not reach the volcano for perhaps ten hours. You had better watch."

Fallon's hard jaw set. "I can't go any longer without sleep."

Bjarnsson's cragged face was flushed and greasy behind his helmet, but his eyes were like glittering frost.

"All the whisky and the women," he whispered. "They make you soft, Fallon. The girl would have been better."

A flashing glimpse of Joan as she had looked in the car that morning crossed the eye of Fallon's mind—the tumbled fair hair and the sunlight warm on throat and cheek, and her voice saying, "You wouldn't be bad, Webb . . . so lazy and so hell-fired selfish!"

He cursed and started forward. The dark blur of Bjarnsson rose, blotting out the green glow. And then the panel light rose in a shuddering arc.

Fallon thought for a moment that he

was fainting. The low curve of the hull spun about. He knew that he fell, and that he struck something, or that something struck him. All orientation was lost. His helmet rang against metal like a great gong, and then he was sliding down a cluttered slope.

A blunt projection ripped across his back. Even through the leaded suit, the pain of it made him scream. He heard the sound as a distant, throttled echo. Then even the dim green light was gone.

THE screen flickered abominably. It showed mostly a blurred mob of people, trampling back and forth. Then it steadied and there was a picture, in bright, gay colors.

A starfish twenty feet across wrapping itself around a woman and her stupefied child.

"We saw that," said Fallon. "On the beach. Remember?"

He thought Joan answered, but there was another picture. A vast red crab, pulling a man to bits with its claws. And after that, the shrieking woman outside the broken window, dragged down by a worm.

"Wonder who got those shots?" said Fallon. Again Joan answered, but he didn't hear her. The pictures moved more rapidly. Rays, black against the blue sky. Planes falling. Guns firing and firing and choking to silence. People, black endless streams of them, running, running, running.

Joan pulled at him. Her face was strangely huge. Her eyes were as he had first seen them, hard chips of sapphire. And at last he heard what she was saying.

"Your fault, Webb Fallon. This might have been stopped. But you had to sleep. You couldn't take it. You're no good, Webb. No good. No good . . ."

Her voice faded, mixed somehow with a deep throbbing noise. "Joan!" he shouted. "Joan!" But her face faded too. The last he could see was her eyes, hard and steady and deeply blue.

"Joan," he whispered. There was a sound in his head like the tearing of silk, a sensation of rushing upward. Then he was quite conscious, his face pressed forward against his helmet and his body twisted, bruised and painful.

The first thing he saw was Einar Bjarnsson sprawled on the floor plates. A sharp point of metal had ripped his suit from neck to waist, laying his chest bare.

For a moment of panic horror, Fallon sought for tears in his own suit. There were none. He relaxed with a sob of relief, and looked up at the low curve of the hull.

It was still whole. Fallon shuddered. What product of abnormal evolution had attacked them in the moment that he had looked away? Strange he hadn't seen it coming, before.

The dim, still bulk of Einar Bjarnsson drew his gaze. Crouched there on his knees, it seemed to Fallon that the whole universe drew in and centered on that motionless body.

"I killed him," Fallon whispered. "I looked away. I might have seen the thing in time, but I looked away. I killed him."

For a long time he couldn't move. Then, like the swift stroke of a knife, terror struck him.

He was alone under the sea.

He got up. The chronometer showed an elapsed time of nearly two hours. The course, held by an Iron Mike, was steady. The beast that had attacked them must have lost interest.

Fallon clung to a stanchion and thought, harder than he had ever thought in his life.

He couldn't go on by himself. There had to be two men, to gauge distances, spot the best target, control the sub in the resultant blast. Why couldn't he forget the volcano? There were lots of islands in the Pacific, beyond the affected sphere.

He could stay drunk on palm wine as well as Scotch.

He'd never see Joan again, of course. Joan, accusing, hard-eyed, contemptuous. Joan, condemning him for murder . . .

Fallon laughed, a sharp, harsh bark. "Joan, hell! That was my own mind, condemning me!"

HIS gaze went back to Bjarnsson's body, rolling slightly with the motion of the ship. It boiled down to that. Murder. His careless, selfish murder of Bjarnsson. The murder of countless civilians. War, bitter, brutal, desperate.

Fallon drew a long, shuddering breath. His head dropped forward in his helmet, and his slanting wolf's eyes were closed. Then he turned and sat down at the controls.

The single forward 'scope field gave him vision enough to steer. Anything might attack from the sides or the stern—another beast grown incredibly huge, but not yet a lung breather.

Alone, he probably wouldn't succeed. He wouldn't live to know whether he had or not. His gloved hands clenched over the levers that would change the course, send him away to safety.

Savagely he forced his hands away. He gripped the wheel. Time slid by him, black and silent as the water outside. And then . . .

Something moved in the dark behind him.

Slowly, slowly, Fallon rose and turned. The veins of his lean face were like knotted cords. The hard steel of the hull held him, tight and close, smothering.

Blurred, faint movement. The soft scrape of metal against metal. He had been so sure Bjarnsson was dead. He'd been dazed and sick, he hadn't looked closely. But he'd been sure. Bjarnsson, lying so still, with his suit ripped open.

His suit ripped open. Volcanic rays would be seeping into his flesh. Rays of change—perhaps they even brought the dead to life.

There was a grating clang, and suddenly Fallon screamed, a short choked sound that hurt his throat.

Bjarnsson's face looked at him. Bjarnsson's face, with every gaunt bone, every vein and muscle and convolution of the brain traced in lines of cold white fire.

The shrouding leaden suit slipped from wide, stooped shoulders. The heart beat in pulses of flame within the glowing cage of the ribs. The coil and flow of muscles in arm and thigh was a living, beautiful rhythm of light.

"Fallon," said Einar Bjarnsson. "Turn back."

The remembered voice, coming from that glowing, pulsing throat, was the most horrible thing of all.

Fallon licked the cold sweat from his lips. "No," he said.

"Turn back, or you will be killed."

"It doesn't matter," whispered Fallon. "I've got to try."

Bjarnsson laughed. Fallon could see his diaphragm contract in a surge of flame, see the ripple of the laughter.

A wave of anger cut across Fallon's terror, cold and sane.

"I did this to you, Bjarnsson," he said. "I'm trying to make up for it. I thought you were dead. Perhaps, if you put your armor back on, we can patch it up somehow, and it may not be too late."

"But it is too late. So, you blame yourself, eh?"

"I left my post. Otherwise, you might have dodged that thing."

"Dodged it?" Tiny sparkles of light shot through Bjarnsson's brain. "Oh, *ja*. Perhaps." And he laughed again. "So you will not turn back? Not even for the beautiful Joan?"

Fallon's eyes closed, but the lines of his jaw were stern with anger. "Do you have to torture me?"

"Wait," said Bjarnsson. "Wait a little. Then I will know."

HIS voice was suddenly strange. Fallon opened his eyes. The glowing fire in the explorer's body was growing brighter, so that it blurred the lines of vein and bone and sinew.

"No," said Bjarnsson. "No need for torture. Turn back, Fallon."

God, how he wanted to! "No," he whispered. "I've got to try."

Bjarnsson's voice came to him, almost as an echo.

"We were fools, Fallon. Fools to think that we could stop this thing with a single puny bomb. Kashimo was a fool, too, but he was a gambler. But we, Fallon, you and I—we were the bigger fools."

"The kind of fools," said Fallon doggedly, "that men have always been. And damn it, I think I'd rather be the fool I am than the smart guy I was!"

Bjarnsson's laughter echoed in his helmet. Fallon had a moment's eerie feeling that he heard with his brain instead of his ears.

"Wonderful, Fallon, wonderful! You see how circumstance makes us traitors to ourselves? But there is no need for heroics. You can turn back, Fallon."

The lines of Bjarnsson's body were quite gone. He loomed against the darkness as a pillar of shining mist. Fallon's weary eyes were dazzled with it.

"No," he muttered stubbornly. "No."

Bjarnsson's voice rolled in on him suddenly, soul-shaking as an organ.

Voice—or mind? A magnificent, thundering strength.

"This is evolution, Fallon. So shall we be, a million million years from now. This is living, Fallon. It is godhood! Take off your suit, Fallon! Grow with me!"

"Joan," said Fallon wearily. "Joan, dearest."

Cosmic laughter, shuddering in his mind. And then,

"Turn back, Fallon. In an hour it will be too late."

The shining mist was dimming, drawing in upon itself. And at the core, a tiny light was growing, a frosty white flame that seared Fallon's brain.

"Turn back! Turn back!"

He fought, silently. But the light and the voice poured into him. Abruptly, something in him relaxed. He'd been so long without rest.

He knew, very dimly, that he turned and changed the course, back toward the coast of California.

FROM somewhere, out of the gulfs between the stars, a voice spoke to him as he lay sprawled across the control panel.

"There was no need for you to die, Fallon. Now, I can see much. It was no monster that struck us, but the first shock of a series of quakes, which will close the fissure far better than any human agency. Therefore, what happened to me was not your fault.

"And I am glad it happened. I, Bjarnsson, was growing old. I had nothing but science to hold me to Earth. Now my knowledge is boundless, and I am not confined by the fetters of the flesh. I am Mind—as some day we will all be.

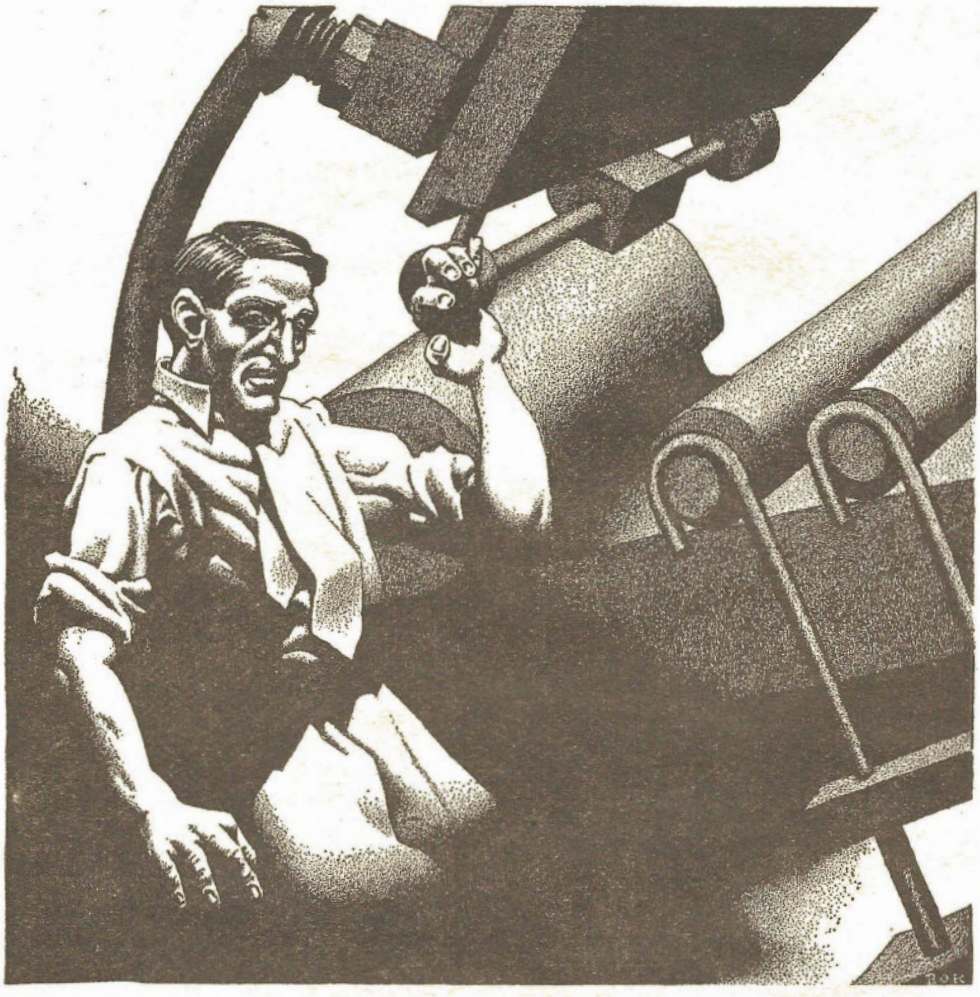
"You will be safe, Fallon. The invasion will fail as the power is shut off, and America can deal with any further dangers. Marry Joan, and be happy.

"I don't know about myself, yet. The possibilities are too vast to be explored in a minute. I am not dead, Fallon. Remember that! But—" and here Fallon heard an echo of Bjarnsson's harsh, mocking laughter—"if you should ever cease to be a fool and become again a smart guy, I shall find a way to send you back along evolution, to a stupid ape!

"I go now, Fallon. *Skoal!* And will you name your first-born Einar? I can see that it will be a son!"

The Impossible Invention

By Robert Moore Williams



Wrest from forbidden limbo, if you dare, the secret of the fourth dimension. But remember, in the hour of your triumph—he who makes real the impossible, may fall heir to impossible vengeance!

I HAD to admire this little guy's courage. Fradin, his name was—James Arthur Fradin, with a string of letters after it that even the alphabet agencies down at Washington could not have unscrambled. The letters represented honorary degrees conferred on him by half a dozen different colleges, and they should

have entitled him to be heard with respectful consideration, but they weren't. The assembled scientists of the Institute of Radio Engineers were giving him merry hell.

"What you are saying, Fradin," one of the scientists interrupted hotly, "is gross nonsense."

"It is absolutely impossible," another shouted.

"Faker!" somebody yelled, and a dozen voices took it up until the room echoed with the sound.

I sat back and grinned to myself. If this meeting ended in a free-for-all fight, which was what looked like was due to happen, I would be able to make a swell human interest humorous yarn out of it. My editor went for human interest stuff, which was largely why he had sent me down to cover this meeting. He knew I wasn't likely to develop any front page news here, scientific meetings being what they are. But there might be a human interest angle that would be good for a laugh. And the way these solemn scientists were calling Fradin a liar, it looked like the laugh was coming.

There was one man who wasn't doing any name calling, I noticed, a tall, cadaverous-looking individual sitting two seats down from me. He had listened very carefully, almost eagerly, I thought, to everything the speaker had said. Glancing at him, I got the impression that I should know him, but at the moment I couldn't place him. Tall, bony face, thin, hawk nose—yes, it seemed I should know him.

Fradin had stopped speaking when the storm of abuse broke over him. He stood there on the platform, a little, white haired guy with a gentle face.

"If you numbskulls will only be quiet for a moment," he said, when the noise had subsided for an instant, "I will offer incontrovertible proof to support my statement that radio waves are transmitted through what I must, for lack of a better term to describe the undescribable, call the fourth dimension."

What I mean, the roof must have been nailed down tight, or the explosion that followed would certainly have lifted it off the building. You never did see so many excited scientists in one group. Normally a scientist is supposed to be cool, aloof, and impersonal. But this group was anything else! They went right straight up in the air. I couldn't tell whether they were angrier because he had called them a bunch of numbskulls or because he had said that radio waves were transmitted through the fourth dimension.

ONE of them leaped to his feet. Ramsen, I think his name was. He was a big shot in the field, almost as big as De Forest and Marconi.

"Fradin," he yelled, "that is the most preposterous statement I ever heard from the lips of any man in his right senses. It raises the immediate question of whether or not *you* are in your right senses."

There was a buzz of approval following his statement. Fradin waited for it to die down.

"Mr. Ramsen," he said, "you have chosen to challenge my theory. Perhaps you can tell me what medium *does* carry the electro-magnetic radiations that we call radio waves?"

"Certainly," Ramsen answered. "Any schoolboy knows that."

"We are not here concerned with the knowledge of schoolboys," Fradin gently replied. "Sound is carried in air and water and by many solid substances. But we know that radio waves do not travel in air, because they will pass through a perfect vacuum. In what medium do they travel, Mr. Ramsen?"

Right here was where I began to pay close attention. Something about Fradin's manner, his calmness, his certainty, gave me the impression that he knew

pretty much what he was talking about.

"Radio waves, Mr. Fradin," Ramsen answered, in the manner of a scoutmaster revealing the facts of life to an errant Boy Scout, "travel in the ether."

He was right. I was not assigned to cover this meeting by chance but because I happen to have a pretty good groundwork in science. Radio waves, all scientists admit, are propagated through the ether.

"And what," Fradin countered, "is the ether?"

"Why—" Ramsen answered. "It's—" He started to flounder. A sudden silence fell in the room. Ramsen's face started to get red. "The ether," he finished, "is—why it's the ether, that's what it is."

"What you are refusing to admit," Fradin crowed, "is that 'ether' is a meaningless word invented by numbskulls such as are gathered here to describe something about which they know absolutely nothing. The ether is a word, nothing more. It does not exist. The Michelson-Morley experiments conclusively proved that, if it existed, its nature was such that it could not be detected by any physical experiment whatsoever. In other words, that it exists only as a handy tool by which scientists who ought to know better can conceal their own ignorance. Gentlemen," he said, turning from the red-faced Ramsen to the perturbed audience, "I can not only conclusively prove that radio waves are transmitted through the fourth dimension—but I can also prove that power, actual power, can also be transmitted through the same medium!"

He stopped suddenly, biting his lips as if he had said more than he had intended to. But I think only one man in the audience had caught the full implication of Fradin's words. The rest of them were too busy defending themselves against the accusation of being numbskulls to notice the one really important thing he had said.

How that audience did boil! And they boiled because every man jack of them, in his heart of hearts, knew that Fradin was right. I knew it the minute he said it. And they knew it too. When he said that "ether" was only a word used by fools to conceal their own ignorance, he had hit the nail exactly on the head.

For that is precisely what it is. Nobody has ever seen the ether, felt it, smelled it, heard it, touched it. Scientists of the past century, needing a mechanical device to account for the observed propagation of electro-magnetic radiations such as light and the then little known radio waves, had invented the ether to carry those radiations, invented it out of whole cloth. Fradin's hearers knew he was right. Taken individually, when they were calm, they would have admitted it. But they were in a group and he was calling them fools right out in public. Mass hysteria got them. They boiled over and very promptly demanded that he prove his statements.

He refused to do it. Absolutely refused.

"WE DEMAND that you produce your proof," Ramsen howled. "You have called us fools and said you could prove it. We demand that you *do* prove it."

"I—" Fradin began. He wet his lips. His face had whitened. It wasn't a gentle, kindly face any more. It was the face of a badly scared man.

Fradin was scared. But he wasn't scared of those engineers who were shouting at him. He was scared of something else.

"Speak up," Ramsen roared. "Produce your proof!"

"I can show you mathematical proof," Fradin offered.

How they howled at that, all except the tall, thin, hawk-nosed individual sitting two seats down from me. He took no part in the demonstration. Instead he got up

and very quietly went out of the room.

As he walked out, I again got the impression that I ought to know him. But I still couldn't place him. A reporter sees too many people to remember all of them.

"Mathematical proof, unless supported by incontrovertible experimental evidence, is not sufficient," Ramsen thundered. "We demand that you produce experimental proof."

By experimental proof, he meant an actual instrument of some kind to demonstrate Fradin's claims—some gadget that they could see and feel and examine, something they could take apart and put back together again, something that they could watch in operation. Ramsen was quite right in making such a demand, for without experimental evidence to back it up, mathematical theory is more often than not just so much hot air.

"Your demand is just," Fradin faltered. "I fear in the heat of argument I made statements I do not care to support. I do not choose to produce the experimental evidence that I have."

He didn't say another word. Instead, he turned and walked off the platform, going out through a door at the back. Nor did he enter the lecture hall where the meeting was being held. He walked out of the room.

And he didn't come back.

Why had he refused to produce the evidence that he had? What had scared him?

Questions were buzzing like gadflies in my mind. There was one particularly persistent gadfly. Fradin had said something of which I had almost caught the significance. Almost, but not quite. The significant thing he had said kept buzzing in the back of my mind, but I couldn't quite put a mental finger on it. . . .

Then I remembered it.

I went out of that room at a dead run. I went up over the speaker's platform and through the door Fradin had taken. How I did want to talk to that tortured man!

What he had said, letting it slip accidentally, added up to one of the biggest stories that ever splashed across the front page of a newspaper. I had come down here looking for a human interest yarn. Instead I had run straight into a story that could easily set the world on fire, *if* I could find Fradin and make him talk.

I didn't doubt that I would find him. He couldn't have gotten far away. He hadn't had time. Not five minutes had passed after he had walked off the platform until I was following him.

The door opened into a long hall, and in that hall I found Fradin. He was down at the far end, getting into an elevator. A tall, thin individual was with him.

I sprinted down the hall to try to catch them before the elevator doors closed. The operator saw me coming and started to wait for me, but something changed his mind for him. The two men were already in the cage; I couldn't be positive of it, but I thought the tall man said something to the operator. Just as I got there, the operator slammed the door in my face. The cage started down.

"All right, smart guy," I yelled at the operator. "I'll give you a smack in the snoot for this."

Probably I could have gotten down faster by waiting for another elevator, but there was a stairway and I used that. I was in a hurry.

I GOT to the first floor just in time to see Fradin and his companion walk out of the front door.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Wait—"

I started to say, "Wait for me," but the words were choked off in my throat. I recognized Fradin's companion. The hawk-faced man who had sat two seats down from me and who had slipped unobtrusively out of the meeting. He had gone around to the back of the hall and joined Fradin.

But the fact that he was with Fradin wasn't the thing that had choked off my call. It was the way the two men were walking. Fradin was a little ahead, and he wasn't looking to the right or the left. Just walking. There was a stiffness about him that made me think of a mechanical toy that has been wound up and is taking a walk for itself.

Hawk-face was following right behind him. Hawk-face had his hand in his pocket. I didn't need to look twice to know that he had a gun in that pocket too, pointing straight at the little inventor's back.

It wasn't a stick-up. It was a kidnap job. Hawk-face had also heard the really important thing that Fradin had said in his speech. I had missed it for a few minutes, but he hadn't missed it. He had instantly realized how damned important it was. He had walked out of the meeting, gone around to the back, waited for the scientist.

I should have called the police. But just then something happened that upset me so badly I completely forgot all about police.

I recognized Hawk-face, and cold chills began to run up and down my spine.

His name—or at least the name attached to the picture I had once seen in the hands of an F.B.I. man—was Marvak. The name didn't mean anything. He had others. A name to use in Asia, one for Russia, one for Europe, all different.

Marvak was one of the names he used in America, but the F.B.I. suspected he had others. They would cheerfully have hung him by any of his names, if they could have caught him, but he didn't catch easily. Compared to him, an eel was a rank amateur in slipperiness, and a rattlesnake was man's best friend.

Right out in front of the building, on a crowded city street, he forced Fradin into a cab. I was so close I could see the haunted, terrified expression on the little scientist's face. But I didn't think then and I know now that he wasn't afraid of the gun. He was afraid of something even more horrible than Marvak.

The cab pulled away.

An eternity seemed to pass before I could collect my faculties and grab the next cab in line.

"Follow that cab," I hissed at the hacker. "There's a ten spot in it for you if you don't lose it."

He didn't lose it. We followed Fradin and Marvak down to an old, abandoned factory building on the outskirts of the city. They were getting out of their cab when we drove up. Marvak, with his right hand still in his coat pocket, was paying off the driver.

"Drive on past," I told my driver.

He went on past and around the block and I got out, but the driver had to remind me about the ten-spot I had promised him. I paid off like a slot machine.

THAT shows how excited I was. I had stopped thinking about the story I might get. The story was secondary now. What really mattered was that Fradin had to be rescued, and fast. The thing he had let slip was too big to fall into Marvak's hands under any circumstances. And I had to be the one who rescued him. There wasn't time to go for the police. Marvak would work fast.

Marvak did work fast.

I tried the front door first because that was the obvious thing to do. If I got caught coming in the front door I could say I had the wrong address and back out. But if I got caught at the back door, no amount of explanation would do me any good.

The front door was unlocked. It opened into what had once been an office. A flight of stairs led up to the second floor.

I listened—there wasn't a sound. "They went upstairs," I thought.

"Hold it, bud," a voice said behind me.

The voice had a chilled steel ring that sent my heart right down into my shoes. There was no mercy in it, no compassion, no pity. It was double-edged with the threat of death. It jerked my head around.

Marvak was standing there in the office. He had the gun out of his pocket now, pointing it straight at me.

There was a closet in the office. Marvak had simply waited in the closet until I entered. When I started up the stairs, he had stepped out behind me.

"I—I must have got the wrong ad—address," I faltered.

His eyes, gray chilled steel, they were, drilled into me.

"No doubt," he said—but very doubtfully. "You're the reporter I noticed at the meeting, aren't you? What are you doing here?"

How big a lie could I tell and still be safe? How close to the truth could I come and not get one of those slugs between my eyes?

"I came out to interview Mr. Fradin," I blurted out.

He seemed to let it go, but back of those cold gray eyes I could see his mind working as he decided what to do with me. Then I saw him reach a decision.

First, he searched me. I didn't have a gun, which seemed to surprise him.

"You can come along," he said. "If Fradin can demonstrate to my satisfaction the discovery he claimed to have made, it will make the headlines, *if* you get a chance to write it."

With that, he dug the little inventor out of the closet, and with the gun out, prodded both of us upstairs. There were only two floors to this building and the entire second floor was Fradin's laboratory.

IT WAS crammed to the ceiling with the weirdest collection of electrical equipment I have ever seen. Generators, dynamos, electric motors. There was enough radio equipment to set up a modest broadcasting station. And in one corner was something big enough to be a cyclotron. Fradin had just about everything in his laboratory.

"Now," said Marvak to the little inventor, "you will please prove the truth of your assertion that power can be transmitted by radio."

That was the thing that Fradin had said. Power by radio! It doesn't sound like much, but let me tell you, it's plenty big. With it, science could come darned close to remaking the face of the globe.

How?

This is the power age. Practically all of our industrial achievements—and through them we have achieved what passes for civilization—have come about through cheap power. Coal, the steam engine, the dynamo, water power. Maybe, not so long in the future, we'll have atomic power, but we don't have it yet. All we have now are coal and water. And possibly 90% of the water power in this country and probably 95% of the water power on earth are going to waste, simply because the waterfalls are usually in mountains and the places where the current is to be used are in cities hundreds and even thousands of miles away. *Transmission losses over high lines are so great that electrical energy cannot be efficiently transmitted very far.* So the water power goes to waste.

But here we have radio transmitted power. No high lines, hence no high line losses. Of course there would be other losses, but if Fradin said power could be transmitted by radio, he would know how to cure the losses. Radio transmitted power would make electricity so damned cheap that every home in the country could have it.

And this is only part of the picture that Fradin's invention brought into being. Supposing power could be transmitted by radio. Suppose automobiles could pick it

up and use it. Then the extremely expensive internal combustion engine that goes into every car could be replaced by cheap motors. The price of cars could be cut in half. Everybody could have one. And operation costs would be next to nothing.

Ocean liners? No more bulky, costly steam engines. Boats could take their power out of the air.

And airplanes. There was the most important item of all. No gasoline engines in planes, no engine failures, no crashes because the motor conked out. Air flight spanning the globe.

That's what radio transmitted power ought to mean, that's what it would mean —until Marvak entered the picture. When he appeared on the scene, power by radio, instead of being a blessing, would become one of the worst disasters that ever happened to humanity.

Marvak was a spy. Not a common, garden variety of spy, not a fifth columnist, not a saboteur, but a sort of superspy who sold his services to the highest bidder. If you wanted a war started, he could make all the arrangements to provide for an "incident." If you wanted to take over a minor nation, he could pave the way for you; if your enemy had a new and secret weapon, he could get the plans. Anything, just so he was well paid for it.

If Fradin could really transmit power by radio, and if Marvak got the plans, the waterfalls would not be harnessed, there wouldn't be cheap automobiles, and handy power for ocean liners. There would be power—unfailing power—for one thing: planes! Bombing planes, fighting planes!

If you think several nations on this globe would not jump at the chance to acquire such an invention, you have another think coming. And the price they would be willing to pay for it, would be big enough to interest even Marvak. It would be worth—well, what is the worth of the British Empire, China, and the United States?

Fradin's invention had exactly the same value as those three nations lumped together, if Marvak succeeded in peddling it in Europe. Bombers over New York, bombers over Chicago. There would no longer be any safety in three thousand miles of water. Bombers over London. New bombers that would be almost invincible.

SWEAT was running down over my face, down over my body, down over my soul. If Marvak got Fradin's invention, Johnny Holmes—that's me—go hunt for an air-raid shelter, because you're sure going to need it.

"I was mistaken," Fradin faltered, his voice a whisper. "I was—boasting. I cannot transmit power by radio."

"You're a liar!" Marvak snapped.

"I'm not a liar," Fradin whispered.

"Either or else," Marvak said, bringing up his gun until it pointed right at the little inventor's forehead.

Fradin had something that a man could call courage. He looked that gun in the eye. His face went a shade whiter, but his eyes did not drop.

"I'm afraid it will have to be else," he said. As he spoke the words, he seemed to stiffen himself until he stood very straight. He looked like a soldier standing at attention. "But if you shoot me you may find it difficult to operate my invention."

Marvak's finger tightened around the trigger. His face was cold with rage, his grey, killer eyes looked like icicles.

"Don't shoot him, you fool!" I hissed. "Then you'll never find out what you want to know."

I was stalling for time, stalling for anything, stalling for a chance to jump that gun. I was standing beside Fradin, but the gun covered both of us.

"Shut up!" Marvak snarled at me.

The gun went off.

He had shot Fradin. It was cold blooded murder. But as he had shot the little scientist, he had taken his eyes off me. I started to jump. The gun instantly swung to cover me. I saw Marvak's face, with no mercy in it. The gun froze me motionless.

Fradin didn't fall. There was a look of surprise on his face, but he didn't fall. Then I saw what had happened. Marvak had shot him in the shoulder instead of through his head.

"That's just a sample," Marvak said, "to show you that I mean business. You're not badly hurt, but the next one will go through your knee-cap. I understand that a bullet through the knee is very painful. Now are you going to tell me what I want to know or are you going to need further persuasion?"

Blood was running down Fradin's coat. He was clutching his shoulder with the other hand, trying to stop the flow of blood. His face was very white. And now there was fear on it, fear that had not been there when he first faced Marvak's gun. I got the fleeting impression that it was not fear of the spy nor of the weapon, but of something else. I also got the impression that it was a terrible fear, a soul-consuming fear, a bleaching, whitening, shuddering fear, a fear greater even than the fear of death. . . .

"All right," the little inventor whispered. "You win. I'll show you what you want."

"That's better," Marvak said, in a satisfied tone. "I don't mind saying that if I make a cleaning on this, I'm quite willing to cut you and the reporter in on it."

He was lying. The only way he would cut us in would be to cut our throats. Both Fradin and I knew it.

"I'm afraid," the inventor said, "that your shot has injured my arm so badly that I will have to ask you to help me."

"Okay," Marvak said. "But remember I have an excellent knowledge of electrical apparatus, so don't try any tricks, like electrocuting me by accident."

"There won't be any trickery involved here," the little inventor whispered through bloodless lips.

I WATCHED. There were two bulky instruments, one of them a transmitter, the other a receiver. The current flow was seemingly directional. It was sent out from the transmitter and caught by the receiver. There was a meter on the transmitter to show how much current was being transmitted and another on the receiver to show how much was getting through.

There was a red line on the dial of the meter at the transmitter.

The purpose of the set-up was obviously to demonstrate that current could be transmitted by radio.

Marvak made a complete examination of the apparatus. He knew what he was doing, all right. You could tell from the way he went over the instruments that he knew his stuff.

"I'm not interested in transmitting just a little power," Marvak said. "If this thing is to be useful, it must be able to send lots of kilowatts through the ether."

"I think," Fradin answered wearily, "it will handle all the power you choose to put into it."

That was the thing Marvak had to know, that the power transmitted would be adequate to keep a plane in the air. If only a little power was transmitted, the invention, from a practical viewpoint, was useless. No dictator would give a cent for it.

Marvak handled the transmitter, Fradin tried to operate the receiver and to stanch the flow of blood from his shoulder at the same time.

Marvak turned a switch, and the power transmitter began to throb under the load.

Marvak consulted the meter on the transmitter, then ran across the room to the receiver and examined the meter there.

"You've really got it!" he exulted. "There's enough power flowing through the receiver to keep a plane in the air."

I was sick, sicker than I had ever been. Fradin's invention worked. And when it worked, it spelled our doom. We would be killed, because it worked. How many millions of others would also die, I could not begin to guess.

"One plane is not enough," Marvak said. "It has to be strong enough to supply current to a fleet of planes."

He started triumphantly back to the transmitter.

"I—" Fradin faltered. He started to say something but changed his mind abruptly.

Marvak kicked over the handle of the rheostat that fed current into the transmitter. The transformer groaned. I could see the hand of the meter on the transmitter. It was moving forward as more and more current flowed into that mysterious medium that transmits radio waves.

The needle on the dial touched the red mark.

Then—it happened.

If I live to be a thousand years old I'll never be able to describe adequately what I saw happen, what I heard happen, what I felt happen. It had never happened before.

Something that I can only describe as a lightning flash ran through the room. It was a sharp, tearing crash, similar to the sound you hear when a bolt of lightning hits near you. There was a flash of brilliant light. Thunder seemed to smash my ear drums.

Fradin leaped—but not at Marvak. He leaped at me. The next instant he was grabbing me, shoving me across the room. And all the tortures of hell were breaking loose around that generator.

THERE was a blasting, howling roar of wind. It was the coldest wind ever. It was, I suspect, the cold of absolute zero that struck through that laboratory.

Out of nowhere, around that transmitter, a hole seemed to appear. It seemed to be torn in space. It was black, with a curiously liquid kind of blackness. It appeared around the transmitter, and Marvak was at the transmitter.

The spy seemed to freeze. A look of amazed fright appeared on his face.

Then he seemed to fall. The transmitter seemed to fall with him. Marvak tried to leap, but the footing seemed to fall away under him. He fell out of sight.

For a mad instant, while Fradin kicked and hauled me away from that transmitter, the laboratory was hideous with the blast of thunder.

Then another murderous crash came, and . . .

Then there was silence. Utter silence. The only sound was Fradin fighting for his breath. I looked across the room. The transmitter was gone. It just wasn't there any more. Under it, in the floor of the room was a neat, round hole. All the mass of wires that had led into it were neatly severed. Wires came from the transformer to where the hole began, then stopped.

Marvak wasn't there. Marvak was gone.

Suddenly I turned to Fradin. "You—" I gulped. "You were afraid this would happen. My God, man, what was it?"

"It was," he answered, "a hole in the fourth dimension."

Then I got it. He had been trying to tell that convention of radio engineers that radio waves were transmitted through the fourth dimension, not through the "ether." He had been able to prove his point but he had refused because he knew that this would happen.

"But even if radio waves do pass through the fourth dimension, nothing like

this has ever happened," I stammered.

"Ordinary broadcasting stations do not put enough power through their transmitters to open this hole," he explained. "It takes power to do it, lots of power. I had calculated how much power it would take. There was a red mark on the in-put meter of the transmitter. That red line marked the critical point. If more power was put through the transmitter, it would break down the fabric of space between this dimension and the fourth dimension. I knew it would happen. That's why I refused to make a demonstration for the benefit of my skeptical compatriots. If I told them what I had discovered, proved I had discovered it, some fool would be sure to try it, with disastrous results."

"But that cold wind," I protested.

"This particular region opens out into what must be interplanetary space in the fourth dimension. That cold wind was simply the cold of outer space rushing through what was in effect a window."

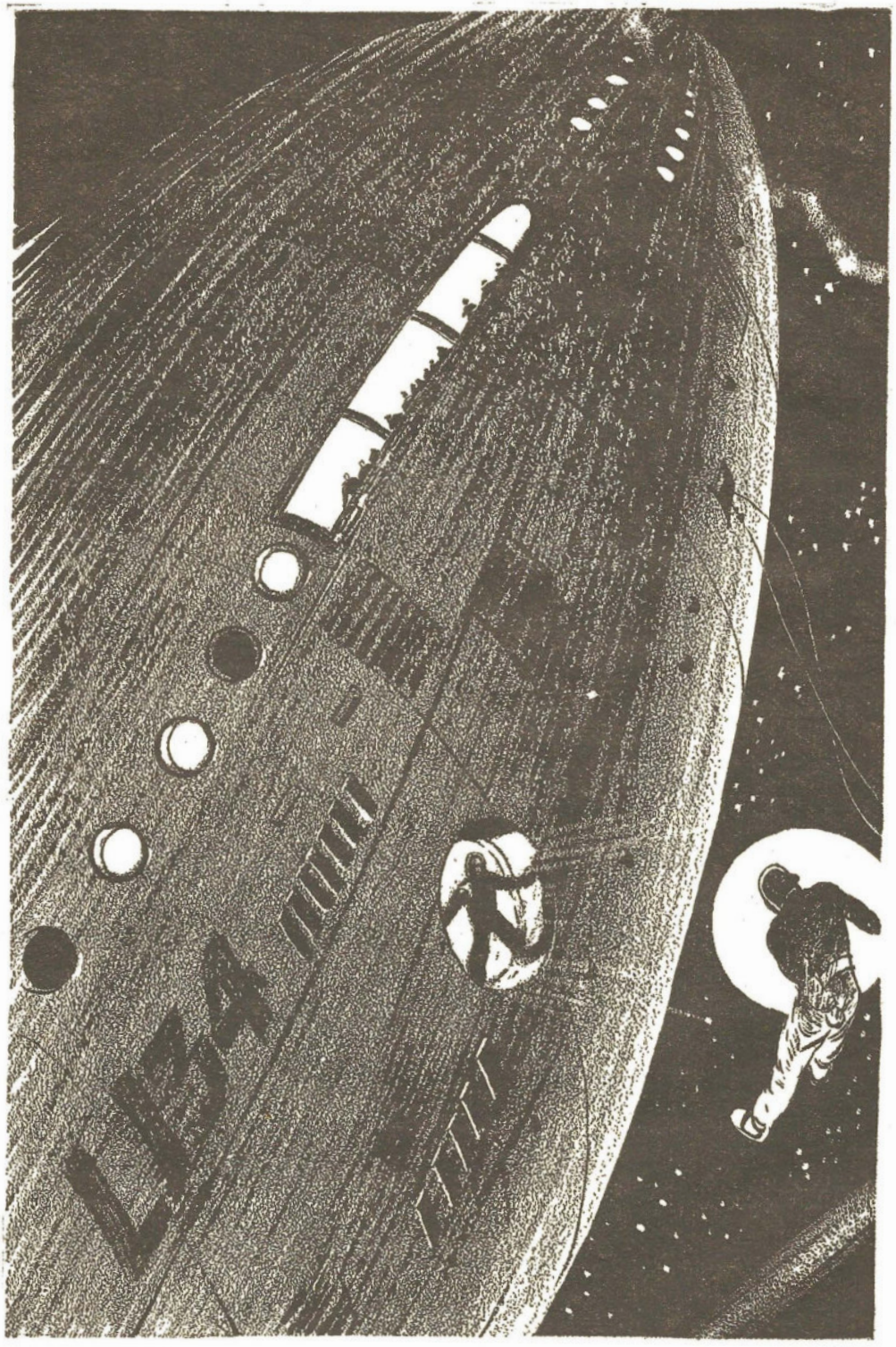
So that was it. There was a hole in space. And space is cold.

"Marvak!" I said weakly.

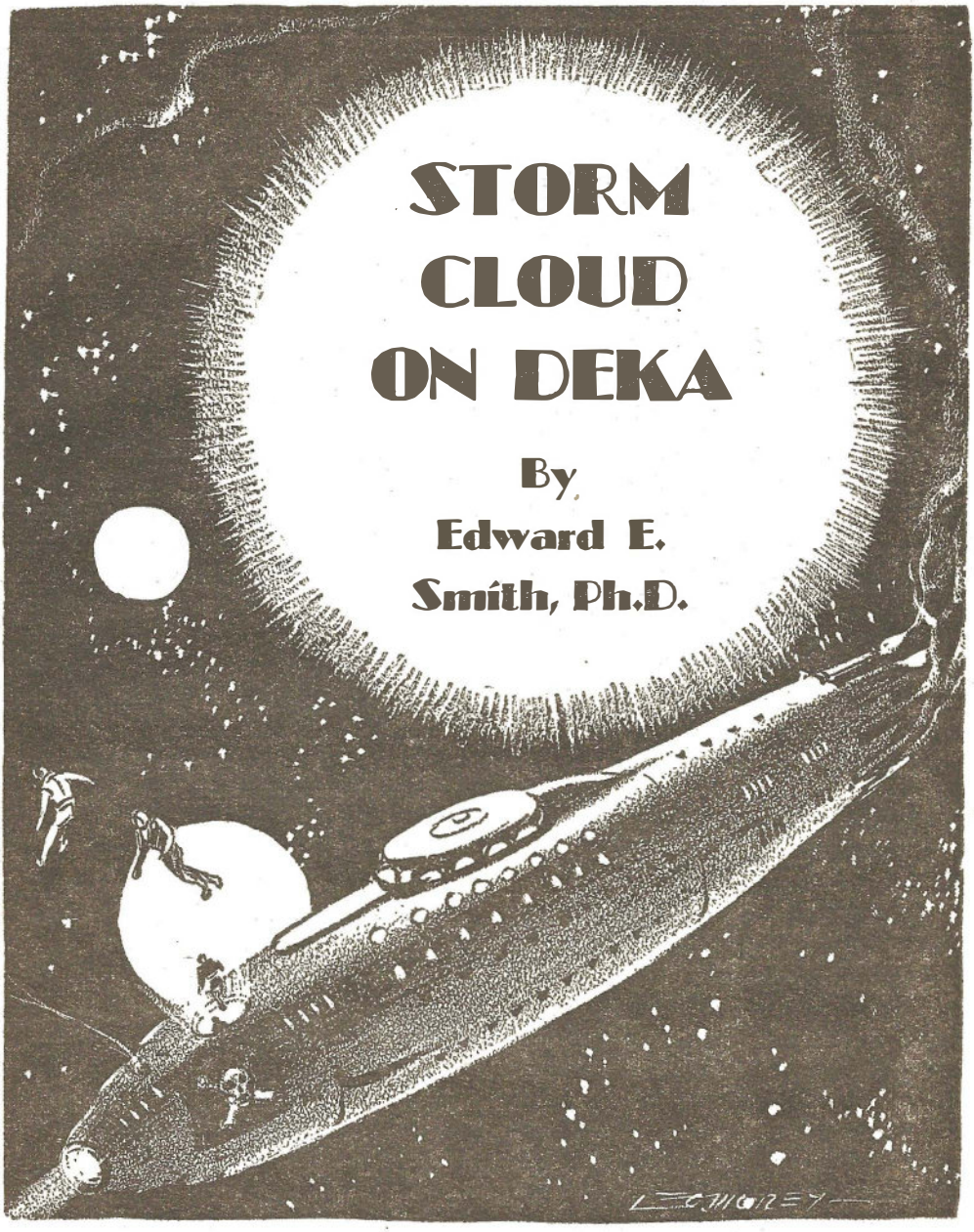
"Don't mention him," Fradin shuddered. "He was catapulted into the fourth dimension. He's frozen solid by now."

I guess the human race will never have power by radio. Probably we will be able to get along without it. Atomic power seems to be coming along, and it's safe.

I took Fradin to the hospital. That slug through his shoulder had cost him a lot of blood, but he recovered all right, only to discover that the Institute of Radio Engineers had booted him right out of their organization, for making the preposterous claim that radio waves are transmitted through the fourth dimension instead of through the ether. However, he never cared two whoops in hell about that. He knew what he knew. And he was content with that.



A Thrilling New Novelette by "Skylark" Smith



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To a cordon of burning death he sped, one man against a demoniac universe—Storm Cloud, who had sworn to blast out the most dreaded menace mankind had ever faced—an atomic vortex gone mad!

★

CHAPTER ONE

From a Seed . . .

TELLURIAN PHARMACEUTICALS, Inc., was civilization's oldest and most conservative drug house. "Hide-bound" was the term most frequently used, not only by its younger employees but also by its more progres-

sive competitors. But, corporatively, Tellurian Pharmaceuticals did not care. Its board of directors, by an iron-clad, if unwritten law, was limited to men of over three score years and ten.

Against the inertia of that ruling body the impetuosity of the younger generations was precisely as efficaceous as the dashing of waves against the foot of an adamantine cliff—and in very much the same fashion. Ocean waves do, in time, cut into even the hardest rock; and, every century or so, Tellurian Pharmaceutical, Inc., did take a forward step. However, "Rather than make a mistake, do nothing" was its creed. To that creed it adhered rigorously.

Thus, it did not establish branches upon other planets until a century or so of experiment had proved that no unforeseen factor would operate to lessen the prodigiously high standard of its products. Nor would it own or operate spaceships, as did other large firms. Its business was the manufacture of the universe's finest, most carefully standardized drugs and it would go into no sidelines whatever.

Even the location of its head office; directly under the guns of Prime Base, bore out the same theme. Originally it had been in the middle of the city, miles away from the reservation; but as Prime Base had expanded, the city had moved aside. Tellurian Pharmaceuticals, however, would not give way. It stolidly refused to sell its holdings even to the Galactic Patrol; it would not move until the patrol should condemn its property and compel it by law to vacate.

Into that massive gray building there strode a tall, lean, gray man; into an old-fashioned elevator, operated by a seventy-year-old "boy'; into a darkish, severe room whose rock-of-ages furniture had become pricelessly antique. Without a word he handed a card to the receptionist, a prim spinster of some fifty summers.

"Ezekiel R. Stonely, M.D., Sc.D., Consultant in Radiation," she read precisely into a communicator. "By appointment."

"Let him come in, please."

Dr. Stonely entered the private office of a vice-president—a young man, as T. P.'s executives went—a man scarcely sixty years of age.

"All ready," the consultant reported briefly. "Graves is here, you said?"

"Yes. He got in from Deka last night. How long will the demonstration take?"

"Seven hours to the point of maximum yield; twelve for the full life cycle."

"Very good." The vice-president then spoke into the communicator. "Please ask Mr. Graves to step in."

Graves, the manager of T. P.'s branch upon the planet Deka—planetographically speaking, Dekanore III—was a short, fat man; and he possessed, upon the surface at least, the fat man's proverbial geniality and good nature.

"Mr. Graves—Dr. Stonely."

"Mighty glad to meet you, Doctor," Graves shook hands effusively. "Splendid accomplishment. You've been working on it five years or more, I hear."

"Six years and two months," the scientist said precisely.

"I cannot accompany you, of course," the vice-president interposed busily, "and you appreciate that the less of communication or contact hereafter, the better. Good day."

THE two went out, took a cab, and soon were in Dr. Stonely's ultra-private laboratory. It was a large room, artificially lighted, lined throughout with sheet metal—metal which, when properly charged, formed a barrier through which no harmful radiation or particle could pass. The scientist snapped on the wall shield and set to work, explaining each step to his visitor.

"Here are the seeds. For the present

you will have to take my word for it that I produced them here. I will go through as many cycles as you please. Here are the containers—miniatures, you will observe, of the standard hydroponics tanks. The formula of the nutrient solution, while of course crucial, contains nothing either rare or unduly expensive. I plant the seed, thus, in each of the two tanks. I cover each with a bell-jar of plastic—transparent to the frequencies to be employed. I enclose the whole with a similar envelope—so. I align the projectors—thus. We will now put on our armor, as the radiation is severe and the atmosphere, which displaces our own of oxygen—"

"Synthetic or imported?" Graves asked.

"Imported. Synthesis is possible, but prohibitive in cost. Importation in tank ships is easy, simple, and comparatively cheap. I will now energize the projectors, and growth will begin."

He did so, and in the glare of blue-green radiance the atmosphere within the bell-jars, the very ether, warped and writhed. In spite of the distortion of vision, however, growth could be perceived—growth at an astonishing rate.

In a few minutes the seeds had sprouted. In an hour the thick, broad, glossily-green leaves were inches long. In seven hours each jar was full of a lushly luxuriant tangle of foliage.

"This is the point of maximum yield," Stonely remarked as he shut off the projectors. "I assume that you will want to take a sample."

"Certainly," the fat man agreed. "How else would I know it's the clear quill?"

"If you were a scientist, the sight of it would be sufficient," came the dry rejoinder. "Knowing that you are not, however, I am running two tanks, as you see. Take either one you like."

The sample tank was removed and the full cycle of growth completed upon the other. Graves himself harvested the seeds, and himself carried them away.

Six days, six generations, six samples, and even the eminently skeptical Graves was convinced.

"You've certainly got something there, Doc," he admitted finally. "We can really go to town on that. You're absolutely sure that you're covered—no trace?"

"None whatever," Stonely assured him. "Doctor Stonely will retire and will gradually drop from sight. I will abandon this disguise, resume my true identity as Fairchild, which has been kept alive judiciously, and move openly to Deka."

"Notes? Data? Possible observers? This machinery and stuff?" Graves insisted.

"No notes or data have ever been written down. The knowledge exists only in my own brain. You are the first person other than myself ever to see the inside of this room. This apparatus will be unrecognizable before it is boxed, and I shall do the packing myself. Why? Are you by any chance apprehensive that I may slip up?"

"Well, we can't be too sure." The fat man's blue eyes were now neither genial nor good-natured; they were piercing and cold. "In this game anybody who permits any leaks dies. And anyone who knows too much dies. We don't want you to die, at least until after we get started on Deka—"

"Nor then," the scientist interrupted cynically, "if you know when you're well off. I'm the only man in the universe who can run the apparatus. It would take a mighty good man three years to learn it after I get it going. Remember that, my friend."

"So what?" Graves' stare was coldly level.

"Just so you won't develop any funny ideas. I know as well as you do, however, about leaks and leakers. I don't

leak. How long will it take you to get ready—three months?"

"Um—just about. And you?"

"Any time."

"Make it three months, then."

"Three months it is—on Deka." The interview was ended.

NEWSPOKE — originally New Spokane—was the largest city of Dekanore III. It lay in the broad valley of the Spokane River, just above the mouth of Clear Creek, which latter stream meandered along a fertile valley between mountains lofty and steep. Clear Creek Valley—all of it—and all its neighboring mountains belonged to Tellurian Pharmaceuticals, Inc.

The valley floor was a riot of color, devoted as it was to the intensive cultivation of medicinal plants which could not as yet be grown economically in tanks. Along both edges of the valley extended rows of huge hydroponics sheds. Upon the mountains' sides there were snake dens, lizard pens, and enclosures for many other species of fauna.

Nor was the surface all that was in use. Those mountains were hollow, honeycombed into a host of rooms in which, under precisely controlled environments of temperature, atmosphere, and radiation, were grown and studied hundreds of widely-variant forms of life.

At the confluence of creek and river, just inside the city limits, there reared and sprawled the company's buildings, the processing and synthesizing plants, the refineries, the laboratories, the powerhouses, and so on.

In a ground-floor office of the towering Administration Building two men sat in silence and waited while a red light upon a peculiarly complicated desk-board faded through pink into pure white.

"All clear. This way, Doctor." Manager Graves pushed a button and a section of blank wall slid smoothly aside.

The fat man and Doctor Fairchild—unrecognizable now as the man who had once been known as Doctor Stonely—went down two long flights of narrow steps. Along a dimly-lit corridor they made their way, through an elaborately locked steel door, then into a barely-furnished, steel-lined room upon the floor of which four inert bodies lay.

Graves thrust a key into an inconspicuous orifice and a plate swung open, revealing a chute into which the four lax forms were unceremoniously dumped. Then the two men retraced their steps to the manager's office.

"Well, that's about all that we can feed to the disintegrators." Fairchild lit an Alsakanite cigarette and exhaled thoughtfully.

"Why? Going soft on us?" Graves sneered.

"No," the scientist replied calmly. "The ice is getting thin."

"Whaddya mean 'thin'?" the manager demanded. "The Patrol inspectors are ours—enough of them, anyway. Our records are fixed. Faked identities, trips, all that stuff, you know. Everything's on the green."

"That's what you think," Fairchild countered cynically. "Our accident rate, in spite of everything we have been able to do, is up three hundredths of one percent; industrial hazard rate and employee turnover about three and a half; and the Narcotics Division alone knows how much we have upped total bootleg sales. Those figures are all in the Patrol's files. How can you give such facts the brush-off?"

"We don't have to," Graves laughed comfortably. "Even a half of one percent would not excite suspicion, and our distribution is so uniform throughout the galaxy that they can't center it. They can't possibly trace anything back to us. Besides, they wouldn't suspect us. With our reputation, other firms would get

knocked off in time to give us plenty of warning. Lutzenschiffer's, for instance, is putting out heroin by the ton."

"Again I say that's what *you* think." Fairchild remained entirely unconvinced. "Nobody else is putting out the stuff that comes out of Cave Two Seventeen—demand and price prove that. What you don't seem to get, Graves, is that some of those damned Lensmen have brains. Suppose they put Worsel of Velantia, Tregonsee of Rigel IV, or even Kinnison himself onto this job—then what? The minute that anybody decides to run a rigid statistical analysis of our records, we're done."

"Um—" This was a distinctly disquieting thought, in view of the impossibility of concealing anything from a Gray Lensman who was really on the prowl. "That might not be so good. What would you advise, then?"

"Shut down Two Seventeen—and preferably the whole hush-hush end—until we can get our records absolutely honest and our death rates down to the old-time ten-year average," the scientist insisted. "In that way only can we make ourselves really safe."

"Shut down? They way they're pushing us for production?" Graves sneered. "You talk like a fool. The chief would toss us both down the chute and put somebody in here that *would* really produce."

"Oh, I don't mean without permission. Talk him into it. It's best for him, as well as everybody else, over the long pull."

"He couldn't see it. I can't either, really," grunted the manager. "If we can't dope out something better than that, things have got to go on as is."

"I suspected so—but you asked me. The next best thing is to use some new form of death, openly explainable, to clean up our books."

"Wonderful!" Graves snorted contemptuously. "What can we possibly add to what we are using right along?"

"A loose atomic vortex."

"Whoooosh!" The fat man deflated in an exclamation of profound surprise, then came back up for air, gasping. "Man, you're nuts. There's only one on the planet, and it's—or do you mean—but nobody ever touched one of those things off deliberately! Can it be done?"

"Yes. It isn't simple, but we Fellows of the College of Radiation know how—theoretically—the transformation can be made to occur. The fact that it is a new idea makes it all the better. It has never been done because it has been impossible to extinguish the things. But now 'Storm' Cloud is putting them out."

"I see. Neat, very neat." Graves' agile and cunning brain was going over the possibilities. "Certain of our employees, I take it, will be upon a picnic in the upper end of the valley when this unfortunate occurrence is to take place?"

"Exactly—and enough mythical ones to straighten out our bookkeeping. Then, later, we can dispose of suspects as they appear. Vortices are absolutely unpredictable, you know. People we don't like can die of radiation or of any one or a mixture of various toxic gases and vapors and the vortex will take the blame."

"And later, when it gets dangerous, Storm Cloud can blow it out for us," Graves gloated. "But we'll not want him for a long, long time!"

"No, but we'll report it and ask for him the hour it happens—" Fairchild silenced the manager's expostulations. "Use your head, Graves! Anybody who has a vortex go out of control wants it killed as soon as possible. But here's the joker—Cloud has enough Class A prime urgent demands on file right now to keep him busy for the next ten or fifteen years. Therefore we won't be able to get him—see?"

"I see. This is nice, Fairchild, very, very nice. But the head office had better keep an eye on Cloud, just the same."

CHAPTER TWO

Vortex Buster

ROBERT RYDER, Bachelor of Hydroponics from the University of Newspoke, was also, maritally, a bachelor. For a year or so after graduation, while he was making good with Tellurian Pharmaceutical, Inc., he had no reason to be dissatisfied with that state of affairs. However, Mother Nature went to work upon him in her wonted fashion, and, never averse to feminine society, he began to go in for girls in a large and serious way.

In the hyroponics office there was an eminently personable and yet level-headed young filing clerk named Jacqueline Comstock, who was all unconsciously—or was it?—working much more toward her Mrs. degree than for the good of the firm.

It was inevitable, then, that these two should single each other out; that each should come to behold in the other all that made life worth while. They planned, breathtakingly happy.

They saved their money, instead of indulging in expensive amusements; they took long hikes.

Thus they discovered many choice spots affording the maximum of privacy, of comfort, and of view; thus they came to know almost as individuals the birds and beasts and reptiles in the far-flung pens.

They sat blissfully, arms around each other, upon a rustic seat improvised from rocks, branches, and leaves. Below them, almost under their feet, was a den of venomous serpents, but they did not see the snakes.

Before them, equally unperceived, there extended the magnificent vista of stream and valley and mountain.

All they saw, however, was each other—until their attention was literally wrenched to a man who was climbing frantically toward them with the aid of a stout cudgel which he used as a staff. The girl gazed briefly, stared, and then, with a half-articulate moan, shrank even closer against her lover's side. Ryder, even while his left arm tightened

around his Jackie's waist, felt with his right hand for a club of his own and tensed his muscles in readiness for strife —for the climbing man was all too apparently mad.

His breathing was horrible. Mouth tight-clamped, in spite of his terrific exertion, he was sniffing—sniffing loathsomely, lustfully, each whistling inhalation filling his lungs to bursting. He exhaled explosively, as though begrudging the second of time required to empty himself of air. Wide-open eyes glaring fixedly ahead, he blundered upward, paying no attention whatever to his path. He tore through clumps of thorny growth; he stumbled and fell over logs and stones; he caromed from boulders, as careless of the needles which tore clothing and skin as of the rocks which bruised his flesh to the very bone.

He struck the gate of the pen immediately beneath the two appalled watchers, and then stopped. He moved to the right and paused, whimpering in anxious agony. Back to the gate and over to the left he went, where he stopped and sent forth a blood-curdling howl. Whatever the frightful compulsion was, whatever it was that he sought, he could not deviate enough from his line to go around the pen. He looked, and for the first time saw the gate and the fence and the ophidian inhabitants of the den. They did not matter— nothing mattered. He fumbled with the lock, then furiously attacked it and the gate and the fence with his club—fruitlessly. He tried to climb the fence, but failed. He tore off sandals and socks and, by dint of thrusting fingers and toes ruthlessly into the narrow meshes of the woven wire, he succeeded in getting through.

No more than he had minded the thorns and the rocks did he mind the eight strands of viciously-barbed wire surmounting that fence. He did, however, watch the snakes. He took pains to drop into an area temporarily clear of them, and he pounded to death the half-dozen serpents bold enough to bar his path.

Then, dropping to the ground, he writhed and scuttled about, sniffing ever harder, nose plowing the ground. He halted; he dug with his bare hands at the hard soil. Thrusting his face into the hole, he inhaled tremendously. His body writhed, trembled, shuddered uncontrollably, then stiffened convulsively into a supremely ecstatic rigidity, terrible to gaze upon.

The horribly labored breathing ceased. The body collapsed bonelessly, even before the outraged serpents crawled up and struck.

Jacqueline Comstock saw very little of the outrageous performance. She screamed once, shut both eyes and, twisting about within the embracing arm, burrowed her face into the man's left shoulder.

Ryder, however—white-faced, jaw set, sweating—watched the whole ghastly thing to its grimly cataclysmic end. When it was over he licked his lips and swallowed hard before he could talk.

"It's all over, dear—no danger now," he finally managed to say. "We'd better go. We ought to turn in an alarm—make a report or something. They'll want us as witnesses."

"Oh, I can't, Bob!" she sobbed. "If I open my eyes I just know I'll look, and if I look I'll . . . I'll just simply turn inside out."

"Hold everything, Jackie! Keep your eyes shut. I'll pilot you and tell you when it's safe to look."

MORE than half carrying his companion, still gripping unconsciously his heavy club, the man set off down the rugged trail. Out of sight of what had happened, the girl opened her eyes and they continued the

descent in a more usual, more decorous fashion until they met a man hurrying upwards.

"Oh, Doctor Fairchild! There was a—" But the report which Ryder was about to make was unnecessary; the alarm had already been given.

"I know!" the scientist puffed. "Stop! Stay right where you are." He jabbed a finger emphatically downward to anchor the couple in the exact spot they occupied. "Don't talk! Don't say a word —until I get back."

Fairchild returned after a time, unhurried and completely at ease. He did not need to ask the shaken couple if they had seen what had occurred. It was plainly evident that they had.

"But—but, Doctor—" Ryder began.

"Keep still! Don't talk at all!" Fairchild ordered brusquely. Then, in an ordinary conversational tone, he went on: "Until we have investigated this extraordinary occurrence thoroughly—sifted it to the bottom—the probability of spying cannot be disregarded. As the only eyewitnesses to what actually happened, your reports will be exceedingly valuable. But I do not want to hear a word until we are in a place which I am sure beyond peradventure is proof against any and all spy-rays. Do you understand?"

"Oh yes, I understand."

"Pull yourselves together, then. Act unconcerned, casual—particularly when we get to the Administration Building. Talk about the weather, or, better yet, about the honeymoon you are going to take on Chickladoria."

Thus it was that there was nothing noticeably abnormal about the group of three which strolled into the office building and entered a private automatic elevator. The conveyance, however, went down instead of up.

"I am taking you to my private laboratory, not to my office," Fairchild replied to Ryder's unspoken question. "Frankly, young folks, I am a scared—a badly scared man."

This statement, so true and yet so misleading, resolved thoroughly the young engineer's inchoate doubts. Entirely unsuspectingly the couple accompanied the Senior Radiationist along the grim corridor. They paused as he unlocked and swung open a door of thick metal; they stepped unquestioningly into the room in response to his gestured invitation. He did not, however, follow them. Instead, he swung shut the heavy slab, whose closing cut off completely the filing clerk's piercing scream of fear.

"Cut out that noise!" came raspingly from a speaker in the steel ceiling of the small room—a room which was very evidently not Doctor Fairchild's private laboratory. "It won't do you any good. You're sound-proofed. Talk all you please, but any more of that yelling and I'll have to put you out of your misery."

"But Mr. Graves, I thought—Dr. Fairchild told us—we were to report on that—" Ryder's words came confusedly from the maze of his surprise.

"You're to report on nothing. You saw too much and know too much, that's all."

"Oh, so *that's* it." Ryder's mind reeled as some part of the actual significance of what he had seen struck home. "But listen, Graves. Jackie didn't see anything. She had her eyes shut all the time, and doesn't know anything. You don't want the murder of such a girl as she is on your mind, I know. Let her go and she'll never say a word. We'll both swear to that. Or you could—"

"Why? Just because she's got a face and a shape?" the fat man sneered. "There are thousands of women as good-looking as she is, but I've got only one life—" Graves broke off as Fairchild entered the office.

"Well, how about it? How bad is it?" the manager asked.

"Not bad at all. Everything's under control."

"Listen, Doctor Fairchild!" Ryder put in, desperately, "surely you don't have to murder Jackie here in cold blood. I was just suggesting to Graves that he could get a therapist—"

"Shut up," the scientist ordered coldly. "Our therapists are working on things that are really important. You two must die."

"But why?" Ryder protested wildly. He could not as yet perceive more than a small fraction of the whole. "I tell you, it's—"

"We'll let you guess," said Fairchild.

SHOCK upon shock had been too much for the girl's overstrained nerves. She fainted quietly and Ryder eased her unconscious form down to the cold steel floor.

"Can't you put her into a better place than this?" the man protested then.

"You'll find water and food, and that's enough." Graves laughed coarsely. "You won't live very long, so don't worry about conveniences. But keep still. If you want to know what is going to happen to you, listen—we have no objections to that—but one more word out of you and I cut the circuit. Go ahead, Fairchild, with what you were saying."

"There was a fault in the rock. Small, but big enough to let a little of the fine smoke seep through. He must have been a sniffer before to be able to smell the trace of the stuff that was drifting down the hill. All fixed now, though. I'm having the fault, and any others that may exist, cemented up solid. Death by snake bite will fix our records."

"Fair enough. Now, how about these two? There has been some talk of a honeymoon to Chickladoria, but that may have been a blind. Doubles? Disappearance? The vortex? What do you think?"

"Um— We've got to hold the risk at minimum." Fairchild pondered for minutes. "We can't disintegrate them, that's sure. We're trying to clear our books of too much of that stuff already. They've got to be found dead, and the quota for the vortex for this period is full. Therefore we'll have to keep them alive and out of sight—where they are is as good a place as any—for a week."

"Why alive? We've kept stiffs in storage before now."

"Too chancey—dead tissues change too much. We weren't courting investigation then, but now we are—on the vortex, at least—so we have to keep our noses clean. How about this? They decided that they couldn't wait any longer and got married today. You, big-hearted philanthropist that you are, told them that they could take their two weeks vacation immediately and that you would square it with their department heads.

They went on their honeymoon. Not to Chicklladoria, of course—too long and too risky—but to a place where nobody knows them. We can fake the evidence on that easily enough. They come back in about a week, to get settled, and the vortex gets them. See any flaws in that set-up?"

"No, that looks perfect," Graves decided after due deliberation. "One week from tonight, at midnight, they go out. Hear that, Ryder?"

"Yes, you pot-bellied—"

The fat man snapped a switch.

Doggedly and skillfully though he tried, Ryder could open up no avenue of escape or of communication; Fairchild and Graves had seen efficiently to that. And Jacqueline, in the inevitability of impending death, steadied down to meet it. She was a woman. In minor crises she had hidden her face and had shrieked and had fainted; but in this ultimate one she drew from the depths of her woman's soul not only a power to overcome her own weaknesses, but also an extra something with which to sustain and to fortify Ryder in his black moments.

They were together. That fact, and the far more important one that they were to die together, robbed incarceration and death itself of sting.

AT THE Atomic Research Laboratory on Teelus a conference was taking place between Unattached Lensmen Philip Strong, the head of that laboratory, and Doctor Neal Cloud, ex-atomic-physicist, now "Storm" Cloud, the Vortex Blaster.

Cloud had become the Vortex Blaster because a fragment of a loose atomic vortex had wiped out his entire family—not by coincidence, but by sheer cosmic irony. For he, while protecting his home and his loved ones from lightning by means of a mathematically infallible network of lightning rods, had all unknowingly erected a super-powerful magnet for loose-flying vortices of atomic disintegration.

Nor were such vortices scarce. Every time an atomic powerplant went out of control, a loose atomic vortex resulted, and there was, at that time, no way of extinguishing them. It was theoretically possible to blow them out with duodec, but the charge of explosive had to match within very close limits the instantaneous value of the vortex's activity. Since that value varied rapidly and almost unpredictably, practically all such attempts resulted in the death of the operator and the creation of a dozen or more new centers of annihilation.

There was a possibility that Cloud, a mathematical prodigy able to compute instantaneously any mathematical problem, would be able to succeed where so many others had failed; but as long as he had Jo and the three kids, as long as he had the normal love of life, that possibility had never occurred to him.

When he lost them, however, he no longer had the slightest interest in living. Unwilling to kill himself, he decided to try to blow out the oldest and worst vortex upon Tellus. Against the orders of his chief and the pleadings of his friends he tried it. He succeeded.

He had been burned; he had been broken, but he carried no scars. The Phillips treatment for the replacement of lost or damaged members of the human body had taken care of that. His face looked youthful; his hard-schooled, resiliently responsive body was in startlingly fine condition for that of a man of forty.

The Phillips treatment could not, however, fill a dully aching void within him. It could not eradicate from mind and soul the absence of and the overpowering longing for his deceased wife and children—particularly his wife, Jo the lovely, Jo the beloved, Jo his all in all for eighteen fleeting and intensely happy years.

He no longer wore that psychic trauma

visibly; it no longer came obtrusively between him and those with whom he worked, but it was and always would be there. He had by this time blown out so many vortices and had developed such an effective technique that he no longer had any hope that any vortex could ever kill him—but there were other forms of death. He still would not actually court it; but more and more certainly, as the days dragged on, he came to know that not by one single millimeter would he dodge anyone or anything bringing the dread messenger his way.

"Where do you want me to go next, Chief?" the Vortex Blaster asked. "Spica or Rigel or Corvina? Those three are the worst, I'd say."

"Uh-huh—Rigel's is probably a shade the worst in property damage and urgency. Before we decide, though, I wish you'd take a good look at the data on this one from Dekanore III. See if you see what I do."

"Dekanore III?" Cloud glanced curiously at the older man. "Didn't know they were having any trouble. Only got one, haven't they?"

"Two now—they just had a new one. It's that new one I'm talking about. It's acting funny—damned funny."

Cloud went through the data in brow-furrowing concentration, then charted some of it and frowned.

"I get it. 'Damned funny' is right," he agreed. "The toxicity is too steady, but at the same time the composition of the effluvium seems to be too varied. Inconsistent, apparently — but since there's no real attempt at a gamma analysis and very little actual mathematical data, it could be; they're so utterly unpredictable. Inexperienced observers, I take it, with chemical and medical bias?"

"Very much so, from our angle."

"Well, I'll say this much—I never saw a gamma chart that would fit this stuff, and I can't even imagine what the sigma curve would look like. Boss, I'd like to run a full test on that baby before it goes orthodox."

"My thought exactly. And we have a valid excuse for giving it priority, too. It happens to be killing more people than all three of those bad ones combined."

"I can fix that toxicity, I think, with exciters; and I'll throw a solid cordon around it, if I have to, to keep the fools from getting themselves burned to death. However, I won't blow it out until I find out why it's acting so—if it is. Clear the ether, Chief, I'm practically there!"

IT DID not take long to load Cloud's apparatus-packed flitter into a liner, Dekanore-bound. But that trip was not uneventful. Half-way there an alarm rang out and the dread word "Pirates!" resounded throughout the ship.

Consternation reigned, for organized piracy had vanished with the fall of the Council of Boskone. Treasure ships were either warships themselves or were escorted by warships. But this vessel was no treasure ship; she was only a passenger liner.

She had had little enough warning—her alert Communications Officer had sent out only a part of his first distress call when the blanketing interference closed down. The pirate—a first-class super-dreadnought—flashed up, and a heavy visual beam drove in.

"Go inert," came the tense command. "We are coming aboard."

"Are you crazy?" The liner's captain was surprised and disgusted, rather than alarmed. "If not, you've got the wrong ship. Everything we have aboard, including the ransom—if any—you can get for our passengers, wouldn't pay your expenses."

"You wouldn't know, of course, that you are carrying a package of Lonabarian jewelry, would you?" The question was elaborately skeptical.

"I know damned well that I'm not!"

"We'll take the package you *haven't* got, then!" The pirate snapped. "Go inert and open up, or I'll inert you with a needle-beam and open you up, compartment by compartment—like this." A narrow beam lashed out and expired. "That was through one of your cargo holds, just to show you that I mean business. The next one will be through your control room."

Resistance being out of the question, the liner went inert, and while the intrinsic velocities of the two vessels were being matched, the attacker issued further instructions.

"All officers are to be in the control room, all passengers in the main saloon. Everybody unarmed. Any person wearing arms or slow in obeying orders will be blasted."

Lines were rigged and space-suited men crossed the intervening void.

One squad went to the control room. Its leader, seeing that the Communications Officer was still trying to drive a call through the blanket, beamed him down without a word, then fused the entire communications panel. The captain and four or five other officers, maddened by this cold-blooded butchery, went for their guns and were butchered in turn.

A larger group—helmets thrown back for unimpeded vision, hands bared for instantaneous and accurate use of weapons—invaded the main saloon. Most of them went on through to perform previously assigned tasks, only a half dozen posting themselves to guard the passengers. One of these guards, a hook-nosed individual wearing consciously an aura of authority and dominance, spoke.

"Just take it easy, folks, and nobody will get hurt. If any of you have guns, don't go for them. That's a specialty that—" One of his DeLameters flamed briefly. Cloud's right arm vanished almost to the shoulder. The man behind him—what was left of him—dropped.

"Take it easy, I said," he went calmly on. "You can tie that arm up, fella, if you want to. It was in line with that guy who was trying in his slow way to pull a gun. You nurse over there, take him to the sick-bay and let them fix up his wing. If anybody stops you tell them Number One said to. Now the rest of you watch your step. I'll cut down every damn one of you that so much as looks like he wanted to start something."

They obeyed. They were very near the point of panic, but in view of what had happened no one dared to make the first move. The leniency displayed toward the wounded man also had a soothing effect.

In a few minutes the looting parties returned to the saloon.

"Did you get it, Six?"

"We got it. It was in the mail, like you said."

"The safe?"

"Sure. Wasn't much in it, but not bad, at that."

"QX. Control room! All done—let's go!"

The pirates backed away, their vessel disappeared, and its passengers rushed for their staterooms.

Then: "Doctor Cloud—Chief Pilot calling Doctor Cloud," the speaker announced.

"Cloud speaking."

"Report to the control room, please."

"Oh, excuse me—I didn't know that you were wounded," the officer apologized as he saw the Blaster's bandaged stump. "You had better go to bed."

"Doing nothing would only make it worse. Can I be of any help?"

"Do you know anything about communicators?"

"A little."

"Good. All our communications officers were killed and the sets—even those in the lifeboats—blasted. You can't do

much with your left hand, of course, but you may be able to boss the job of rigging up a spare."

"I can do more than you think," Cloud grinned wryly. "It so happens that I'm left-handed. Give me a couple of technicians and we'll see what we can do."

They set to work, but before they had accomplished anything a cruiser drove up, flashing its identification as a warship of the Galactic Patrol.

"We picked up the partial call you got off," the young commander said briskly. "With that and the center of interference we didn't lose any time. Let's make this snappy." He was itching to be off after the marauder, but he could not leave until he had ascertained the facts and had been given a clearance signal by the merchantman's commanding officer. "You aren't hurt much. Don't need to call a repairship for you, do I?"

"No."

"QX." A quick investigation ensued.

"Anybody who ships stuff like that open mail ought to lose it, but it's tough on innocent bystanders. Anything else I can do for you?" the rescuer asked.

"Not unless you can lend us a communications officer or two."

"Sorry, but we're short-handed there ourselves. Can give you anybody else you need though, I think."

"Nothing else, thanks."

"Sign this clearance then, please, and I'll get on that fellow's tail. I'll send a copy of the report to your owners' head office. Clear ether!"

The visitor shot away and the liner, after repairs had been made, resumed its course toward Dekanore, with Cloud and a couple of electrical technicians as communications officers.

THE Vortex Blaster was met effusively at the dock by Manager Graves himself. The fat man was overwhelmingly sorry that Cloud had lost his arm, but assured him that the accident wouldn't lay him up very long. He, Graves, would get a Posenian surgeon over here so fast that—

If the manager was taken aback to learn that Cloud had had a Phillips treatment already, he scarcely showed it. He escorted the specialist to Deka's best hotel, where he introduced him largely and volubly. Graves took him to supper. Graves took him to a theater and showed him the town. Graves told the hotel management to give the specialist the best rooms and the best valet they had and that all of his activities whatever their nature, purpose, or extent, were to be charged to Tellurian Pharmaceuticals, Inc. Graves was a grand guy.

Cloud broke loose finally, however, and went to the dock to see about storing his flitter.

It had not been unloaded. There would be a slight delay, he was informed, because of the insurance inspections necessitated by the damage—and Cloud had not known that there had been any damage! When he had found out just what that beam had done to his little ship he swore viciously and sought out the liner's Chief Pilot.

"Why didn't you tell me that that damned pirate holed us?" he demanded hotly.

"Why didn't you ask?" the officer replied, honestly surprised. "I don't suppose that it occurred to anybody—I know it didn't to me—that you might be interested."

And that was, Cloud knew, strictly true. Passengers were not informed of such occurrences. He had been enough of an officer so that he could have learned everything if he had so wished, but not enough of one to have been informed of such matters as routine. Nor was it surprising that it had not come up in conversation. Damage to cargo meant

nothing whatever to those in the liner's control room; a couple of easily-patched holes in the hull were not worth mentioning. From their standpoint the only real damage was done to the communicators, and Cloud himself had set them to rights. No, this delay was his own fault as much as anybody else's.

"You won't lose anything, though," the pilot said helpfully. "It's all covered by insurance, you know."

"It's not the money I'm yapping about —it's time. Those instruments and generators can't be duplicated anywhere except on Tellus, and even there it's all special-order stuff—oh, damn!"

CHAPTER THREE

"Clear Ether!"

DURING the following days Tellurian Pharmaceuticals entertained Cloud. Not insistently—Graves was an expert in such matters—but simply by letting him know that the planet was his. He could do anything he pleased; he could have any number of companions to help him do it. And as a result he did—within limits—exactly what Graves wanted him to do. In spite of the fact that he did not want to enjoy life, he liked it.

One evening, however, he refused to play a slot machine, explaining to his laughing companion that the laws of chance were pretty thoroughly shackled in such mechanisms—and the idle remark backfired. What was the mathematical probability that all the things that had happened to him could have happened by pure chance?

That night he analyzed his data and found that the probability was an infinitesimal. And there were too many other incidents—all contributory. Six of them —seven if he counted his arm. If it had been his left arm—jet back! Since he wrote with his right hand, very few people knew that he was left-handed, and anyway, it didn't make any difference. Everybody knew that it took both hands and both feet to do what he did. Seven it was; and that made it virtually certain that accident was out.

But, if he was being delayed and hampered deliberately, who was doing it, and why? It didn't make any kind of sense. Nevertheless, the idea would not down.

He was a trained observer and an analyst second to none. Therefore he soon found out that he was being shadowed, but he could not get any truly significant leads.

"Graves, have you got a spy-ray detector?" he asked boldly—and watchfully.

The fat man did not turn a hair. "No, nobody would want to spy on me. Why?"

"I feel jumpy, as though somebody were walking on my grave. I don't know why anybody would be spying on me, but—I'm neither a Lensman nor an esper, but I'd swear that somebody's peeking over my shoulder half the time. I think I'll go over to the Patrol station and borrow one."

"Nerves, my boy, nerves and shock," Graves diagnosed. "Losing an arm would shock hell out of anybody's nervous system, I'd say. Maybe the Phillips treatment—the new one growing on— pulls you out of shape."

"Could be," Cloud assented moodily. His act had been a flop. If Graves knew anything—and he'd be damned if he could see any grounds for such a suspicion —he hadn't given away a thing.

Nevertheless, the Blaster went next to the Patrol office, which was of course completely and permanently shielded. There he borrowed the detector and asked the lieutenant in charge to get a special report from the Patrol upon the alleged gems and what, if anything, it knew about either the cruiser or the

pirates. To justify the request he had to explain his suspicions.

After the messages had been sent the young officer drummed thoughtfully upon his desk. "Wish I could do something, Doctor Cloud, but I can't see how I can," he decided finally. "I'll notify Narcotics right away, of course, but without a shred of evidence I can't act, even if they are as big a zwilnik outfit as Wembleson's was, on Bronseca. . . ."

"I know. I'm not accusing them. It may be anything from Vandemar to Andromeda. All firms—all individuals, for that matter—have spy-ray blocks. Call me, will you, when you get that report?"

The call came eventually and the Patrolman was round-eyed as he imparted the information that, as far as anyone could discover, there had been no Lonabarian gems and the rescuing cruiser had not been a Patrol vessel at all. Cloud was not surprised.

"I thought so," he said, flatly. "This is a hell of a thing to say, but it now becomes a virtual certainty—mathematically, the probability approaches absolute certainty as a limit—that this whole fantastic procedure was designed solely to keep me from analyzing and blowing out that vortex. Here's what I'm going to do." Bending over the desk, even in that ultra-shielded office, he whispered busily for minutes.

"But listen, Doctor!" the Patrolman protested. "Wait—let a Lensman do it. Do you realize that if they're clean and if they catch you at it, nothing in the universe can keep you from doing at least ninety days in the clink?"

"Yes. But if we wait, the chances are that it'll be too late: They will have had time to cover up whatever they're doing. What I am asking you is—will you back my play if I catch them with the goods?"

"Yes. We'll be here, armored and ready. But I still think you're completely nuts."

"Maybe so, but if my mathematics is wrong, it is still a fact that my arm will grow back on just as fast in clink as anywhere else. Clear ether, Lieutenant—until tonight."

Cloud made an engagement for luncheon with Graves. Arriving a few minutes early, he was of course shown into the private office. Seeing that the manager was busily signing papers, he strolled aimlessly to the side window and seemed to gaze appreciatively at the masses of gorgeously-blooming flowers just outside. What he really saw, however, was his detector. Since he was wearing it openly upon his wrist, he knew that he was not under observation. Nobody knew that he had in his sleeve a couple of small but highly efficient implements. Nobody knew that he was left-handed. Nobody knew that he had surveyed, inch by inch, the burglar-alarm wiring of this particular window, nor that he was an expert in such matters. Therefore no one saw what he did, nor was any signal given that he did anything at all.

That same night, however, that window opened alarmlessly to his deft touch. That side was dark, but enough light came through the front windows so that he could see what he was doing. Bad or good? He did not know. Those walls might very well have eyes, but he had to take that chance. One thing was in his favor: no matter how crooked they were they couldn't keep armored troops on duty as night-watchmen. That would be begging for trouble. And, in a pinch, he could get the Patrolmen there as fast as they could get their thugs.

He had not brought any weapons. If he was wrong, he would have no need of one and it would only aggravate his offense. If right, one wouldn't be enough and there would be plenty available. There they were, a drawerful of them. DeLameters—full charged and ready—complete with belts. He was right.

He leaped to Graves' desk. A spy-ray. That basement—"private laboratories"—was still blocked. He threw switch after switch—no soap. Communicators— He was getting somewhere now—a steel-lined room, a girl and a boy.

"Eureka! Good evening, folks."

IT HAD not taken long for Ryder to arrive at the explanations of the predicament in which he and the girl were so hopelessly enmeshed.

"Thionite!" he explained to her, bitterly. "I never saw a man take thionite before, let alone die of it, but it's the only thing I can think of that can turn a man into such an utter maniac as that one was. They're *growing* the stuff. They must be a zwilnik outfit from top to bottom. That's why they've got to rub us out."

"But how could it get out?"

"Through a fault, Fairchild said, a crack in the rocks. A millionth of a gram is enough, you know, and the stuff's so fine that it's terrifically hard to hold. If we could only tell the Patrol!"

But they could not tell, nor could they escape. They exerted their every resource, exhausted every possibility—in vain. And as day followed day Ryder almost went mad under the grinding thought that they both must die without any opportunity of revealing their all-important knowledge. Hence he burst out violently when the death-cell's speaker gave tongue.

"Eureka? Damn your gloating soul to hell, Graves!" he yelled furiously.

"This isn't Graves!" the speaker snapped. "Cloud. Storm Cloud, the Vortex Blaster, investigating—"

"Oh, Bob, it is! I recognize his voice!" the girl screamed.

"Quiet! This is a zwilnik outfit, isn't it?"

"I'll say it is," Ryder gasped in relief. "Thionite—"

"That's enough, details later. Keep still a minute!" Locked together in almost overpowering relief, the imprisoned pair listened as the crisp voice went on:

"Lieutenant? I was right—zwilnik. *Thionite!* Get over here fast. Blast down the Mayner Street door—stairway on right, two flights down, corridor to left, half-way along left side, Room B twelve. Snap it up!"

"But wait, Cloud, wait!" they heard a fainter voice protest. "Wait until we get there. You can't do anything alone!"

"Can't wait. Got to get these kids out—evidence!" Cloud broke the circuit and, as rapidly as his one hand permitted, buckled gun-belts around himself. He knew that Graves would have to kill those two youngsters if he possibly could. If they were silenced, it was eminently possible that all other evidence could be destroyed in time.

"For God's sake save Jackie anyway!" Ryder prayed. He knew just how high those stakes were. "And watch out for gas, radiations, and traps—a dozen alarms must have been sprung before now all around here."

"What kind of traps?" Cloud demanded.

"Deadfalls, sliding doors—I don't know what they haven't got in this damned place."

"Take Fairchild's private elevator, Doctor!" the girl's clear voice broke in. "Graves said that he could kill us in here with gas or rays or—"

"Where is it?"

"The one farthest from the stairs."

Cloud jumped up, listening with half an ear to the babblings from below as he searched for air-helmets. Radiations, in that metal-lined room, were out—except possibly for a few narrow-beam projectors, which he could deal with easily enough. Gas, however, was bad. They couldn't weld cover-plates everywhere, even if they had time and metal. Every

drug house had air-helmets, though, and this one must have hundreds of them. Ah! here they were!

HE PUT one on, and made awkward shift to drape two more around his neck. He had to keep his one hand free. To the indicated elevator he dashed. Down two floors. He ran along the corridor and drove the narrowest, hottest possible cutting beam of his DeLameter into the lock of Room B Twelve. It took time to cut even that small semi-circle in that refractory and conductive alloy—altogether too much time—but the kids would know who it was. The zwilniks would unlock the cell with a key, not a torch.

They knew. When Cloud kicked the door open they fell upon him eagerly.

"A helmet and a DeLameter apiece. Get them on quick. Now help me buckle this—thanks. Miss Jackie, stay back there, clear of our feet. You, man, lie down here in the doorway. Keep your ray-gun outside, and stick your head out just barely far enough to see—no farther."

A spot of light appeared in a port, then another. Cloud's weapon flamed briefly. "I thought so. They do their serious radiation work somewhere else. The air right now, though, I imagine, is bad. It won't be long now. Do I hear something?"

"Somebody's coming, but suppose it's the Patrol?"

"They'll be in armor, so a few blasts won't hurt 'em. Maybe the zwilniks will be in armor, too—if so we'll have to duck—but I imagine that they'll throw the first ones in here just as they are."

They did. Graves, or whoever was directing things, rushed his nearest guards into action, hoping to reach B Twelve before anyone else could.

But as that first detachment rounded the corner Cloud's DeLameter flamed white, followed quickly by Ryder's, and in those withering blasts of energy the zwilniks died. The respite was, however, short. The next men to arrive wore armor against which the DeLameters raved in vain, but only for a second.

"Back!" Cloud ordered, and swung the heavy door as the attackers' beams swept past. It could not be locked, but it could be welded solidly to the jamb, which operation was done with dispatch, if not with neatness.

"I hope they come in time." The girl's low voice carried a prayer. Was this brief flare of hope false—would not only she and her Bob, but also their would-be savior die? "That other noise—suppose that's the Patrol?"

It was not really a noise—the cell was sound-proof—it was an occasional jarring vibration of the entire structure.

"I wouldn't wonder." Cloud looked around the room as he spoke. "Heavy stuff—semi-portables, perhaps. Well, let's see if we can't find some more junk like that trap-door to stick onto that patchwork. Jackie, you might grab that bucket and throw water. Every little bit helps and it's getting mighty hot. Careful! Don't scald yourself."

The heavy metal of the door was bright-to-dull red over half its area and that area was spreading rapidly. The air of the room grew hot and hotter. Bursts of live steam billowed out and, condensing, fogged the helmets and made the atmosphere even more oppressive.

The glowing metal dulled, brightened, dulled. The prisoners could only guess at the intensity of the battle being waged without. They could follow its progress only by the ever-shifting temperature of the barrier which the zwilniks were so suicidally determined to beam down. Then a blast of bitterly cold air roared from the ventilator, clearing away the gas in seconds, and the speaker came to life.

"Good work, Cloud and you other

two," it said chattily. "Glad to see that you're all on deck. The boys have been working on what's left of the air-conditioner, so now we can cool you off a little and I can see what goes on there. Get into this corner over here, so that they can't blast you if they hole through."

The barrier grew hotter, flamed fiercely white. A narrow pencil of energy came sizzlingly through—but only for seconds. It expired. Through the hole there poured the reflection of a beam so brilliant as to pale the noonday sun. The portal cooled; heavy streams of water hissed and steamed. Warm water—almost hot—spurted into and began to fill the room. A cutting torch, water-cooled and carefully operated now, sliced away the upper two-thirds of the fused and battered door. The grotesquely-armored lieutenant peered in.

"Anybody hurt, Cloud?" he shouted. Upon being assured that no one was, he went on: "Good. We'll have to carry you out. Step up here where we can get hold of you."

"I'll walk and I'll carry Jackie myself," Ryder protested, while two of the armored warriors were draping Cloud tastefully around the helmet of a third.

"You'll get boiled to the hips if you try it. The water's deep and hot. Come on!"

The slowly rising water was steaming sullenly; the walls and the ceiling of the corridor gave mute but eloquent testimony of the appalling forces which had been unleashed. Wood, plastic, concrete, metal—nothing was as it had been. Cavities yawned; plates and pilasters were warped, crumbled, fused into hellish stalactites; mighty girders hung awry. In places complete collapse had necessitated the blasting out of detours.

Through the wreckage of what had been a magnificent building the cavalcade made its way, but when the open air was reached the three rescued ones were not left to their own desires. Instead, they were escorted by a full platoon of Patrolmen to an armored car, which was in turn escorted to the Patrol Station.

"I'm afraid to take chances with you until we find out who is who and what is what around here," the young commander explained. "The Lensmen will be here, with reinforcements, in the morning, but I think you had better stay here with us for a while, don't you?"

"Protective custody, eh?" Cloud grinned. "I don't remember ever having been arrested in such a nice way before, but it's QX with me. Thanks, Lieutenant, for everything."

LENSMEN came, and companies of Patrolmen equipped in many and various fashions, but it was several weeks before the situation was entirely under control. Then Ellington—Councillor Ellington, the old Unattached Lensmen who was in charge of all Narcotics work—called the three detainees into the office which had been set aside for his use.

"We can release you now," the Lensman smiled. "Thanks, from me as well as from the Patrol, for everything you have done. There has been some talk that you two youngsters have been contemplating a honeymoon upon Chickladoria or thereabouts?"

"Oh, no, sir—that is—That was just talk, sir." Both spoke at once.

"I realize that the report may have been exaggerated or premature, or both, but it strikes me as being a sound idea. Therefore, not as a reward, but in appreciation, the Patrol will be very glad to have you as its guests throughout such a trip—all expense—if you like."

They liked.

"Very well. Lieutenant, take Miss Cochran and Mr. Ryder to the Disbursing Office, please. . . . Dr. Cloud, the Patrol will take cognizance of what you

have done. In the meantime, however, I would like to say that in uncovering this attempt to grow Trenconian broad-leaf here, you have been of immense, of immeasurable assistance to us."

"Nothing much, sir, I'm afraid. I shudder to think of what's coming. If the zwilniks can grow that stuff anywhere—"

"Not at all, not at all," Ellington interrupted briskly. "No worse than ever, if as bad. For if such an entirely unsuspected firm as Tellurian Pharmaceuticals, with all their elaborate preparations and precautions—some of the inspectors must have been corrupted too, although we aren't to the bottom of that phase yet—could not get more than started, it is not probable that any other attempt will prove markedly successful. And in the case of the other habit-forming drugs, which Tellurian Pharmaceuticals and undoubtedly many other supposedly reputable firms have been distributing in quantity, you have given us a very potent weapon."

"What weapon?" Cloud was frankly puzzled.

"Statistical analysis and correlation of apparently unrelated indices—as you pointed out."

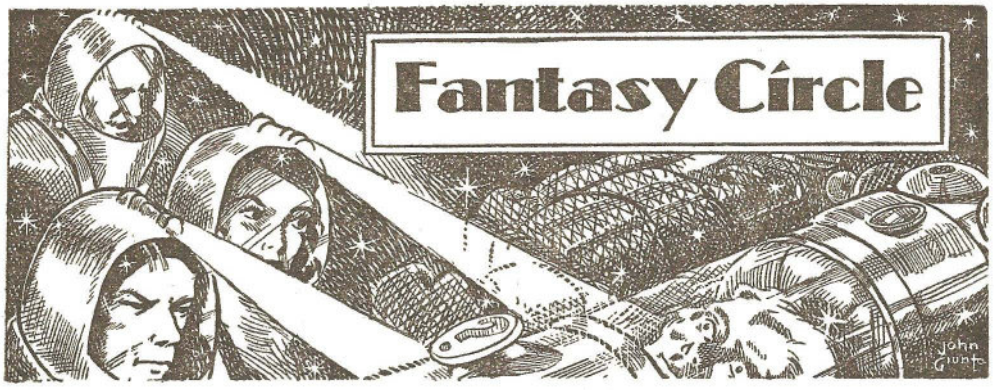
"But they have been used for years!" the Blaster protested.

"Admitted—but only when individual departures from the norm became so marked as to call for a special investigation. We now have a corps of analysts applying them as routine. Thus, while we cannot count upon having any more such extraordinary help as you have given us, we should not need it. I don't suppose that I can give you a lift back to Tellus?"

"I don't think so, thanks. My new flitter is en route here now. I'll have to analyze this vortex anyway. Not that I think it's abnormal in any way—those were undoubtedly murders, not vortex casualties at all—but just to complete the record. And since I can't do any extinguishing until I grow a new flipper, I might as well stay here and keep on practising."

"Practising? Practising what?"

"Gun-slinging—the lightning draw. I intend to get at least a lunch while the next pirate who pulls a DeLameter on me is getting a square meal."



ONE of the oldest and yet one of the newest points of discussion in all stf-enthusiasts circles is this: just where can the line be drawn between science fiction and fantasy? Where does weird fiction fit in? In the April, 1935, issue of *Fantasy Magazine,* Donald A. Wollheim had the following to say on the subject:

"Science fictionists are inclined to regard adult fantasy as belonging to only two general classifications, science fiction and weird fiction. These classifications may be roughly defined as follows: Science fiction is that branch of fantasy which is rendered plausible by the reader's recognition of its scientific possibilities. Weird fiction is that branch of fantasy dealing with supernatural or occult objects, which is rendered plausible by the reader's recognition of the fact that there are people somewhere who did believe or do believe in the truth of the ideas therein, and is willing to concede the truth of these things for the period in which he is reading the story.

"There is however a third class of fantasy which cannot come under either of these headings and therefore must be classed separately. This I will term *Pure Fantasy.* It is known to everyone in its juvenile version as fairy tales. But it does not stop at the juvenile; unknown apparently to most people, it extends into adult fiction in a few seldom-encountered books and authors.

"I will define this third class of fantasy as follows: pure fantasy is that branch of fantasy which is rendered plausible by the reader's desire to consider it as such. As you will notice, this definition holds true for fairy tales in the mind of a child as well as for pure fantasy in the mind of an adult."

Another topic of discussion among stf readers which never seems to die away is that of the time-travel paradox. Any number of time-travel tales have been written; several have appeared in past issues of *Astonishing* and *Super Science.* Here is what one "Ommia" had to say on the subject in *Fantasy Magazine* for October, 1934:

"It's all sort of mixed up, sort of.

"Look— Mort Wheams invents an airplane that can travel faster than time. He can take off from New York, fly around the world, and land in New York two hours before he took off.

"Now look— Mort Wheams is a cautious fellow. Before taking off, he looks to see if he has landed two hours before. He finds that he hasn't landed, so he figures that he crashed over China or somewhere, and was killed or something. Well, to avoid this, he doesn't take off— and that's the reason he didn't land— because he didn't take off in the first place.

"It's all sort of mixed up, sort of."

Rather amusing, and much more logical than some of the time-travel explanations you may have heard. The question is, of

course, if Mort never tried out his airplane, how did he know the thing would actually fly faster than time? Some fans might explain his not having landed two hours ago by saying that Mort obviously landed in a *different* time, though still two hours back. Which is still a not-too-overworked theme for an stf tale for someone . . .

TO GET to more serious matters, here's an excerpt from the February 1941 issue of *Science Fiction Fan.* G. Ken Chapman, a British enthusiast, takes exception to the comments of *Astonishing's* book reviewer:

"I notice that *Astonishing Stories* for October, 1940, contains, amongst other items in its "Fantasy Reviews", a paragraph or two upon Book Notes. In turn, this little excerpt has a couple of sentences to say on a Penguin Book titled "The Rights of Man", author H. G. Wells.

"It is extremely incongruous that three quarters of a page is expanded on two fantastic novels, which, in his polished fashion, Don Wollheim rather admits are nowhere near top rate, yet this great Wellsian philosophy is dismissed in a score or so of words.

"Nor, to be quite frank, is what is said entirely accurate! For instance, the reviewer remarks that the book sets forth H. G. Wells' ideas on the reorganization of the world after the present war is over. Whereas, on page seven of the British Penguin edition, in the preface, this is clearly stated: 'It is a piece of associated writing of which the present writer is to be regarded as the editor and secretary rather than the author—'

"I have every reason to believe that Mr. Wells did indeed go to a considerable amount of trouble to make the book the result of expert and rational debate, rather than the original industry of his own brilliant intellect . . . .

"Much of Wells' own opinion does come out in the work, I will admit, but it is such rationally-planned and common sense stuff, that my guess is that no very reasonable counter-argument could be put up against its philosophy.

"Again, *Astonishing Stories'* review states that the book's object is 'to reorganize the world *after* the present world war is over.' Once more, I object! My impression is that Wells intends his rationalized World Revolution to begin *now!*

"I can find no reason for hold-up of his plans because there is a war on in mad Europe. On the contrary, all the more reason why we should, indeed, make our start at it . . . at once!

"It may be assumed that an intelligent individual will want, nay *demand,* better living conditions for the entire human race, when this devastation is eventually over. I ask you to note that I say the entire human race, and use the words advisedly, for it is obvious, too, that racial prejudices will never be forgotten, nor enmities forgiven, as long as poverty, injustice, and inequalities remain unabated. It is therefore necessary for action to be taken now, to make possible for a united world to exist, upon Peace coming to Terra.

"Wells' 'Declaration of Rights' is eminently suitable for this purpose. It is a manifesto of clean common sense, such as this Earth needs to pull it together today, and it is surely up to the democratic peoples of the Western Civilizations who claim themselves to be saving the world's liberty, to adopt some fashion of plans to give this poor old world a chance to enjoy its liberation. Yes, H. G. Wells is the man for the job!

"The book is, I must confess, typically Wellsian in its frankness and daring, and the Master obviously, *is* airing his own views at those candid moments."

To this challenge, Wollheim makes the following reply:

"I regret that my brief mention of Mr. Wells' slim volume aroused Mr. Chapman's righteous wrath. I should have devoted more space to the work had it been available. In spite of Mr. Wells' wish that 'The Rights of Man' be regarded as a collaboration, I prefer to regard it as almost pure Wells. Even Mr. Chapman finds that he must needs admit that the old 'Master' dominates the work throughout and uses it entirely as a sounding board for his own particular political philosophy.

"As for the second objection to my reference, even though Mr. Wells may plain his reconstruction to start now, his blue-prints do apply to the reorganization of the world after the war is over. And thus I think my description, as such, is not inaccurate.

"I have the utmost respect for H. G. Wells as a prophet of scientific achievement and as a builder of Utopias. But as a political commentator, I think I could scarcely find one more thoroughly saddled with a record of bad guesses and blind stumbling. It is a sad thing, perhaps, but it is so.

"The bibliography of Mr. Wells is strewn with works of political prophecy which are almost pathetic in retrospect. This latest volume is showing signs of going the same way. Shot through it are references that already ring false. References to the Soviet-Finnish war reveal the man's lack of understanding (a lack he shared with most of the world, admittedly, but, after all, *he* was supposed to be the learned and understanding one); he refers often to the 'mental and moral deterioration of the Soviet Government'. We know now that that statement is utter nonsense. That alone warps the book. There are similar statements all through, revealing an ignorance of the nature of the political factions of Europe, which is an all-important thing to consider for any new world-building.

"But the thing which we feel to be wrong mainly is Mr. Chapman's insistence that the thing to do is to start reconstruction now. Mr. Wells is more definite; he speaks of the need for immediately fomenting dispute, debate, and actual revolution against all the governments of the democratic allies. Not after the war, but now, even while they are engaged in fighting for their lives. All the leaders of the United Nations, regardless of the nature of their national philosophies, today agree on one point—National Unity. We must stand together until we have smashed the menace to our very existence. Until that menace is dead, we dare not weaken ourselves by splitting our nations in squabbling factions over the problems of self improvement.

"Mr. Wells militates against that unity which is our watchword. As such, we must reject him."

ONE of the most interesting and unique volumes of which we have heard in a long time, is reviewed by Forrest J. Ackerman in *Fantasy Magazine* for July, 1934. Mr. Ackerman has this to say:

"'The World of Tomorrow' by I. O. Evans, published by Denis Archer, London, England, at 10s 2d.

"This is the forecast of the 'World of Tomorrow' printed in the "Book of Tomorrow" from England.

"On just how much science-fiction the person has read will depend upon how much new is found. The author of it is grateful to UFA films and Gaumont and Fox, *Amazing Stories, Meccano Magazine,* David Lasser's 'Conquest of Space', Mr. A. C. Garrad—apparently a British stf fan—and others as the sources of material for his book. And, subsequently, you will find photos from 'High Treason', 'Just Imagine', 'By Rocket to the Moon', illustrations by Wesson, Paul, Morey, etc., which you may have seen before; and are

quite apt to find yourself familiar with many of the ideas in it. But there are some illustrations which, personally, I have never seen, and there is contained in it at least one novel idea.

"The book, in being a prediction of Tomorrow, is a summary of what many of our stf authors have said, applied to Great Britain. It is a British book and deals with British achievement. Some of the subjects covered include 'New Sources of Power', 'Communications', 'Transport and Travel', 'Space Travel', 'Cities', 'Weather', 'Food and Clothing', 'Government and Law', 'War and Peace', 'Human Evolution' and so on. It does not look into the *distant* future and is not fantastic; it treats of the things that are likely to happen.

"Of chief interest is the construction of the book itself. As is pointed out, the book as we have it today differs very slightly in construction from the volumes in use a thousand years ago. This—'The World of Tomorrow'—is the first attempt to bring book production into line with modern requirements. It strikes an entirely new note, and is the result of long experiment. It is made of translucent 'rhodoid' on which the design, the City of 1980 of 'Just Imagine', is printed. The 'rhodoid' edges overlap so as in a way to lock the book and protect it from wear, and the whole cover is stainless and washable. There is a new type binding employed, and also an arrangement of print to give a sense of continuity. Pages with illustrations have no type on the back, and the illustrations are printed on transparent 'diophane' plates, giving a luminosity that is almost stereoscopic.

"A junior futurist history of one hundred sixty-three pages, fifteen chapters, thirty-two illustrations. Some of the 'diophane' illustrations are of a Solar Motor, Tidal Power Generator, Teletypewriter, Mid-Ocean Airport, Spacerocket, Moonscape, and other futurisms."

And, *we* might add, the book's title will not be pertinent many years longer. When the war is finally won, as it shall be, the needs of a new world will soon bring into being not only many of these 'futurisms' of science-fiction authors, but applications and inventions which they themselves never dreamed. It has often been remarked that the fault of science-fiction is not in that it's too fantastic, but that it is not fantastic enough to keep up with the flow of scientific achievement.

BOWEN CONWAY writes, in regard to the item on dynamism in our last issue:

"Two news items published some time back tend to shed a new light on the still-prevalent 'heat death theory'. The first item concerns a speech made by Albert Einstein before the American Scientific Congress where he stated that physics admittedly no longer possesses any logical theoretical basis. The only certainty left, he said, seemed to be Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty. Nature, said Einstein, seems to be operating on the throw-of-the-dice method.

At the same time, he disclaimed any belief in this idea himself!

"The second item was a restatement by Dr. Henry Norris Russel of Princeton of the classical entropy proposition. The good doctor saw for our cosmos only the usual slow decay, at the end of which was to be a final state of quiescence.

"An article by the internationally famous Professor J. B. S. Haldane, however, took the opposite stand. Summing up, what he said was that natural laws no longer need be considered as unchanging and eternal, but dynamic.

"Viewed from that standpoint that dynamism is better than staticism (and the whole past history of the human race confirms this comparison) the dynamic concept utterly antiquates both the Uncertainty Viewpoint as explained by Einstein

and the static theories of Russel, replacing them with a *developing* theory which rises from and influences the forces released by the ever-conflicting, ever-changing phases of the Cosmos.

"Applied to the cosmical outlook, this raises the status of the cosmos from the conception of a sentient whole developing onward and upward, as it were, rather than backward and downward, toward an at present unknowable goal.

"If it is true that natural laws are subject to change, it is true that entropy is nothing more than a 'surface' phase, and it is true that the universe will suffer no heat-death or any other change leading to dissipation and dissolution."

THIS department would not be complete without an item from Ye Olde Booke Collector. Here's an excerpt from his column, Ye Fantasie Books, in the Jan. 24, 1938 issue of *Science Fiction Fan*:

"Two prize volumes that will bring a laugh to any reader are two books by John J. Meyer. The first is called 'The Deer-Smellers of Haunted Mountain'. It is published by the Cerebroscope Company of New York, 1921. It is a wild and wooly tale of queer people living in a haunted mountain, who turn out to be a super-race capable of doing anything—and who proceed to do it. They chase around all over the universe, tear up everything on earth, reorganizing, moving cities around, and so on. Replete, of course, with Ether Solar Tanks, Transmigrational Marshals, Soul Temples, Cerebroism, and what have you. A delirious hodge-podge of almost pure nonsense, illustrated with the most woozily *prosaic* illustrations ever. A real riot of science fiction.

"The second volume by John J. Meyer is the more recent. '13 Seconds that Rocked the World', published by Rae D. Henkle, N. Y., 1935. It is not so purely nonsensical as the first, apparently having been written with serious intent. It portrays a giant receiving station for mental thought, which is hooked up to 20,000 scientists and with this combined stupendous mass of mental power, simply takes over the world and reorganizes it. The 'Mentator' is what the thing is called. This book, like the other, is replete with such organizations as United Science of the World, United Brains Corporation, Soul Reconstruction Corporation, etc. Another brainstorm of its author.

"I notice also that listed under the above author's name is the title of a third book that I have not yet run across. This speaks for itself though. The title is 'Twenty Thousand Trails Under the Universe'."

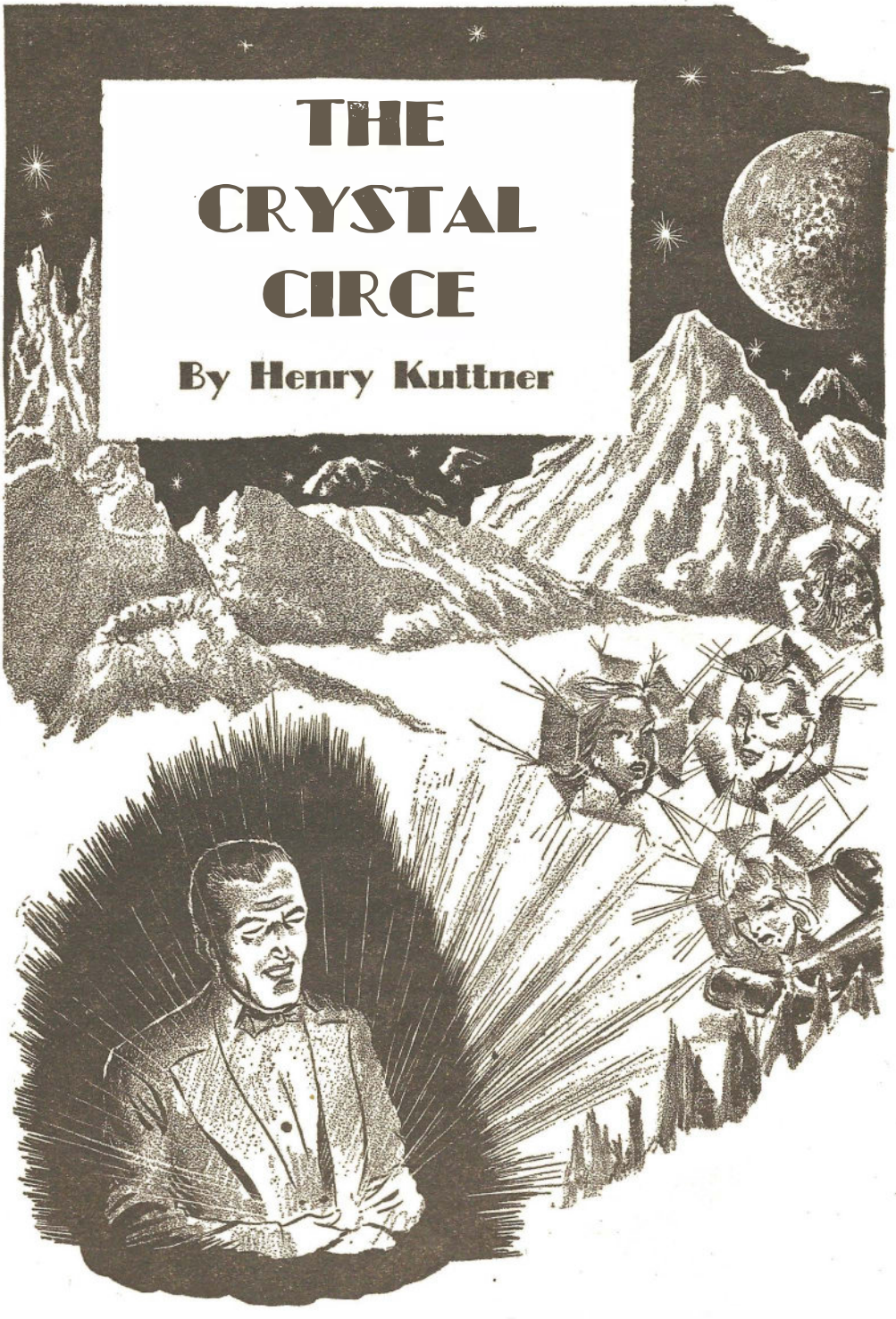
FORREST J. ACKERMAN writes in:

The books of Edgar Rice Burroughs have been translated into fifty-nine languages and dialects, including Esperanto and Braille. Let us turn our attention back, for the moment, about twenty years, to the first picture featuring the world-famous ape-man "Tarzan of the Apes," adapted from Edgar Rice Burroughs' marvelous story of the jungle, was one of the first movies reputed to have made a million dollars. Seeing it today, one wonders why. I recently attended a Hollywood revival of the original. As I remember the book, the picture followed same fairly faithfully, but was tame in action compared to the vigorous Weissmuller epics. To this reviewer, Johnny is the only White Skin; tho my companion at the revival (to give you the fantasy woman's angle on the ape man) thought she would have preferred Elmo Lincoln, who portrayed the role, had he been a younger man. Film is undoubtedly interesting, historically, but, confidentially, I don't think its revival ever would earn it a second million.

On the other hand, a scientifilm which stands the test of time is "Metropolis." Fans at the First World Science Fiction Convention—New York '39—were shown this film of the future, conceived by Thea von Harbou and directed by Fritz Lang, at one time her husband. A tale of the 21st century (when a weird language was used with names in it like Utamoh X. Thumo, Anenirok, Eranot, etc.), "Metropolis" pictured a large population of workers suppressed in a subterranean world by a super-boss, Masterman. When a daughter of the gray denim class betokened trouble by organizing the underground slaves, she was kidnaped by Rotwang, scientist, subordinate of Masterman's. A robotrix created in her likeness, a mechanical woman of human appearance, replaced her in the catacombs and conveyed Masterman's ideas instead. In the end, capital and labor were united, the moral being: "Halfway between the brain and the hands must the heart be." Production is memorable for its inspiring technical effects: the grandeur of the architectural conception of the metropolis of 2026 A.B.; the lab deluxe of Rotwang. "Metropolis:" scientificinemasterpiece extraordinary!

"Tarzan's Secret Treasure" has been previewed, may be playing at the time this announcement appears. Next in M-G-M's series is to be named "Tarzan Against the World," with a Manhattan background. Lycanthropy is the theme of Universal's "The Wolf Man," starring Lon Chaney Jr., and ready for release. Same studio has scheduled "Destiny" for shooting, with Claude Rains, and Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Roget," with Maria Ouspenskaya. While a fourth Frankenstein film is being casted, "The Ghost of Frankenstein," probably for early showing.

OUR thanks to those of you who have made suggestions about this department, and those of you who have written in. We should be happy to hear from more of you, but, as we stated last issue, it isn't the purpose of *Fantasy Circle* to get you to do anything. We merely hope that the material above has contributed some measure of stimulation to your grey cells in addition to providing you with entertainment you will read.



A Full-Length Novelette of Outer Space

The weak ones fell back, the strong ones fought on—toward the crossroads of the past and the future where the crystal Circe waited to keep her dreadful tryst—"A man and a jewel—but the man will die!"

Prologue

THE stratoship from Cairo was late, and I was wondering whether the newsreel theatre or a couple of drinks would make time pass faster. It was early dusk. Through the immense, curved wall-window of the Manhattan Port Room I could see the landing field, with a silvery ship being rolled over the tarmac, and the skyscrapers of New York beyond.

Then I saw Arnsen.

It was Steve Arnsen, of course. No

doubt about that. No other man had his great breadth of shoulders, his Herculean build. Ten years ago we had been classmates at Midwestern. I remembered rakehell, laughing, handsome Steve Arnsen very well, with his penchant for getting into trouble and out of it again, usually dragging Douglas O'Brien, his room-mate, along with him like the helpless tail of a kite. Poor Doug! He was the antithesis of Arnsen, a thoughtful, studious boy with the shadow of a dream lurking always in his dark eyes. An idealist was Douglas O'Brien, as his Celtic ancestors had been. Strong friendship had existed between the two men—the mental communion of laughter and a dream.

Arnsen was looking up into the darkening sky, a queer tensity in his posture. He turned abruptly, came to a table near me, and sat down. From his pocket he took a small box. It snapped open. His gaze probed into the unknown thing that was hidden by his cupped hands.

I picked up my drink and went to Arnsen's table. All I could see was the back of his sleek, massive head. Then he looked up—

If ever I saw hell in a man's face, I saw it in Arnsen's then. There was a dreadful longing, and an equally horrible hopelessness, the expression one might see on the face of a damned soul looking up from the pit at the shining gates forever beyond his reach.

And Arnsen's face had been—ravaged.

The searing mark of some experience lay there, branded into his furrowed cheeks, his tightened lips, into his eyes where a sickness dwelt. No—this was not Steve Arnsen, the boy I had known at Midwestern. Youth had left him, and hope as well.

"Vail!" he said, smiling crookedly. "Good Lord, of all people! Sit down and have a drink. What are you doing here?"

I sought for words as I dropped into a chair. Arnsen watched me for a moment, and then shrugged. "You might as well say it. I've changed. Yeah—I know that."

"What happened?" There was no need to fence.

His gaze went beyond me, to the dark sky above the landing field. "What happened? Why don't you ask where Doug is? We always stuck together, didn't we? Surprising to see me alone—"

HE LIT a cigarette and crushed it out with an impatient gesture. "You know, Vail, I've been hoping I'd run into you. This thing that's been boiling inside of me—I haven't been able to tell a soul. No one would have believed me. You may. The three of us kicked around together a lot, in the old days."

"In trouble?" I asked. "Can I help?"

"You can listen," he said. "I came back to Earth thinking I might be able to forget. It hasn't worked. I'm waiting for the airliner to take me to Kansas Spaceport. I'm going to Callisto—Mars—somewhere. Earth isn't the right place any more. But I'm glad we ran into each other, Vail. I want to talk. I want you to answer a question that's been driving me almost insane."

I signalled the waiter and got more drinks. Arnsen was silent till we were alone once more. Then he opened his cupped hands and showed me a small shagreen box. It clicked open. Nestling in blue velvet was a crystal, not large, but lovelier than any gem I had ever seen before.

Light drifted from it like the flow of slow water. The dim shining pulsed and waned. In the heart of the jewel was—

I tore my eyes away, staring at Arnsen. "What is it? Where did you get the thing? Not on Earth!"

He was watching the jewel, sick hopelessness on his face. "No—not on Earth. It came from a little asteroid out there—

somewhere." He waved vaguely toward the sky. "It isn't charted. I took no reckonings. So I can never go back. Not that I want to, now. Poor Doug!"

"He's dead, isn't he?" I asked.

Arnsen looked at me strangely as he closed the box and slipped it back into his pocket. "Dead? I wonder. Wait till you know the story, Vail. About Doug's lucky charm, and the dreams, and the Crystal Circe. . . ."

The slow horror of remembrance crept across his face. Out there, in space, something had happened. I thought: It must have been frightful to leave such traces on Arnsen.

He read my thought. "Frightful? Perhaps. It was quite lovely, too. You remember the old days, when I thought of nothing but raising hell. . . ."

After a long pause, I said, "Who was—the Crystal Circe?"

"I never knew her name. She told me, but my brain couldn't understand it. She wasn't human, of course. I called her Circe, after the enchantress who changed her lovers to swine." Again he looked at the darkening sky. "Well—it began more than two years ago, in Maine. Doug and I were on a fishing trip when we ran into the meteorite. Little fishing we got done then! You know how Doug was—like a kid reading a fairy tale for the first time. And that meteorite—"

CHAPTER ONE

The Star-Gem

IT LAY in the crater it had dug for itself, a rounded arc visible about the brown earth. Already sumac and vines were mending the broken soil. Warm fall sunlight slanted down through the trees as Douglas O'Brien and Steve Arnsen plodded toward the distant gurgling of the stream, thoughts intent on catching the limit. No fingering tendril of menace thrust out to warn them.

"Mind your step," Arnsen said, seeing the pit. He detoured around it and turned, realizing that O'Brien had not followed. "Come on, Doug. It's getting late."

O'Brien's tanned young face was intent as he peered down into the hollow. "Wait a bit," he said absently. "This looks—say! I'll bet there's a meteor down there!"

"So there's a meteor. We're not fishing for meteors, professor. They're mostly iron, anyway. Gold, now, would be a different matter."

O'Brien dropped lightly into the hole, scraping at the dirt with his fingers. "Wonder how long it's been here? You run along, Steve. I'll catch up with you."

Arnsen sighed. O'Brien, with his vast enthusiasm for everything under the sun, was off again. There would be no stopping him now till he had satisfied his curiosity about the meteorite. Well, Arnsen had a new fly he was anxious to use, and it would soon be too late for good fishing. With a grunt he turned and pushed on toward the stream.

The fly proved excellent. In a surprisingly short time Arnsen had bagged the limit. There was no sign of O'Brien, and hunger made itself evident. Arnsen retraced his steps.

The younger man was sitting cross-legged beside the crater, holding something in his cupped hands and staring down at it. A swift glance showed Arnsen that the meteorite had been uncovered, and, apparently, cracked in two, each piece the size of a football. He stepped closer, to see what O'Brien held.

It was a gray crystal, egg-sized, filled with cloudy, frozen mists. It had been cut into a diamond-shaped, multifaced gem.

"Where'd you get that?" Arnsen asked.

O'Brien jumped, turning up a startled face. "Oh—hello, Steve. It was in the meteorite. Damnedest thing I ever saw.

I saw the meteorite had a line of fission all around it, so I smacked the thing with a rock. It fell apart, and this was in the middle. Impossible, isn't it?"

"Let's see." Arnsen reached for the jewel. O'Brien showed an odd reluctance in giving it up, but finally dropped it into the other's outstretched hand.

The gem was cold, and yet not unpleasantly so. A tingling raced up Arnsen's arm to his shoulder. He felt an abrupt, tiny shock.

O'Brien snatched the jewel. Arnsen stared at him.

"I'm not going to eat it. What—"

The boy grinned. "It's my luck piece, Steve. My lucky charm. I'm going to have it pierced."

"Better take it to a jeweler first," Arnsen suggested. "It may be valuable."

"No—I'll keep it." He slipped the gem into his pocket. "Any luck?"

"The limit, and I'm starving. Let's get back to camp."

OVER their meal of fried trout, O'Brien fingered the find, staring into the cloudy depths of the gem as though he expected to find something there. Arnsen could sense a strange air of withdrawal about him. That night O'Brien fell asleep holding the jewel in his hand.

His sleep was troubled. O'Brien watched the boy, the vaguest hint of worry in his blue eyes. Once Doug lifted his hand and let it fall reluctantly. And once a flash of light seemed to lance out from the gem, brief and vivid as lightning. Imagination, perhaps. . . .

The moon sank. O'Brien stirred and sat up. Arnsen felt the other's eyes upon him. He said softly, "Doug?"

"Yes. I wondered if you were awake."

"Anything wrong?"

"There's a girl. . . ." O'Brien said, and fell silent. After what seemed a long time, he went on: "Remember you said once that I'd never find a girl perfect enough to love?"

"I remember."

"You were wrong. She's like Deirdre of the Tuatha Dé, like Freya, like Ran of the northern seas. She has red hair, red as dying suns are red, and she's a goddess like Deirdre, too. The Song of Solomon was made for her. 'Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee. . . . I sleep, but my heart waketh; it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh.' Steve," he said, and his voice broke sharply. "It wasn't a dream. I know it wasn't. She exists, somewhere." He stirred; Arnsen guessed that he was peering at the gray jewel.

There was nothing to say. The frosty brilliance of the stars gleamed through the laced branches above. A curious breath of the unearthly seemed to drop down from the vast abyss of the sky, chilling Arnsen's heart.

In that moment he knew that his friend was ensorcelled.

Superstition—foolishness! He shook the thought away. But all the blood of his Northern ancestors rose up in him, the Vikings who had believed in Queen Ran of Ocean, in trolls and warlocks and the water-maidens who guard sunken gold.

"You're dreaming," he said stubbornly, more loudly than he thought. "It's time we got back to the city. We've been here long enough."

To his surprise, O'Brien agreed. "I think so. I've an idea I want to work on." And the boy shut up like a clam, relaxing almost instantly into peaceful slumber.

But Arnsen did not sleep for a long time. The stars seemed too close and, somehow, menacing. From the black void, eyes watched—not human eyes, for all their loveliness. They were pools of darkest night, and stars glimmered within them.

He wished that O'Brien had not found the meteorite.

CHAPTER TWO

Lure of the Crystal

THERE was a change in the boy after that. The dream in his eyes did not fade, but he worked now with an intensity of purpose that had never existed before. Previously, the two had held routine jobs in a huge commercial organization. Without warning O'Brien quit. Arnsen followed suit, feeling the necessity for staying close to the younger man. Yet in the days to come, he amounted to little more than excess baggage.

O'Brien had plans. He borrowed money, scraped together enough to equip a small laboratory, and there he worked long hours. Arnsen helped when he could, though that was not often. He seldom knew exactly what the boy was trying to accomplish.

Once O'Brien said a queer thing. They were in the laboratory, awaiting the result of an experiment, and Arnsen was pacing back and forth nervously.

"I wish I knew what was up, Doug," he said almost with anger. "We've been at this for months now. What do you expect, anyway? You've had no more than an ordinary training in physics."

"The jewel helps," O'Brien said. He took the gem from its suede bag and stared into the cloudy depths. "I catch—thoughts from it."

Arnsen stopped short, staring. His face changed.

"You kidding?" he demanded.

O'Brien flushed. "Okay, try it," he said, thrusting the stone at Arnsen, who took it rather reluctantly. "Shut your eyes and let your mind go blank. That does it, sometimes."

"I—all right." Arnsen squeezed his eyes closed and thought of nothing. Instantly a sick, horrible feeling swept through him—a terrible yearning such as he had never known before. So might the Assassins feel, deprived of the magic drug that took them to Paradise. An Assassin exiled, cast into outer darkness.

A face swam into view, lovely and strange beyond imagination. Only a glimpse he had, blotted out by rainbow, coruscating lights that darted and flashed like elfin fireflies. Then darkness, once more, and the frightful longing—for what?

He let go of the gem; O'Brien caught it as it fell. The boy smiled wryly.

"I wondered if you'd get it, too. Did you see her?"

"I saw nothing," Arnsen snarled, whirling toward the door. "I felt nothing!"

"Yet you're afraid. Why? I don't fear her, or the stone."

"The more fool you," Arnsen cast over his shoulder as he went out. He felt sick and weak, as though unnamable vistas had opened before him. There was no explanation for what he had felt—no sane explanation, at least.

AND yet there might be, he thought, as he paced about the yard, smoking an endless chain of cigarettes. Telepathy, thought-transference—he had simply caught what was in O'Brien's mind. But it was horrible to know that Doug was feeling that soul-sick craving for the goddess-girl who could not exist.

O'Brien came out of the laboratory, eyes aglow. It's done," he said, trying to repress his triumph. "We've got the alloy at last. That last treatment did the trick."

Arnsen felt vague apprehension. He tried to congratulate O'Brien, but his tone rang false to his own ears. The boy smiled understandingly.

"It's been good of you to string along, Steve. The thing will pay off now. Only—I'll need a lot of money."

"You'll have a lot. Plenty of companies will be bidding for the process."

O'Brien said, "I want enough to buy a spaceship."

Arnsen whistled. "That's a lot. Even for a small boat." His eyes narrowed. "Why do you want it?"

"I'm going to find Deirdre," the other said simply. "She's out there, somewhere." He tilted his head back. "And I'll find her."

"Space is pretty big."

"I've a guide." O'Brien took out the gray gem. "It wants to go to her, too. It wants to go back. It isn't really alive here on Earth, you know. And I'm not just dreaming, Steve. How do you suppose I managed to make this alloy—the perfect plastic, tougher than beryllium steel, lighter than aluminum, a conductor or non-conductor of electricity depending on the mix . . . . You know I couldn't have done it alone."

"You did it."

O'Brien touched the jewel. "I found out how to do it. There's life in here, Steve. Not earthly life, but intelligent. I could understand a little, not much. Enough to work out the alloy. I had to do that first, so I could get money enough to buy a spaceship."

"You don't know how to pilot in space."

"We'll hire a pilot."

"We?"

He grinned. "I'm going to prove my point. You don't believe in Deirdre. But you'll see her, Steve. The jewel will guide us. It wants to go home—so we'll take it there."

Arnsen scowled and turned away, his big shoulders tense with unreasoning anger. He found himself hating the imaginary being O'Brien had created. Deirdre! His fists clenched.

She did not exist. The major planets and satellites had been explored; the inhabited ones held nothing remotely human. Martians were huge-headed, spindle-legged horrors; Venusians were scaled amphibians, living in a state of feudalism and constant warfare. The other planets . . . . the avian, hollow-boned Callistans were closest to humanity, but by no stretch of the imagination could they be called beautiful. And Deirdre was beautiful. Imaginary or not, she was lovely as a goddess.

Damn her!

But that did no good. O'Brien was not to be turned from his purpose. With relentless, swift intensity he patented the alloy process, sold it to the highest bidder, and purchased a light space cruiser. He found a pilot, a leather-skinned, tough, tobacco-chewing man named Tex Hastings, who could be depended on to do what he was told and keep his mouth shut.

O'BRIEN chafed with impatience till the cruiser jetted off from the spaceport. The closer he came to achieving his goal, the more nervous he grew. The jewel he kept clenched in one hand most of the time. Arnsen noticed that a dim brilliance was beginning to glow within it as the ship plunged farther out toward the void.

Hastings cast quizzical glances at O'Brien, but did what he was told. He confided in Arnsen.

"We haven't even bothered with charts. It's screwy, but I'm not kicking. Only this isn't piloting. Your friend just points at a star-sector and says, 'Go there.' Funny." He scratched his leathery cheek, faded eyes intent on Arnsen's face.

The big man nodded. "I know. But it isn't up to me, Hastings. I'm supercargo."

"Yeah. Well, if you—want any help—you can count on me. I've seen space-madness before."

Arnsen snorted. "Space-madness!"

Hastings' eyes were steady. "I may be wrong, sure. But anything can happen out here. We're not on Earth, Mr. Arnsen. Earth laws don't apply. Neither does logic. We're on the edge of the unknown."

"I never thought you were superstitious."

"I'm not. Only I've been around, and seen a lot. That crystal Mr. O'Brien lugs around with him—I never saw anything like that before." He waited, but Arnsen didn't speak. "All right, then. I've known things to drift in from Outside. Funny things, damn funny. The Solar System's like a Sargasso. It catches flotsam from other systems, even other universes, for all I know. One rule I've learned—when you can't guess the answer, it's a good idea to stay clear."

Arnsen grunted moodily, staring out a port at the glaring brilliance of the stars.

"Ever heard any stories about jewels like that one?"

Hastings shook his closely-cropped head. "No. But I saw a wreck once, Sunside of Pluto—a ship that hadn't been designed in this System. It was deserted; God knows how long it had been out there. Or where it came from. Inside, it wasn't designed for human beings at all. It came from Outside, of course, and Outside is a big place. That jewel, now—" He bit the end off a quid of tobacco.

"What about it?"

"It's an Outside sort of thing. And your friend isn't acting normal. It may add up to trouble. It may not. My point is that I'm going to keep my eyes open, and you'd be wise to do the same thing."

Arnsen went back to the galley and fried eggs, angry with himself for listening to Hastings' hints. He was more than ever uncomfortable. Back on Earth, it had been easier to disbelieve in any unknown powers that the gray jewel might possess; here, it was different. Space was the hinterland, the waste that bordered the cryptic Outside. The forward step in science that threw open the gates of interplanetary travel had, in a way, taken man back in time to a day when he cowered in a cave, fearing the powers of the dark that lurked in the unknown jungle. Space travel had broken barriers. It opened a door that, perhaps, should have remained forever closed.

On the shores of space strange flotsam was cast. Arnsen's gaze probed out through the port, to the red globe of Mars, the blinding brilliance of the Milky Way, the enigmatic shadow of the Coal Sack. Out there anything might lie. Life grown from a matrix neither Earthly nor even three-dimensional. Charles Fort had hinted at it; scientists had hazarded wild guesses. The cosmic womb of space, from which blasphemous abortions might be cast.

So they went on, day after day, skirting Mars and plunging on into the thick of the asteroid belt. It was uncharted country now, a Sargasso of remnants from an exploded planet that had existed here eons ago. Sounds rang loudly in the narrow confines of the space ship. Nervousness gripped all three of the men. But O'Brien found comfort in the gray crystal. His eyes held a glowing light of triumph.

"We are coming closer, Steve," he said. "Deirdre isn't far away now."

"Damn Deirdre," Arnsen said—but not aloud.

The ship went on, following the blind course O'Brien pointed. Hastings shook his head in grim silence, and trained his passengers in the use of the space-suits. Few of the asteroids had atmosphere, and it became increasingly evident that the destination was an asteroid. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Singing Crystals

THEY found it at last, a jagged, slowly revolving ball that looked incredibly desolate, slag from some solar furnace. The telescope showed no life. The ball had hardened as it whirled,

and the molten rock had frozen instantly, in frigid space, into spiky, giant crags and stalagmites. No atmosphere, no water, no sign of life in any form.

The crystal O'Brien held had changed. A pale light streamed from it. O'Brien's face was tensely eager.

"This is it. Set the ship down, Hastings."

The pilot made a grimace, but bent toward the controls. It was a ticklish task at best, for he had to match the ship's speed to the speed of the asteroid's revolution and circle in, describing a narrowing spiral. Rocket ships are not built for maneuverability. They blast their way to ground and up again through sheer roaring power.

She settled bumpily on the iron-hard surface of the asteroid, and Arnsen looked through the thick visiglass at desolation that struck a chill to his heart. Life had never existed here. It was a world damned in the making, a tiny planetoid forever condemned to unbearable night and silence. It was one with the darkness. The sun glare, in the absence of atmosphere, made sharp contrasts between light and jet shadow. The fingers of rock reached up hungrily, as though searching for warmth. There was nothing menacing about the picture. It was horrible in its lifelessness; that was all.

It was not intended for life. Arnsen felt himself an intruder.

O'Brien met his glance. The boy was smiling, rather wryly.

"I know," he said. "It doesn't look very promising, does it? But this is the place."

"Maybe—a million years ago," Arnsen said skeptically. "There's nothing here now."

Silently O'Brien put the crystal in the giant's hand.

From it a pulse of triumph burst out! Exultation! The psychic wave shook Arnsen with its intensity, wiped doubt from his face. Invisibly and intangibly, the jewel shouted its delight!

The glow within it waxed brighter.

Hastings said abruptly, "Time to eat. Metabolism's higher in space. We can't afford to miss a meal."

"I'm going out," O'Brien said.

But Arnsen seconded the pilot. "We're here now. You can afford to wait an hour or so. And I'm hungry."

They opened thermocans in the galley and gulped the hot food standing. The ship had suddenly become a prison. Even Hastings was touched with the thirst to know what awaited them outside.

"We circled the asteroid," he said at last, his voice argumentative. "There's nothing here, Mr. O'Brien. We *saw* that."

But O'Brien was hurrying back to the control cabin.

The suits were cumbersome, even in the slight gravity. Hastings tested the oxygen tanks strapped on the backs, and checked the equipment with stringent care. A leak would be fatal on this airless world.

SO THEY went out through the airlock, and Arnsen, for one, felt his middle tightening with the expectation of the unknown. His breathing sounded loud and harsh within the helmet. The tri-polarized faceplates of the helmets were proof against sunglare, but they could not minimize the horrible desolation of the scene.

A world untouched—more lifeless, more terrible, than frigid Jotunheim, where the Frost Giants dwelt. Arnsen's heavily-leaded boots thumped solidly on the slag. There was no dust here, no sign of erosion, for there was no air.

In O'Brien's hand the crystal flamed with milky pallor. The boy's face was thin and haggard with desire. Arnsen, watching, felt hot fury against the incubus that had worked its dark spell on the other.

He could do nothing—only follow and

wait. His hand crept to the weighted blackjack in his belt.

He saw the hope slowly fade from O'Brien's eyes. Against his will he said, "We're only on the surface, Doug. Underground—"

"That's right. Maybe there's an entrance, somewhere. But I don't know. We may be a thousand years too late, Steve." His gaze clung to the crystal.

It pulsed triumphantly. Pale flame lanced joyously from it. Alive it was; Arnsen had no doubt of that now. Alive, and exulting to be home once more.

Years too late? There was not the slightest trace of any artifact on this airless planetoid. The bleakness of outer space itself cast a veil over the nameless world. The three men plodded on.

In the end, they went back to the ship.

The quick night of the tiny world had fallen. The flaming corona of the sun had vanished; stars leaped into hard, jeweled brilliance against utter blackness. The sky blazed with cold fires.

Lifeless, alien, strange. It was the edge of the unknown.

They slept at last; metabolism was high, and they needed to restore their tissues. Hours later Arnsen came to half wakefulness. In his bunk he rose on one elbow, wondering what had roused him. His mind felt dulled. He could scarcely tell whether or not he was dreaming.

Across the ship a man's head and shoulders were silhouetted against a port, grotesquely large and distorted. Beyond, the stars blazed.

They moved. They swirled in a witch-dance of goblin lanterns, dancing, whirling, spiraling. Blue, yellow, amethyst and milky pearl, streaks of light golden as the eye of a lioness—and nameless colors, not earthly, made a patterned arabesque as they danced their elfin saraband there in the airless dark.

The dark swallowed Arnsen. Slumber took him. . . .

SLOWLY, exhaustedly, he came back to consciousness. His head ached; his tongue was thick. For a moment he lay quietly, trying to remember.

Dream? Arnsen cursed, threw his blankets aside, and sprang from the bunk.

O'Brien was gone. Tex Hastings was gone. Two spacesuits had vanished from their racks.

Arnsen's face twisted into a savage mask. He knew, now, what had been so wrong about his vision of the night. The man he had glimpsed at the port had been *outside* the ship. Doug?

Or Hastings. It did not matter. Both men were gone. He was alone, on the mystery world.

Arnsen set his jaw, gulped caffeine tablets to clear his head, and wrenched a space-suit from its hooks. He donned it, realizing that sunlight once more was pouring down from the distant sun.

Soon he was ready. He went out of the ship, climbed atop it, and stared around. Nothing. The bleak, light-and-shadow pattern of the asteroid stretched to the sharply curving horizon all around. There was nothing else.

Nor were there tracks in the iron-hard slag. He would have to search at random, by pure guesswork. In the low gravity his leap to the ground scarcely jarred him. He gripped the billy at his left and moved forward, toward a high pinnacle in the distance.

He found nothing.

Worst of all, perhaps, was the horrible loneliness that oppressed him. He was too close to Outside now. He was the only living thing in a place never meant for human life. The ghastly bleakness of the asteroid sank like knife-blades into his mind, searing it coldly. There was no relief when he looked up. The distant sun, with its corona, was infinitely far away. The rest of the sky held stars, remote, not twinkling as on Earth, but shining with a cold intensity, a pale fury relentless and eternal. In the light the heat seared him through his armor; in the shadows he shivered with cold.

He went on, sick with hate, seeking the unknown thing that had taken Doug.

The boy was a poet, a dreamer, a fool, easy victim for the terror that haunted the asteroid.

Exhausted, he turned back. His air supply was running low, and there was no sign of either Doug or Hastings. He headed for the ship. . . .

It was further than he had thought. He sighted it at last, beneath a towering stalagmite that thrust up into the harsh sunlight, and his steps quickened. Why hadn't he thought to bring extra cylinders of oxygen?

The lock stuck under his gloved, awkward fingers; he wrenched at it savagely. At last the great valve swung open. He went through the airlock, opened his visiplate, and took great breaths of the fresher air. Oxygen cylinders were racked near by; he swung several into position on his back and clamped them into place. He gulped more caffeine tablets.

Some instinct made him turn and look back through the port. Over the uneven ground a space-suited figure was staggering, a quarter of a mile distant. . . .

Arnsen's heart jumped. In one swift motion he clamped shut his visiplate and leaped for the airlock. It seemed an eternity before he was outside, leaping, racing, straining toward the man who had fallen helpless, a motionless shadow amid the glare. Doug? Hastings?

IT WAS O'Brien, his young face gray with exhaustion and flushed with oxygen-thirst. For a moment Arnsen thought the boy was dead. He thrust one arm under O'Brien's back, lifting him; with the other hand he fumbled at an auxiliary air-hose, thrusting it into the valve in O'Brien's chin-plate as he ripped away the useless hose. Oxygen flowed into the boy's suit.

His nostrils distended as he drank in the precious air. Arnsen watched, teeth bared in a mirthless grin. Good! Color came back to O'Brien's cheeks—a healthy flush under the deep tan. His eyes opened, looked into Arnsen's.

"Couldn't find her," he whispered, his voice hollow through the audiophone.

"Deirdre—I couldn't find her, Steve."

Arnsen said, "What happened, Doug?"

O'Brien took a deep breath and shook his head. "I woke up—something warned me. This." He unclasped his gloved hand and showed the milky crystal. "It knew—she—was close. I felt it. I woke up, went to a port, and saw the—the lights. Hastings was out there. She'd called him, I guess. He was running after the lights. . . . I had sense enough to put on my suit. Then I followed. But Hastings was too fast for me. I followed till I lost him. Miles—hours. Then I saw my oxygen was low. I tried to get back to the ship—"

He tried to smile. "Why did she call Hastings, Steve? Why not me?"

Arnsen felt cold. "We're getting off this asteroid. Right away."

"Leaving Hastings?"

"We—I'll look for him myself. There's life here, malignant life. Plenty dangerous."

"Not evil. No. Beyond evil, beyond good. I'm not going, Steve."

"You're going if I have to hog-tie you."

O'Brien's gloved hand tightened on the milky crystal. "Deirdre!" he said.

And, in the emptiness above them, a glow brightened.

There was no other warning. Arnsen tilted back his head to see—the incredible.

Deirdre, he thought. Then, unbidden, another name leaped into his mind.

Circe!

Circe of Colchis, goddess of Aea—Circe, Daughter of the Day, who changed men to swine! Circe—more than human!

For this was no human figure that hovered above them. It seemed to be a girl, unclad, reclining in nothingness, her floating hair tinted like the rays of a dying sun. Her body swept in lines of pure beauty, long-limbed and gracious. Her eyes were veiled; long lashes hid them.

There was tenderness in her face, and aloofness, and alienage. There was beauty there—not entirely human beauty.

Rainbow crystals garmented her.

Some large, some small, multi-faceted gems danced and shimmered against the blackness of the sky and the whiteness of Circe's body. Moon-yellow, amber-gold, blue as the sea off Capri, green as the pine-clad hills of Earth—angry scarlet and lambent dragon-green!

With some distantly sane corner of his mind, Arnsen realized that it was impossible for any living being to exist without protection on the frigid, airless surface of the asteroid. Then he knew that both air and warmth surrounded the girl.

The crystals protected her. He knew that, somehow.

O'Brien twisted in his arms. He saw the girl, tried to spring free. Arnsen gripped him.

The boy swung a jolting blow that jarred the giant's helmet. His mailed glove smashed against the metal plate. Dazed and giddy, Arnsen fell back, clawing at O'Brien. His fingers slipped along the other's arm; he felt something drop into his hand, and clutched it.

Then O'Brien was free. He wrenched an oxygen-tank from Arnsen's shoulders, whirled, and took a step toward the girl. She was further away now. . . .

Arnsen staggered up. His head was throbbing furiously. Too late he realized that, in the scuffle, his air-valve had fouled. He fumbled at it with clumsy fingers—and fell.

His helmet thudded solidly against hard slag. Blackness took him. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Circe the Immortal

IT WAS dark when he woke. Oxygen was once more pouring into his suit; he had managed to open the valve before falling. Far above, the dis-

tant, corona-crowned sun flamed against the starry backdrop. The ship lay beneath its crag.

But of O'Brien there was no trace whatever.

After that, something akin to madness came to Arnsen. Again the utter loneliness of space crushed down on him, with suffocating terror. Doug was gone, like Hastings. Where?

He searched, then, and in the days thereafter. He grew haggard and gaunt, drugging himself with stimulants so he could drive himself beyond his limit. Hour after hour he searched the tiny world, squinting against sun-glare, peering into black shadow, shouting O'Brien's name, cursing bitter, searing oaths that sounded futile to his ears. Time dragged on into an eternity. He had been here forever. He could not remember a time when he had not been plodding across the asteroid, watching for a glimpse of a space-suited figure, of dancing jewels of fire, of a slim white body. . . .

Who was she? *What* was she? Not human—no. And the crystals, what were they?

He returned to the ship one day, shoulders slumping, and passed the spot where he had seen the girl. Something on the ground caught his eye. A pearly, shining gem.

He remembered his scuffle with O'Brien, and the thing that had dropped into his glove.

The jewel, of course. It had lain here, unnoticed, for many revolutions of the asteroid.

He picked it up, staring into the milky depths. A pulse tingled up his arm, fingering into his mind. A pulse of longing—

The girl had appeared when O'Brien summoned her.

Perhaps it would work again. There was no other hope.

But he could not call her Deirdre. He gripped the hard crystal. His thought probed out, forceful and summoning.

"Circe!"

Nothing. The eternal silence, the cold blaze of the stars. . . .

"Circe!"

The gem in his hand leaped with eagerness. In emptiness above him a rainbow glitter of coruscating light flamed. The crystals—and, within them, the girl!

She had not changed. Lovely and alien, she lay among her dancing, shining gems, and her lashes still veiled the cryptic depth of her eyes. Arnsen stumbled forward.

"Where's O'Brien?" His voice cracked, harsh and inhuman. "Damn you! Where is he?"

She did not look at him. Her body seemed to recede. The jewels swirled into swift motion about her.

Arnsen lurched on. His mind felt on fire. He whipped out his elastic billy and plunged toward the girl.

She was not there. She had drifted back amid the rainbow crystals.

Arnsen could not overtake her. It was like following a will-o'-the-wisp, a torch of St. Elmo's fire. But he did not take his eyes from the girl. More than once he fell. She was leading him away from the ship, he knew. That did not matter. Not if she also led him to Doug.

What had she done with the boy? He hated her, hated her relentless inhumanity, her incredible beauty. Teeth bared, red-rimmed eyes glaring, Arnsen plunged on in a nightmare race across the face of the silent asteroid.

Hours later, it seemed, she vanished in black shadow under a thrusting pinnacle of slag. Arnsen followed, reeling with fatigue, expecting to cannon into a rock wall. But the darkness remained intangible. The ground sloped down beneath his leaded boots. Suddenly light shone through a cleft at his side.

Pale, warm, liquid light, it drifted up from a slanting corridor in the rock. Far

down the passage Arnsen could see the cloud of dancing flames that marked the girl's crystal attendants. He stumbled on.

Down he went, and down, till at last the passage turned again in the distance. He rounded the bend—and stopped, blinded and dazed.

AS HIS vision adjusted itself, Arnsen made out a pillar of fire that rose from floor to ceiling of the cavern before him. Yet it was not fire. It was something beyond human knowledge. Pure energy, perhaps, wrenched from the locked heart of the atom itself, silently thundering and pouring up like a geyser. The pillar shook. It wavered and rocked, coldly white, intensely brilliant, like a living thing blazing with a power inconceivable.

Walls and floor and roof of the cavern were crusted with jewels. The rainbow crystals clung quivering, thousands of them, some tiny, others huge. They watched.

They were alive.

The girl stood near Arnsen. A score of the jewels pressed against her lovingly. They caressed her. The veiled eyes did not meet Arnsen's. But she lifted her arm.

There was a movement in Arnsen's gloved hand. The milky gem stirred; a pulse of eagerness beat out from it.

It leaped free—raced toward Circe.

She caught it, flung it at the shaking tower of flame.

Into the pillar's blazing heart the crystal darted.

The fires sank—rose again. Spewed forth the jewel.

No longer milky—no longer dulled. It blazed with fantastic brilliance! Vital energy streamed from it; it whirled and danced joyously with sheer delight. It was like a sleeper suddenly awakened.

It spun toward Circe, pulsed madly with the intoxication of life.

The girl rose, featherlight, without gravity, drifting across the cavern to a passage-mouth that gaped in the wall. The jewels clustered around it swayed toward her. Some broke free, rushing in her train.

She vanished into the portal.

The spell that held Arnsen broke. He flung himself after her, too late. Already she was gone. But along the corridor jewels floated, bright, shining, alive.

And suddenly strong arms were around Arnsen. The face of O'Brien was before him. O'Brien, no longer wearing his space-suit, haggard, and yet aflame with a vital something that glowed in his dark eyes. O'Brien—laughing.

"Steve!" His voice shook. "So you followed me. I'm glad. Come in here—it's all right."

The energy went out of Arnsen, leaving him weak and exhausted. He cast one glance up the empty corridor and followed O'Brien through a cave-opening into a little room cut out of solid rock. He felt the other's fingers loosening his helmet, removing the bulky space-suit. Some remnant of caution returned.

"The oxygen—"

"There's air here. It's a place of wonders, Steve!"

There was air. Cool, sweet, and refreshing, it crept into Arnsen's lungs. He looked around. The little cavern was empty, save for dozens of the rainbow crystals clinging to the walls.

They watched alertly.

O'Brien pressed him back, made a quick gesture. A jewel floated forward, hovering over Arnsen's face. He felt water trickling between his lips, and, too exhausted for wonder, swallowed gratefully.

"You need sleep," O'Brien said. "But it's all right, Steve. It's all right, I tell you. You'll hear all about it when you wake up. Time enough then. You'll see Deirdre."

Arnsen tried to struggle up. "I won't—"

O'Brien signalled again. Another gem drifted close. From it a gray breath of cloud floated, perfume-sweet, soporific. It crept into Arnsen's nostrils. . . .

And he slept.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Jewel-Folk

THE room was unchanged when he woke once more. O'Brien sat cross-legged, looking into space. His face had altered, had acquired a new peace and maturity.

He heard Arnsen's slight movement and turned.

"Awake? How do you feel?"

"All right. Well enough to hear explanations," Arnsen said with a flash of temper. "I've been nearly crazy—looking for you all over this damned asteroid. I still think I'm crazy after all this."

O'Brien chuckled. "I can imagine. I felt pretty upset for a while, till the crystals explained."

"The crystals *what?*"

"They're alive, Steve. The ultimate product of evolution, perhaps. Crystalline life. Perfect machines. They can do almost anything. You saw how one created drinkable water, and—well, look here." He beckoned.

A jewel floated close. From it a jet of flame shot, red and brilliant. O'Brien waved his hand; the gem drifted back to its place.

"They can convert energy into matter, you see. It's logical, when you forget about hide-bound science. All matter's made up of energy. It's simply locked in certain patterns—certain matrixes. But inside the atom—the framework of matter—you've got nothing but energy. These crystals build patterns out of basic energy."

Arnsen shook his head. "I don't see it."

O'Brien's voice grew deeper, stronger. "Long ago—very long ago, and in another galaxy, light-years away, there was a civilization far beyond ours. Deirdre is a child of that race. It was—mighty. It passed through our culture-level and went far beyond. Till machines were no longer needed. Instead, the race made the crystals—super-machines, super-robots, with incredible powers locked in them. They supplied all the needs of Deirdre's race."

"Well?"

"This asteroid doesn't belong to our family of planets. It's from that other system, in the neighboring galaxy. It drifted here by accident, I think. I don't quite know the facts of it. It came under the gravitational pull of a comet, or a wandering planet, and was yanked out into space. Eventually it settled into this orbit. Deirdre didn't care. Her mind isn't like ours. The crystals supplied all her needs—made air, gave her food and water. Everything she desired."

Arnsen said, "How long has this been going on?"

"Forever, perhaps," O'Brien said quietly. "I think Deirdre's immortal. At least she is a goddess. Do you remember the crystal I found in that meteorite?"

"Yeah. I remember."

"It came from here. It was one of Deirdre's servants. Somehow it was lost—wandered away. Cosmic dust collected on it as it moved in an orbit around the sun—for thousands of years, perhaps. Iron atoms. At last it was a meteorite, with the crystal at its heart. So it fell on Earth, and I found it, and it wanted to go home, back to Deirdre. It told me that. I felt its thoughts. It drew me here, Steve—"

Arnsen shivered. "It's unbelievable. And that girl isn't human."

"Have you looked into her eyes?"

"No—"

"She isn't human. She is a goddess."

A new thought came to Arnsen. "Where's Tex Hastings? Here?"

"I haven't seen him," O'Brien said. "I don't know where he is."

"Uh-huh. What have you been doing?"

"She brought me here. The crystals took care of me. And Deirdre—" He stood up. "She's summoning me. Wait, Steve—I'll be back."

Arnsen put out a detaining hand; it was useless. O'Brien stepped through the portal and was gone. A dozen crystals swept after him.

ARNSEN followed, refusing to admit that he, too, wanted another glimpse of the girl. Down the passage he went in O'Brien's trail, till the boy vanished from sight. Arnsen increased his pace. He halted on the threshold of the cavern where the pillar of flame swept up to the roof.

He had thought it thundered. It did not—it rushed up in utter silence, shaking and swaying with the surcharged intensity of its power. The walls were crusted with the dancing, watching crystals. Now Arnsen saw that some were dull gray, motionless and dead. These were sprinkled among the others, and there were thousands of them.

O'Brien paced forward—and suddenly Circe was standing with her back to Arnsen, the gems clustering about her caressingly. She lifted her arms, and O'Brien turned.

A great hunger leaped into his face. The girl did not move, and O'Brien came into the circle of her arms.

So swift was her movement that Arnsen did not realize it till too late. The slender arms slid free; Circe stepped back a pace—and thrust O'Brien toward the tower of flame!

He stumbled, off balance, and the crystals leaped from Circe's body. They were no longer a garment. They pressed against O'Brien, forcing him away, thrusting, pushing. Arnsen cried out and sprang forward—

O'Brien reeled, was engulfed by the flame-pillar. The pouring torrent swallowed him.

Simultaneously from the farther wall a gray, dead jewel detached itself and shot toward the tower of fire. Into the blazing heart it fled and vanished.

The pillar sank down. It pulsed—thundered up again, silently streaming like a torrent toward the roof. And out of its depths the jewel came transformed.

Sentiment, blazing, shining with a myriad hues, it swirled toward Circe. Scintillant with delight, it hovered about her caressingly.

It was alive!

Arnsen cried out, flung himself forward. Circe turned to face him. Still her eyes were hidden; her face was aloofly lovely and inhuman.

The crystal swept toward Arnsen, cupping itself into his outthrust hand. From it a wave of mad delight rushed into his brain.

It was Doug—*it was Doug!* Frozen with sick horror, Arnsen halted, while thoughts poured from the sentient crystal into his mind.

"The—the gray jewel—" His tongue fumbled thickly with the words. He looked up to where the dull gems clung among the shining ones.

"Machines, Steve." The thought lanced into him from the living thing he held. "Robots, not energized. Only one thing can energize them—life-force, vital energy. The flame-pillar does that, through atomic transmutation. It's not earthly science—it was created in another galaxy. There, Deirdre's race had slave people to energize the crystals."

"Doug—she's killed you—"

"I'm not dead. I'm alive, Steve, more alive than I ever have been. All the crystals—Martians, Venusians, beings

from other systems and galaxies that landed on this asteroid. Deirdre took them for her own. As she took Hastings. As she has taken me. We serve her now—"

The jewel tore free from Arnsen's grip. It fled back to Circe, brushing her lips, caressing her hair. The other gems, scores of them, danced about the girl like elfin lovers.

ARNSEN stood there, sick and nauseated. He understood now. The intricate crystal machines were too complicated to work unless life-force energized them. Circe, who took the minds of living beings and prisoned them in silicate robot-forms.

They felt no resentment. They were content to serve.

"Damn you!" Arnsen mouthed, and took a step forward. His fists balled. His fingers ached to curl about the girl's slender neck and snap it with sharp, vicious pressure.

Her lashes swept up. Her eyes looked into his.

They were black as space, with stars prisoned in their depths. They were not human eyes.

Now Arnsen knew why O'Brien had asked if he had looked into Deirdre's eyes. They were her secret and her power. Her human form was not enough to enchant and enslave the beings of a hundred worlds. It was the soul-shaking alienage that looked out of Circe's eyes.

Through those dark windows Arnsen saw the Outside. He saw the gulf between the stars, and no longer did he fear it. For Circe was a goddess.

She was above and beyond humanity. A great void opened between her and the man, the void of countless evolutionary cycles, and a million light-years of space. But across that gulf something reached and met and clung, and Arnsen's senses drowned in a soul-shaking longing for Circe.

It was her power. She could control emotion, as she could control the crystals, and the power of her mind reached into Arnsen and wrung sanity and self from it. Only in outer semblance was she even slightly human. Beside her Arnsen was an animal, and like an animal he could be controlled.

She blazed like a flame before him. He forgot O'Brien, forgot Hastings and Earth and his purpose. Her power clutched him and left him helpless.

The grip upon his mind relaxed. Circe, confident of her triumph, let her eyelids droop.

And Arnsen's mind came back in a long, slow cycle from the gulfs between the stars, drifted leisurely back into the crystalline cavern and the presence of the goddess—and woke.

Not wholly. He would never be whole again. But he felt the crowding vibrations of the countless prisoners in crystal who had gone the way his own feet were walking now, bewildered, drunken and drowning in emotions without name, sacrificing identity without knowing what they sacrificed. Flung into eternity at the whim of a careless goddess to whom all life-forms were one. . . .

She was turning half away as realization came back to Arnsen. She had lifted one round white arm to let the crystals cascade along it. She did not even see him lurch forward.

What he did was without thought. The emotions she had called up in him drowned all thought. He only knew that he must do what he did—he could not yet think why.

The breath hissed between his lips as he stumbled forward and thrust Circe into the flame. . . .

FROM the roof a gray jewel dropped. The tower of fire paused in its rhythm—beat out strongly again. From it a crystal leaped. It hung motion-

less in the air, and Arnsen seized it with shaking fingers. He felt great, racking sobs shake him. His fingers caressed the jewel, pressed it to his lips.

"Circe!" he whispered, eyes blind with tears. "Circe—"

Epilogue

ARNSEN had not spoken for a long time. Through the window I could see the Cairo stratoship being wheeled into place. Beyond, the lights of New York glowed yellow.

"And so you came back," I said.

He nodded. "And so I came back. I put on my spacesuit and went back to the ship. The crystals didn't try to stop me. They seemed to be waiting. I don't know for what. I blasted off and headed Sunward. I knew enough to do that. After a while I began to send out S. O. S. signals, and a patrol boat picked me up. That was all."

"Doug—"

"Still there, I suppose. With all the others. Vail, why did I do it? Was I right?" He didn't wait for an answer, but cupped the little shagreen box in his hand. He didn't open it.

"No," he went on, "you can't answer me; nobody can. Circe took the soul out of my body, and I'm empty now. There's no peace for me on Earth, or in the spaceways. And out there, somewhere, on that asteroid, the crystals are waiting—waiting for Circe to come back—

"But she will never come back. She will stay with me till I die, and then she'll be buried with me in space. In the meantime—Circe doesn't like it here on Earth. So I'm going out again. Sometime, perhaps, I'll take her back Outside, to the unknown place from which she came. I don't know—"

An audio announced the plane for Kansas. Arnsen stood up, gave me a smile from his ravaged face, and without a word went out.

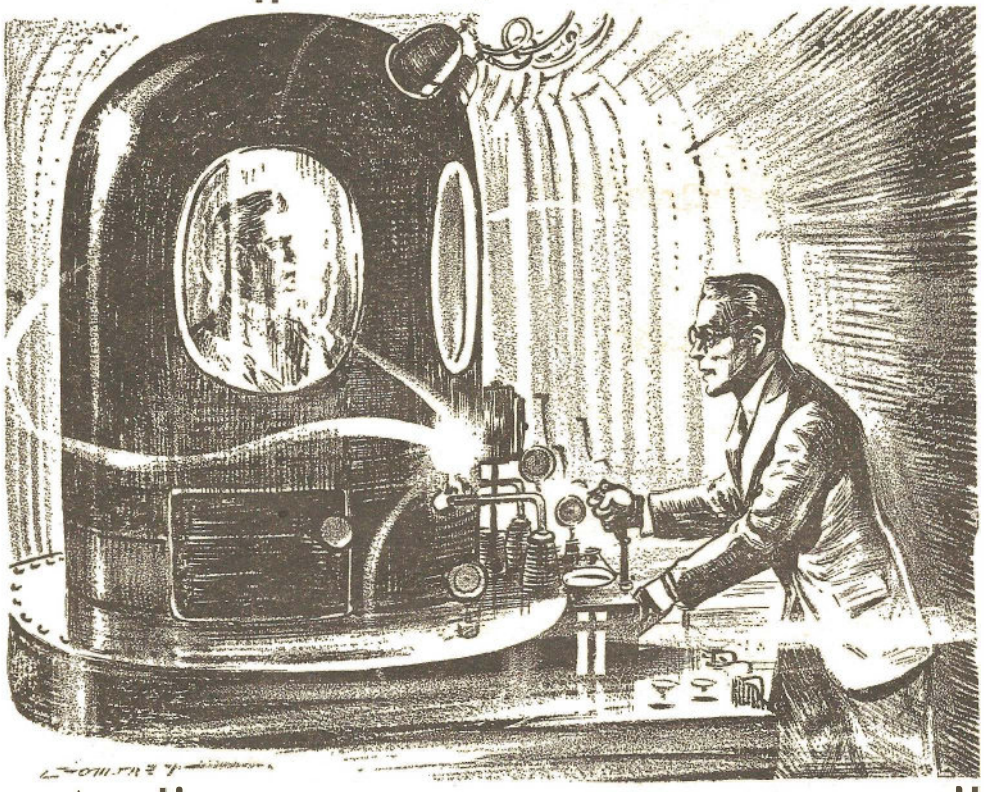
I never saw him again.

I think that beyond Pluto, beyond the farthest limits of the system, a little cruiser may be fleeing into the void, controls set, racing, perhaps, for the darkness of the Coal Sack. In the ship is a man and a jewel. He will die, but I do not think that even in death his hand will relax its grip on that jewel.

And the ship will go on, into the blackness which has no name.

THE UNSEEN BLUSHERS

By Alfred Bester



Like a pack-rat was the strange man out of time—he stole unpublished stories—and left literary immortality!

WITH all kinds of plots twisting in my head, I hadn't slept well the night before. For one thing, I'd worked too late on a yarn that wasn't worth it. For another, there'd been a high wind howling through the streets. It made me restless and did a lot more damage than that. When I got up I found it'd blown a lot of paper and junk in the window and most of the story out—only a part of the carbon was left. I wasn't especially sorry. I got dressed and hustled down to the luncheon.

That luncheon's something special. We meet every Tuesday in a second-rate restaurant and gossip and talk story and editors and mostly beef about the mags that won't pay until publication. Some of us, the high-class ones, won't write for them.

Maybe I ought to explain. We're the unromantic writers—what they call pulp writers. We're the boys who fill the pulp magazines with stories at a cent a word. Westerns, mystery, wonder, weird, adventure—you know them.

Not all of us are hacks. A couple have graduated to the movies. A few have broken the slicks and try to forget the lean years. Some get four cents a word and try to feel important to literature. The rest come to the luncheon and either resign themselves to the one cent rate or nurse a secret Pulitzer Prizer in their bosoms.

There wasn't much of a turn-out when I got there. Belcher sat at the head of the table as usual, playing the genial host. He specializes in what they call science-fiction. It's fantastic stuff about time machines and the fourth dimension. Belcher talks too much in a Southern drawl.

As I eased into a chair he called, "Ah, the poor man's Orson Welles!" and crinkled his big face into a showy laugh.

I said, "Your dialogue's getting as lousy as your stories!" I don't like to be reminded that I look like a celebrity.

Belcher ignored that. He turned to Black, the chap who agents our stuff, and began complaining.

He said, "Land-sake, Joey, can't you sell that Martian story? I think it's good." Before Joey could answer, Belcher turned to the rest of us and said, "Reminds me of my grand-daddy. He got shot up at Vicksburg before his father could locate him and drag him back home. Granny used to say, 'All my life I've believed in the solid South and the Democratic Party. I believed they were good; and if they aren't, I don't want to know about it.' "

Belcher laughed and shook his head. I gave Joey a frantic S.O.S. When Belcher gets going on the Civil War, no one else gets a word in for solid hours.

Joey didn't move, but he said, "What story?" very incredulously, and then he glanced at me and winked.

"That Martian story," Belcher said. "The one about the colony on Mars and the new race of Earth-Mars men that springs up—I've forgotten the title. They say Fitz-James O'Brien never could remember the titles of his stories either."

Joey said, "You never gave me any such yarn," and this time he really meant it.

Belcher said, "You're crazy."

Down at the other end of the table someone wanted to know who O'Brien wrote for.

I said, "He's dead. He wrote 'The Diamond Lens.' "

"He was the first pulp writer," Belcher said. "Most folks believe Poe invented the short story. Land-sake! Poe never wrote a short story. He wrote mood pieces. O'Brien was the first. He wrote great short stories and great pulp stories."

I said, "If you're looking for the father of the pulp industry, why don't you go back far enough? There was a boy named Greene in the late Sixteenth Century.

"You mean 'Groatsworth of Wit' Greene?"

"The very same. Only forget that piece of junk. It was his last grab at a dollar. Get hold of a catalogue some day and see the quantity of pulp he pored out to make a living. Pamphlets and plays and what not."

Someone said, "Greene a pulp writer?" He sounded shocked.

I said, "Brother, when he turned that stuff out, it was pulp. Passes three hundred years and it turns into literature. You figure it out."

Belcher waved his hand. "I was talking about the invention of the short story," he said. "O'Brien—"

I tried to cut him off. "I thought O'Brien predated Poe."

It was a mistake. Belcher said, "Not at all. O'Brien fought in the Civil War. He was with the Thirty-seventh Georgian Rifles, I believe. A captain. He—"

I nudged Joey so hard he yelped, but he said, "I tell you I never received any such story!"

Then Mallison grunted and sipped his

drink. He started to talk and we missed the first few words. It's always that way with Mallison. He's white-haired, incredibly ancient-looking, and he acts half dead. He used to be in the navy so he writes sea stories now. They say he acquired a peculiar disease in the tropics that makes him mumble most of the time. He turns out a damned good yarn.

Finally we figured out Mallison was calling Joey a liar.

"Say, what is this?" Joey said indignantly. "Are you kidding?"

Mallison mumbled something about Joey stealing a story of his that never got paid for and never showed up. Belcher nodded and poured wine from a bottle. He always drinks a cheap kind of stuff with the greatest ostentation. He acts as though it makes you more important if your drink comes out of a bottle instead of from a glass on a tray.

He said, "I'll bet some mag paid two cents for it, Joey, and you're holding out."

Joey snorted. "You better look in your desk, Belcher. You probably forgot to give me the yarn."

Belcher shook his head. "I know I haven't got it. I can't think how I lost it—"

HE BROKE off and glanced up at some people who were threading through the restaurant toward our table. There came a man followed by a couple. The lone man I knew, although I never remember his name. He's a quiet little fellow who smokes what looks like his father's pipe. Joey says he's past forty and still lives with his folks, who treat him like a child.

One of the pair was Jinx MacDougal. He turns out a fantastic quantity of detective fiction. None of his yarns are outstanding; in fact they're all on a consistant pulp level. That happens to be why he sells so much. Editors can always depend on Jinx never to fail them.

Jinx had a stranger with him. He was a tall, slender young man with scanty, tow-colored hair. He wore thick glasses that made his eyes look blurry and he was dressed in a sweater and ridiculously tight little knickers. He smiled shyly, and I could swear his teeth were false, they were so even.

I said, "You've got a helluva nerve, Jinx, if this guy's an editor." And I really meant it. Editors are taboo at the luncheon, it being the only chance we get to knock them in unison.

Jinx said, "Hi, everybody! This here's a white man that'll interest you. Name of Dugan. Found him up in one of the publishing offices trying to locate the pulp slaves. Says he's got a story."

I said, "Pass, friend, and have a drink on us."

Jinx sat and Dugan sat. He smiled again and gazed at us eagerly as though we were the flower of American Letters. Then he studied the table and it looked as though he were itemizing the plates and glasses all the while Jinx was making introductions.

Belcher said, "Another customer for you, Joey. Even if Jinx hadn't given it away, I could have told you he was a writer. Land-sakes! I can smell the manuscript in his back pocket."

Dugan looked embarrassed. He said, "Oh no— Really— I've just got a story idea, so to speak. I—"

He said at lot more but I couldn't understand him. He mumbled something like Mallison, only his speech was very sharp and clipped. It sounded like a phonograph record with every other syllable cut out.

Jinx said, "Dugan comes from your home town, Mallison."

"Whereabouts?" Mallison asked.

"Knights Road."

"Knights Road? You sure?"

Dugan nodded.

Mallison said, "Hell, man, that's im-

possible. Knights Road starts outside the town and runs through the old quarry."

"Oh—" Dugan looked flustered. "Well, there's a new vention."

"A new what?"

"Vention—" Dugan stopped. Then he said, "A new development. That's a slang word."

Mallison said, "Why, man, I was back home less than a month ago. Wasn't any development them."

Belcher said, "Maybe it's very new."

Dugan didn't say anything more. I hadn't listened much because I was busy watching his fingers. He had one hand partially concealed under the table, but I could see that he was fumbling nervously with an odd contraption that looked like a piece of old clock.

It was a square of metal the size of a match box, and at one end was a coil of wire like a watch-spring. On both faces of the box were tiny buttons, like adding machine keys. Dugan kept jiggling the thing absently, and pressing the buttons. I could hear the syncopated clicks.

I thought, *This guy is really soft in the head. He plays with things.*

Belcher said, "Sure you're not a writer?"

Dugan shook his head, then glanced at Joey. Joey smiled a little and turned away because he's very shy about ethics and such. He doesn't want people to think he runs around trying to get writers on his string.

Mallison said to Jinx, "Well, what in hell is this story?"

Jinx said, "I don't know. Ask him."

They all looked at Junior G-Man. I wanted to warn him not to spill anything because pulp writers are leeches. They'll suck the blood right out of your brain. You have to copyright your dialogue at the Tuesday luncheons.

Dugan said, "It's—it's about a Time Machine."

We all groaned and I didn't worry about Dugan's ideas any more after that.

Joey said, "Oh God, not that! The market's sick of time stories. You couldn't sell one with Shakespeare's name on it."

Dugan actually looked startled.

"What's the matter?" Belcher asked, showing off his erudition. "You got a manuscript with Shakespeare's name on it? Discover a Shakespeare autograph on a pulp story?" He laughed uproariously as though he'd cracked a joke at my expense.

Dugan said, "N-no—only that's the story. I mean—" He faltered and then said, "I wish you'd let me just tell you this story."

We said, "Sure, go ahead."

"WELL," Dugan began, "perhaps it isn't very original at that, but it's what you might call provocative. The scene is the Twenty-third Century—over three hundred years from now. At a great American university, physicists have devised a—a Time Machine. It's a startling invention, of course, just as the invention of electric light was startling; but its operation is based on sane physical laws—"

"Never mind the explanations," Belcher interrupted. "We've all alibied a Time Machine at one time or another. Land-sakes! You don't even have to any more. You just write 'Time Machine' and the readers take the rest for granted."

"When the story begins," Dugan continued, "the machine has been in use for several years. But for the first time it's to be used for literary purposes. This is because back in the first half of the Twentieth Century there lived a great writer. He was so great that modern critics call him the New Shakespeare. He's called that not only for his genius, but because, like the original Shakespeare, almost nothing is known of his life."

Mallison said, "That's impossible."

"Not altogether," I argued. "It's con-

ceivable that wars and unprecedented bombings and fires could destroy records. Why even today there are gaps in the lives of contemporary artists that will never be filled up."

"To hell with that!" Mallison said. "I still say it's impossible."

Dugan gave me a grateful look. He said, "Anyway, that's about what happened. The literature department of the university is going to send one of its research men back through time to gather material on the life of the new Shakespeare. This man is an expert in ancient English. He's shuttled back into the Twentieth Century, equipped with camera and stenographic devices and all that. In the short period at his disposal, he attempts to get hold of his man."

I said, "It's a cute idea. Imagine going back to the old Mermaid Tavern and buying Marlowe a drink."

Mallison said, "It's a helluva dull story."

"I don't know about that," Belcher said. "I did something of the sort a couple of years ago. Got a cent and a half for it, eh Joey? Also a bonus."

Joey said, "Say, Dugan, you're not cribbing Belcher's yarn, are you?"

"Certainly not!" Dugan looked shocked. "Well, the research man had less than a day. There was some trouble locating the new Shakespeare's address, and when he did, it was already late at night. Now here's the first little surprise. The man lived in the Bronx."

We smiled back at him because most of us live in the Bronx. Maybe it was a kind of sour smile, but we appreciated the irony. No Bohemian Greenwich Village, no romantic New England retreat—just unadulterated Brox.

Dugan said, "He lived in an ordinary apartment house, one like a million others. The research man hadn't time enough for formality, so at three in the morning he learned how to operate the self-service elevator, went up to the apartment, and broke in to snoop around.

"He expected, at least, to find something different—to see in the furniture and decorations and books an outward sign of the new shakespeare's great talent. But it was just a plain apartment—so plain that it needs no description. When I say that there are a million others like it, I've described it down to the ultimate detail."

"What'd he expect," Joey asked, genius?"

"Isn't that what we all expect of genius?" Dugan countered. "Certainly the research man was disappointed. He sneaked a look at the sleeping genius—and saw a dull, undistinguished person thrashing ungracefully about on the bed. Nevertheless, he crept about silently, taking motion pictures and—"

"At three A. M.?"

"Oh well," Dugan said, "cameras of the Twenty-third Century and all that, you know."

"Could be," Jinx said. "Infra-red photography."

The little guy with the pipe bobbed his head as though he'd invented infra-red rays.

"Then," Dugan went on, "he went to the new Shakespeare's desk and gathered all the manuscript he could find, because in his time there were no surviving manuscripts from his hand. And now—here's the final surprise."

"Don't tell me," Jinx said. "He'd gone to the wrong apartment?"

Belcher said, "No, that's what I used."

"The surprise is," Dugan said, "that the research man is doing this work for his doctorate, and he knows he'll never get his degree because even coming back to the time of the new Shakespeare he can't gather enough material!"

Dugan looked around expectantly, but it'd laid an egg. There was an uncomfortable pause while Mallison mumbled bitterly to himself. Jinx was very unhappy

and tried to say complimentary things. I suppose he felt responsible.

Only I wasn't doing much supposing because I had the most peculiar sensation.

I believed Dugan's story.

I WAS thinking of that manuscript that'd blown out the window and I was trying to remember whether I'd used a paper weight to anchor it down. I was thinking of that gadget with buttons and I was realizing how this mysterious Dugan'd slipped from one tense to another—which is a thing all writers are conscious of and which began to have psychological import for me.

But the most convincing thing of all was how the others were looking at Dugan. Belcher was staring keenly from under his black eyebrows—Belcher, who wrote that sort of stuff and who should have been sophisticated. The little guy with the pipe was absolutely electrified. I knew it couldn't be the story because the story was lousy even for pulp.

Finally Dugan said, "That's all there is. How d'you like it?"

Mallison said, "It stinks!" and probed in his pockets for cigarettes.

"What was this new Shakespeare's name?" Belcher asked slowly.

Dugan said, "I haven't decided yet."

The little guy took the pipe out of his mouth. "What was the name of the story he took?"

Belcher said, "Yes, what was it?"

Dugan shrugged and smiled. "I haven't decided yet. It's not really important, is it?"

I said, "Dugan, when was that manuscript taken?"

I know it was foolish, but I had to ask—and none of the others seemed to think it peculiar. They leaned forward with me and waited for Dugan's answer. He looked at me, still smiling, and as I stared at those blurry eyes behind the vast thick lenses, I began to shake with uncertainty. In all that blur there was a strangeness, a something— Oh, hell!

Suddenly Belcher began to laugh. He laughed so hard he overturned his wine bottle and we all had to scurry out of the wet. When it came time to sit down again, the spell was broken. Anyway, the luncheon was over.

When I got outside, Joey was standing there with Dugan. He was saying, "I'm afraid you haven't got much of a yarn there."

Dugan said, "I suppose so." Only he didn't seem put out. He shook hands with us cheerfully, said he hoped he'd see us again, and turned toward Broadway.

We all waved once, just to be polite, and then lost all interest. We turned on Joey to see if we could get the price of that lunch out of him, and we kidded Jinx about the lousy stories he picked up. Maybe it was because some of us felt a little self-conscious. I know I glanced over my shoulder and felt guilty when I noticed Dugan standing on the corner. He was watching us intently and adjusting his glasses with both hands.

Then I stopped haggling with Joey and turned around because—well, because it occurred to me that cameras of the Twenty-third Century could be so small you couldn't see them at that distance. All that flash and glitter couldn't be coming just from Dugan's glasses. Yes, brother, I turned around while Gray's *Elegy* went thrumming through my head.

It could be Belcher or Jinx or Mallison, or the little guy with the pipe, but I don't think so. I've got a pretty good idea who it is, because something suddenly occurred to me. I turned around to give Dugan a nice full-face and I waved . . .

Because one of those scraps of paper I thought had been blown in my window was marked very peculiarly in red: *Load Only in Total Darkness. Expires Dec. 18, 2241.*

THE BAND PLAYED ON

By C. Shook

I'M PLAYING trombone in a little five-piece combo at Benny's Bar and Grill when it happens. At the time we are slightly enlarged by the presence of four of Bill Gundry's boys who are working out at the park and have dropped by to sit in after they have finished, and also we have present Eddie Smith and Mart Allen, who are a clarinet and trumpet from The Pines.

Jamming on the down beat, he was giving it *Stardust* sweet and slow—and the old slush pump reached out for a high one that was really out of the world—and made it!

Benny's is the local hangout for all the musicians in town, which is the main reason I'm playing there; one night Whiteman himself shows, when his band is working a theatre job at the Palace.

During the early part of the night we play our own arrangements off the paper, but after about one o'clock we are liable

to be jamming with any of the boys who can find seats—like this night I'm telling you about.

When I first notice it we are giving out on the *Jazz Me Blues,* which is a fine ensemble number, and we are hitting it in a fast Dixieland. I'm ragging the beat and I can feel the old slush pump tremble, but I figure it's because I'm really solid at the moment and I keep on sending.

Well, we clean up the *Jazz Me's* and I'm still hot so I hit right on the B-natural for *Stardust,* with the boys jumping in, and we take it slow and mellow through one chorus together. Then I stand up for a solo on the second, and that is when it happens.

I don't know exactly what takes place, but I'm riding as I reach out for a high one that's really out of the world. I feel the pump tremble again, and then what happens is that I am really out of the world.

I mean *I'm actually out of the world!*

The vibrations from the trombone shoot right up my arms, and then my whole body is shaking. I can't stop it. The lights fade away and I'm trembling so I can't even hear the music . . . and then I'm not shaking any more, but Benny's is not there or I'm not there, and it is daylight, which is crazy because it is only two A.M.

I am still kind of weak as I look around, and then I'm weaker still. The least thing, I figured, was that I had had a spasm or something and was in a hospital and it was the next day. But when I look around again I know this is no hospital. I'm lying on a big flat rock and I am dressed just as I was at Benny's. I even have my slip-horn beside me.

But the thing that gives me the jumps is the grass. It is all purple. And the trees and everything around have purple leaves where they should be green. I look at my coat. It is a light blue. My pants are black and my skin is white. Then I look at the grass beside me. I reach out and pick a handful. It is plenty purple all right. And I'm thinking as I look at it there in my hand that there is no place in the world where the trees and plants are purple. No place in the world. . . .

I know I am not asleep, but tell myself, "whenever you read about anything like this happening, the hero always thinks he is asleep at first and pinches himself to find out whether he is or not." So I reach over for my slush pump and give it a good blast. I hear it all right. Just to make sure, I do pinch myself lightly, but it is no soap. I am here and the grass is still purple. I get up off the rock and walk about.

When I stand up I find that I am in a large meadow with nothing more in sight than the rocks here and there and a few trees. The purple grass is nearly knee-high. There is no sense in staying where I am, so I pick up my trombone and begin hiking. After I have walked a couple of miles, maybe, I come to a river. I am not surprised to find that the water is a deep yellow. Nothing will surprise me now.

There must be some settlement along this river if there is anyone living around here, I figure, so I follow along the way the water is flowing. Three or four hours I tramp, and this is something I am not used to. My feet are getting plenty beat and I take up the old bleater and try *The Stars and Stripes Forever,* the only march I can think of. This helps me stumble along in two-four time a while, but it uses up what wind I have left, and pretty soon I am forced to sit down and rest.

Well, I guess I doze off while I am resting, for when I come out of it I find myself tied up tighter than a drum, and there in front of me are four men or animals or something examining my trombone.

"Hey," I say.

At that they turn around and stare at

me and I stare even harder at them. And then I bust out laughing. For they look like four grown up Donald Ducks. They have duck bills for mouths, and their feet are webbed, but they have arms instead of wings. Their bodies are covered with feathers, except for their heads which have a greenish skin and would almost human if it weren't for those bills and the green color.

They begin to gab among themselves and I am surprised because I am expecting to hear them quack like ducks. Their voices are low-pitched and they talk way down in their throats something like German, but thought I don't understand it, I know it isn't. They are talking about me, I can tell, and finally one of them comes over and unties my feet and legs. But he leaves my arms fastened. He motions for me to get up. I do and we start down the river with one of them carrying my slip-horn and walking beside me, and the others floating on the water like their barnyard relatives. This is the way we come to their town.

It is only a short distance before the river widens considerably, and I can see that it is dotted with little islands. The three men who are swimming come close to shore and they walk with the one guarding me, pointing out at one of the islands as they speak. I gather that they don't know how to take me out there. One of them gestures at the water and then at me, but I shake my head no. They gab some more.

Finally one of them hops into the water and swims to the nearest island. He is back in a flash with about ten other duck men who immediately begin gabbing excitedly as soon as they see me. The one holding my trombone says something to them and they shut up and get back into the water. They push me to the edge of the bank and then one of them takes hold of my legs and pulls me into the river on his back. He almost sinks before the others can grab me too and help him out, and even at that they are as far down as low 'E on the doghouse when they start out for the large island almost in the center of the river. This must be their main village, I figure, and it turns out that I am right. Once we get to the village they untie my arms and hand me my horn. I guess they figure I can't get off the island now.

WELL, I don't know what I'm in for, but whatever it is, it is postponed for a while because they take me to a small hut and leave me. There is nothing in the hut except a pile of pale purple straw in one of the corners, but I don't need anything else. I am plenty weary and I flop on the straw and am asleep in a minute.

When I awake again, it is morning. I get up and walk to the door and there are four or five of the duck men standing nearby. They see me come out and they smile, but when I start to move about, they point back into the hut and so I go back in and sit down. I am still sitting there when some others come in with some trays of food. These are a lot lighter green in the faces and I guess they must be the women of the race. They have a lot of stuff that looks like purple lettuce, and different vegetable-looking things on the trays, and they act as if I am to eat them. After I taste them they are not so bad. I even drink a cup of the yellow water, and it is not so bad either, only sweeter than I would want ordinarily.

Once I have finished, I go back outside. Right in front of the door is the duck man which carried my slush pump on the walk yesterday, and when he sees me he smiles and comes over and hits me on the back with his hand. I do the same to him and he smiles wider. This means we are friends, I figure, like shaking hands, so I smile too. He motions for me to come with him.

Some of the others come with us, and we walk all around the village which is not so large. My friend seems to be the head man. He walks with me, and the rest stay a little behind. I am being treated like I have the key to the city. All around are the small huts like the one I slept in, and there isn't much else to the town except for a couple of larger buildings which are made of the same purple wood that the huts are made of. I figure that if three people occupy each hut, there are maybe six hundred altogether in the town. There are some other villages on the islands I can see, but they are not so large.

After we have toured for an hour or two, the chief takes me to one of the large buildings and we go inside. City hall, I think. And sure enough we go right to the mayor's office, which is a little room partitioned off from the rest. There are a couple of stools or something there, and the mayor hops up on one with his thin legs underneath him. I sit on the other. He smiles and I smile, and I think this is getting pretty dull and maybe it would be better if he weren't so friendly because anyway I would have some action. I think I will get away and go over and try a few numbers on the horn.

Finally after we sit there smiling for some time, he points to himself.

"Ogroo," he says. His name.

So I hit myself on the chest and tell him my name.

Then he walks around the room and points to the stools and the table and the walls. He says words at each one. He is trying to teach me their language, so I repeat each one after him. We play this little game for quite a while and then we have food brought in. While we are eating, Ogroo is telling me the name of what I am chewing on and it doesn't taste nearly as good as it did when I knew it was plain food only.

When we finish eating, Ogroo gets up and takes me back to our hut. I am supposed to stay there, I see. Anyway I think I will get out a few riffs just to keep in practice, so I go inside for my slush pump. It isn't there.

So this is why the so and so was keeping me away all the time he did, I say to myself. I am plenty burned up, but there is nothing I can do.

When Ogroo shows up the next morning, I try to tell him about it, but he pretends not to understand. Instead we go through the same routine as the day before, only we eat in another room and he shows me some new words.

WELL, the horn doesn't show up and I can tell my lip is slipping out of shape. It is now three weeks since I got into this place and I have nothing different. I am able to talk to the duck men, though, and I will say for Ogroo that he is a good teacher since I am never more than a poor C in languages when I am in school.

And then one day Ogroo says to me, "Mac, I am happy to tell you that we have located the object which you call a trombone. One of the men took it and has had it hidden. He feared it was a thing of evil power. I assured him it was not, though I was not so sure myself. I hope that I was correct."

"Ogroo, old boy," I tell him, "the trombone is strictly a thing of good power as I will show you if you will produce it. It is a thing of music."

"Why, Mac," says Ogroo, "why did you not say this before. We have music too. It is our great pride."

NOW during the time the mayor has been educating me, there is one of the large buildings which I have never been in. I have asked Ogroo about this and he has always said they were saving it as a surprise for me. But now he gets up and starts out the door.

"You will know of the surprise at last," he says.

And he leads me to the big barn which has always been closed.

Well you can hang me for a long-hair when we get inside, for there are about two hundred of the duck people shuffling around like a flock of jitterbugs, and ten or twelve players are giving out with some corny rhythm on a raised platform for a bandstand. They have about three-fourths percussion, mostly tom-tom-like drums, but there are a few gut buckets of some kind which they do not appear to play for nothing.

Ogroo looks at me.

"Is it not magnificent?" he says.

"Well," I say, "it is all right, but where I come from it is done in a slightly different manner. I shall be happy to show you if you will kindly produce my horn."

I can hardly wait to lay my lip into a solid beat the more I listen to these ickies peeling it off the cob, and when one of the men finally brings in old Susie, I kiss her lovingly. She is in fine shape.

Old Ogroo stops the noise. He makes an announcement, and everything is quiet as I step up with my slush pump. It is like Goodman at Carnegie Hall.

Everybody crowds around as I give out with the *Royal Garden Blues*. I see I have them overcome and I begin to send softly as I hear one of the boys pick up the beat in the background. He is not so awful at that. After I have taken two choruses, one of the gut buckets has picked up the melody and I dub in the harmony for him. The crowd is beginning to sway slightly when I slide into *Rose Room* and pretty soon they are on the jump until it is worse than a bunch of the alligators at a Krupa concert. All in all it is a very successful performance indeed.

By the time I have finished, I see that I have first chair cinched, and the crowd is eating out of my hand.

This is by no means the last performance I give. I soon have the duck men in the band playing the best jive they can give out with, but it is rather sorry without any reeds and only one brass. They are entirely unable to play any wind instruments, though, so I am forced to make the best of it.

We play for three or four hours, and when old Ogroo and I finally leave the hall, I am cheered all down the line. I am really terrific.

"Mac," Ogroo tells me when we are outside, "you are wonderful. We appreciate music and in fact it is the biggest thing in our lives here. But you are lucky that we are the ones that found you on your arrival and not the animal men from the woods. They are very ignorant, and your trombone would have meant nothing to them."

Well, this is the first time I have heard about these animal men, and I figure maybe they are a little closer to civilization than Ogroo thinks. I ask him about them.

"They are our enemies," he says, "and are much stronger than we. They control all the land surrounding us, but on the water we have the best of them and they never try to attack us here. However we must venture into the forests sometimes, and then we are in constant danger. Many of us are killed or captured each year."

I think no more about this, however, and I spend my time playing for the concerts they have every day. I am very popular with one and all. But a few weeks afterwards, Ogroo asks me to join one of their expeditions into the forests.

"We have to gather our monthly food crop," he says. "And everyone in the community has to do his share. As you are now one of us, it is only fitting that you come along."

Well, of course I clap Ogroo on the back and tell him I will be very pleased to go, and, in fact, I am not worried much

about their enemies because I am a good hundred pounds heavier than any of the duck men and I figured I will be plenty for these animal people to handle. As it turns out, I am right in this respect, but I hit one bad note which almost costs me my life and very possibly does so for my friends.

There are about twenty of us that start out. Each one is carrying two large baskets made out of the purple reeds which grow in the swampy lowlands of the islands. Before we begin, I tell Ogroo that I will swim over if he will carry my baskets, but he does not understand what I mean until I dive into the river and demonstrate. This exhibition is a great surprise to everyone, as they have never seen anything like it before. When I have climbed out on the other bank, the rest of the party jumps in and floats over rapidly. Then we begin walking toward the deep purple forests.

We hustle around all morning, and there is no trouble. What we are gathering is some kind of mushroom that grows around the foot of the trees, and we are looking for certain vegetables which have to have the shade to amount to anything. It is in the afternoon shortly before we are ready to depart that one of the men who is acting as a lookout gives the alarm. There is a group of animal men hunting in the woods and they have spotted us. I am curious to see how these men appear and I hang back some while the other runs as fast as they can on their webbed feet toward the river; they are luckily near the water, for they could never outdistance these land people.

Well, I know I can catch up, so, as I say, I wait a couple of seconds. But when I have a gander at our enemies, I am off faster than a sixty-fourth beat, and it is none too soon. As a matter of fact, it is a wonder that I am able to run at all, for what I see charging at me is about ten big two-headed monsters running on four legs sometimes, and sometimes on two. They are not quite as large as a man when they stand up, but they are enough to send me heading for the river. I dive in just before they get there and I am churning the water like the *Queen Mary* when I hit the island. Then I look around to see what has happened. The monsters are lined up at the edge of the river watching us, but they do not try to cross over. They are pointing at me and acting excited, and Ogroo laughs.

"They have never seen anything like you," he says. "But we are safe now for they cannot—what did you call it—swim?"

I say that is very lucky indeed, as they are remarkably tough appearing babies, but we do not bother any more with them and pretty soon they have disappeared into the forests. It is over a week later that I realize the bad note I hit and what it is going to do to us.

I AM sitting on a rock near the island's edge this morning trying to work a little oil out of some plants I have found. I wish to apply some of this to my slip-horn, as the action is getting somewhat gummy and I have neglected to bring any of these necessities with me when I ride out of Benny's. While I am doing this, I see some of the animal men come out of the forest and start toward the river. This is odd since I am told they never do this. They do not see me so I stay where I am, and I see two of them talking and arguing with the others. These two seem to have some idea, and the rest are telling them no and shaking all their heads to do it. It must be a real argument, I think, with two mouths to speak with at the same time. I wonder if one of these animals could get two part harmony with a pair of trumpets, but then I recall that they are strictly ickies, as old Ogroo has explained to me.

So I watch them some more, and pretty soon the two who are talking most jump right into the river and begin to throw their legs up and down and flail their arms, and they are soon moving across the water just as if they could swim. In fact they are swimming, and this excites me greatly since Ogroo has said they could not do this. I get up quick and begin to hunt Ogroo and luckily I find him right away. I tell him what is taking place and he is also greatly excited.

"I'm afraid we have done it now, Mac," he says to me as we run back to where I saw the animal men. "Those creatures are highly imitative—it is the only way they seem to gain any new skill—and they must have been thinking over what they saw when they watched you swim away from them last week."

By the time he has told me this we are back where I have left my trombone, and are just in time to see the last of the group jump into the river. They are able to make the nearest island, which has a small village of maybe fifty people. Well, I do not like this part of my story much and I will cut it short. What happens is that the animal men wipe out that little village in ten minutes and right before our eyes. The animals are extremely happy and we see them grinning with their ugly double faces as they return to shore.

"Quick," says Ogroo, "we have only a little time. They will bring the rest of their tribe immediately and attack all the rest of our islands. We must hide."

I grab my horn and we hurry to notify our own village. But we are stopped. There is no place to go.

Then we hear the menacing roar of the animal men. As we turn, they can be seen jumping into the river one by one. There are hundreds of them.

I turn resignedly to Ogroo. I start to tell him that we must get something to defend ourselves with, but the people are so paralyzed with fear that I know we can never do it. And then before I can say anything, I see the villagers coming slowly toward Ogroo and me. They seem very angry indeed.

Ogroo speaks hurriedly. "They are after you, Mac. You're the one that showed the animal men how to swim and they are after you. In the state they are in, you will probably be killed. I'll try to reason with them, but it is almost certain to be useless, for they might even be after me. I have been your sponsor."

He claps me on the back and then starts toward his people. I do not know what to do. I can see a detachment of the animal people not more than a hundred yards off shore, and the duck men are moving angrily toward me not much farther away. I see them push Ogroo aside as he begins to say something to them.

I move my trombone nervously. And suddenly I see my only chance. I am shaking before I start, but I fit the mouthpiece to my lip and begin to blow. I take a fast scale and I hit the B-natural for *Stardust* at least an octave higher than it was ever played before. I have got to ride high and fast.

Well, I close my eyes and I am shaking so that I hardly notice the vibrations of the horn begin, but when I reach the E in the third measure, I know I am feeling what I felt in Benny's. So I keep pushing it, and the last I remember I am trying to reach the high C closing.

That is when I pass out. . . .

WHEN I come to this time, I am almost afraid to open my eyes. My ears are still buzzing, and I am just beginning to realize weakly what has happened when I hear voices around me which are not part of the score. They are speaking in English. I open my eyes, then and look around.

I find that I am surrounded by a crowd of people who are saying to one another

to give him air and to take it easy, and I perceive that I am on a city sidewalk, and in fact, as I look up, I see that it is somewhere on Fifty-Second Street. A perfect landing for a tail gate artist, I think as I sit up.

WHEN the crowd sees me do this they move in even closer, all the time telling one another to give me air, but finally one of them claims that he is a doctor and he helps me up and I go with him and another man in uniform who is probably a policeman. They tell me that they are taking me to a hospital, and I do not remember much after that. When I wake up again, I am in the hospital.

A doctor has hold of my wrist, and when he sees me open my eyes he says, "How are you feeling now?"

I tell him okay.

"Well," he says, "you seem to have had quite a shock, and perhaps you do not want to discuss it now, but your manner of dress and this instrument which you have brought with you have excited my curiosity no little."

I see that my trombone is on the table near him.

"Why no, I do not mind telling you," I say, "though you might find it hard to believe what I have gone through. But first—where am I and what month is it?"

The doctor lets go of my wrist.

"You are in New York," he says, "and it is September of the year Twenty-five O Seven."

"Just a minute," I say, "I must misunderstand you. I thought you said the year was Twenty-five O Seven."

"That is what I did say," says the doc.

"But that cannot be true," I tell him. "Why I was born in 1914 and it is not possible for me to be living at such a period in history."

He picks up my wrist again.

"You are a little excited," he says, "and I think you had better get a bit more rest. Then we can talk this thing over later."

I see him say something to the nurse who is standing in the doorway all this time, and she nods as he goes out. I start to call to him but I figure it is no use. So I go back to sleep.

The second time I wake up, the doc is back and he has four other men with him. They are sitting in chairs around the room watching me; as soon as they see I am awake they come over to my bed.

"These men are very much interested in your case," the doctor tells me. "I have been telling them about your statement and the strange circumstances attending your appearance on Fifty-Second Street today. Now I feel that you have had enough rest and I want you to tell them the entire story."

Well, I know they will figure I am off the beat, but I start at the beginning and relate the whole story anyway. They do not say a word until I have finished. Then they look at each other and have a whispered session on the other side of the room. Finally one of them speaks up.

"Mr. McRae," he says, "we want to question you a little further if you don't mind. Will you please put on your clothes and come with us?"

I do like they say since there is nothing else for me to do, and when I am dressed they take me down the hall to a big light room which is practically all glass, and they ask me to sit down at a large table.

"Now, Mr. McRae," the first doc says, "I want you to do something for me."

He hands me ten little blocks of different sizes and informs me that I am to place them in the proper holes in a board which he has ready for just that purpose. I do as he asks.

These seems to surprise him, but he is all set with another test, and I spend the rest of the afternoon playing these little

games, until I am plenty weary of it and I say so to him.

"Well," he says, "as you likely know, we have been trying to determine your sanity. I will say that you have demonstrated yourself to be entirely normal."

"That is fine," I say, "but now that we have decided that will someone kindly tell me what is this business about Twenty-Five O Seven—and what has been happening to me anyhow."

Another of the doctors answers me.

"There seems to be only one other explanation," he says, "one which we are reluctant to accept but which we must consider if your story is true. You have been in a fourth dimension. The passage of time there is something that we know nothing of, and it is possible that the few months you spent in it were equivalent to the centuries which have passed in this dimension. You have apparently evolved a unique and purely personal method for entering and leaving the fourth dimension, and since it seems entirely dependent on your own physical skill together with a large element of chance, it is of little value for scientific exploitation. That is the pity."

While he is giving out this statement, the rest of the doctors grow very excited, and soon as he has finished they begin throwing questions at him about curvature of space and Neilson's theory and a lot of other stuff which is very confusing to me indeed.

Finally I stop them.

"If you will kindly return my trombone," I tell them, "I will be on my way, as I do not know anything of all this and I would like to get out and see what it is like in Twenty-Five O Seven A.D."

"Of course, of course," says the first doctor who is the one who brought me to the hospital. "It is very thoughtless of us. I shall get your instrument and you can come home with me until you are able to adjust yourself to our way of living. It will be a great pleasure to show you what we have accomplished in the time since you can remember, though I must say that none of us has done what you have."

He laughs a little at that, and I figure he is a nice guy, so I say I will be happy to accept his offer.

I go home with him and he introduces me to his wife who is a very nice appearing female. He tells her all about me and he keeps saying how remarkable it is all the time.

IT IS the next morning when I come down to breakfast that I meet the doctor's daughter, who is a very lovely little number of about twenty, and I see that my stay is going to be a very pleasant one indeed.

She says, "Dad has been telling me all about you, Mr. McRae, and I'm going to see to it that you really see the New York of Twenty-Five O Seven. He wants to drag you to a lot of stuffy old lectures and scientific conventions, and exhibits you like a freak, but I'm taking charge today."

I remark that that will be fine.

Well, we start right out, and it is amazing what has been done in my absence. Ann—that is the little number's name—tells me about the change in one thing and another; they are now taking vacations on Venus and Mars, and it is merely a matter of a couple of hours to get to San Francisco or London. Of course this is all very interesting, but I am interested in what they are doing in the musical line. I tell Ann this.

"We are in luck," she says, "for there is a concert tonight up in Albany and you will be able to hear all the finest music there."

"I do not wish to hear the long hairs play," I tell her. "Let us go down along Fifty-Second Street and listen to a little barrelhouse. That is my racket."

"There is no musical organization on Fifty-Second Street," Ann says. "We do all our listening and looking at concerts like this one in Albany, and it is the only sort of music we have."

By this time we are home, so I ask Ann if she would like to hear how we played it back in the Twentieth Century. She replies that she would, but not to let her father, the doc, know about it because he is something of a bug on the modern music and considers the old style quite degenerate.

I laugh at this. "What he means by the old style is probably something I have never heard," I say. "You must remember that I am almost six hundred years old, so my style is practically antique. Why, your father did not even know that my horn was a musical instrument until I told him my story, and it is indeed a shame that there are not a few old Beiderbecke platters around so you all could hear what you've been missing.

Well, I have not played the old slush pump since I escaped from the fourth dimension, so I am careful when I pick it up, but after I have tried a few runs I say I am all set. Ann is very curious, and she makes me tell her how it works, as it seems they use instruments altogether different in these concerts we are going to. I explain how the wind goes around and all, and then I move into *I'm Getting Sentimental Over You.* I am very mellow, and T. Dorsey couldn't have sounded any better in the little concert I give. Ann is very overcome.

"It is beautiful," she says when I have finished. "Are there words to it?"

I tell her there are, but that I do not know them, so she hums softly as I take another chorus. She has a lovely voice, and I say that tomorrow I will write down the words to some other numbers and let her practice them with me.

When the doctor hears we are going to the concert that evening, he says that he wishes to come along. We get to Albany in about five minutes, so fast that I see nothing in the journey once we have left the New York airport where the doc keeps his plane, and we enter the auditorium in perfect time. As we go in, I am very surprised to see everyone staring at me, since I have borrowed one of the doctor's suits for the occasion and look just like anyone else. And then everyone stands and begins cheering me until I am very embarrassed indeed. I look at Ann and the doctor. They are both smiling.

"You know now that you have become a celebrity," whispers Ann. "We didn't want to let you know right away, but the papers have been full of your story."

So I smile and bow to the crowd, which keeps on clapping. It is very pleasing.

Finally, however, the noise stops and the curtain raises. There on the stage are about thirty or forty musicians, and behind them is a large screen like in a moving picture house. Also there are a lot of electric cords in sight, and I cannot figure what they are for until I notice that each instrument is wired like an electric guitar.

When the conductor comes on, everybody claps a little more, and then he turns to the orchestra. What I hear after that is something I never expect to hear in my life. All those electric instruments begin to vibrate, and on the screen behind them all sorts of shapes and colors begin to flash and then disappear. This keeps up as long as the number lasts.

"You are now seeing music as well as hearing it," the doctor tells me.

"I never saw any like that before," I say. "All the music I've ever seen has been the regular dot variety; do the men play from those flashes?"

"Why no," the doc smiles. "Those symbols that you see are the result of the electric impulse as the musicians strike certain notes on their instruments. They are never the same, and to me they are

vastly intriguing. Strictly, it was lousy."

"Oh," I say.

The following day Ann informs me that we are going on a picnic and asks me will I please bring my trombone along and teach her a few songs.

About eleven o'clock we get in Ann's plane, and in no time we are down in Virginia in a nice little spot by a small stream.

"I often come down here," Ann says. "It is one of the best places I know."

There is something that seems awfully strange to me, and I finally realize that it is the green grass of the meadow and the trees, after the icky purple I have been used to for the past few months. I tell Ann about this and about how beautiful the green looks, but I add that it is still not as lovely as she is.

She says that is very nice, and then as I stand up from spreading the picnic cloth, she is standing beside me, so I put my arms around her and then I am kissing her and she is kissing me and it is very pleasant indeed. I see that this is much better than any fourth dimension.

Finally we get around to eating the lunch Ann has brought, and I keep saying how lovely she is, which I also mean. And she is saying I am pretty fine too, and we pass some little time like this.

But after a while Ann says, "Mac, will you play for me now? I love to hear you."

So I say I will if she will sing and I give her the words to *The St. Louis Blues,* which I have written out. I hit it soft and easy for one chorus to give her the melody, and then she takes the beat. Well, I have not realized it before, but her voice is plenty schmalz and it is a shame she is not living in my time, for she would be a cinch to panic them anywhere.

After that she does *The Memphis Blues* also, and she has me riding beautifully to keep her up there. She is wonderful.

"You are the one who is wonderful," she says. "I have never heard music like you can get out of that trombone. Play something else, darling, won't you?" I slip into *If I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate,* and as I play, Ann moves over beside me.

"Lovely," she whispers.

With that I am really carried away and I hear her humming softly as I modulate into *Tea for Two.* I am giving it a real ride, and then I feel it coming over me again. I am in a panic. I try to stop playing, but I can't, and my body is vibrating something terrible.

I dimly hear Ann crying, "Mac, Mac, . . ." as I sink off.

That is the last I can remember. . . .

WHEN I come out of it this time, someone is pounding me on the back.

Ann?" I say hopefully, but I know inside that it will be useless.

"Beautiful going, Mac. Beautiful," someone is saying.

"What?" I ask blankly.

"That *Stardust.* Boy, you were really out of the world on that one."

Then I open my eyes and look up. It is Ernie Martin, our sax player, who has the chair next to me in Benny's.

I look around. I am back in Benny's. As I put down my slip-horn there is a scattering of applause from the tables.

Someone shouts at me. I close my eyes, but the noise is still there. I keep my eyes closed, and then I hear music.

Ernie is hitting me with his elbow.

"Get in," he says.

I hear the boys beating out *Rosetta.*

"Take it up," say Ernie. "Get hep, kid."

"Me?" I says sort of foggy like. "Oh, no—not me. Leastways not tonight."

I pick up old Susie and walk to the door. I wonder if maybe there's such a thing as being too hep.

FAN MAGS

(In every issue we will review as many of the current crop of science fiction fan magazines as space allows. All magazines for review should be addressed to ASTONISHING STORIES, Fictioneers, Inc., 210 E. 43rd St., N. Y., N. Y.)

SOUTHERN STAR: Joseph Gilbert, editor, Dec. 1941, 908 Lloyd Court, Columbia, S. C. Forty-two mimeographed pages published bi-monthly. Numerous articles of interest, plus a page of pictures from the Denvention with an article to go with it. The mimeographing (in colors) is good and the format interesting. It acts as organ of the Dixie Fantasy Federation. Rothman, Waldeyer and Tucker make interesting reading. 10 cents an issue.

NOVA: A newcomer to the field with a beautiful format and some of the best mimeographing and wood cuts. "Constructive criticism" by E. E. Smith is top-notch, well supported by the other articles of this first issue. Al Ashley edits from 86 Upton Ave., Battle Creek, Michigan. Published bi-monthly at 10 cents a copy. Wiedenbeck's back cover is good.

FANTASY TIMES: Fanfield's first all photo-offset magazine. February issue contains an article on the father of stf, Gernsback, with over 12 pictures showing some of Gernsback's magazine. Published monthly by James V. Taurasi, 137-07 32nd Ave., Flushing, New York at 5 cents a copy.

FANTASCIENCE DIGEST: Returns after a long absence with an interesting issue. "The Frolic Apace" by E. E. Campbell, Jr. steals the show with its humor. Articles in this issue are good. Robert A. Madle, Rust E. Barron and Jack Agnew are editors; John V. Baltadonis drew an interesting cover. From 333 E. Belgrade Street, Philadelphia, Penna. 15 cents a copy; published bi-monthly.

SUN SPOTS: The third printed issue contains a picture cover of Wellman, Millard and Otto Binder. This magazine continues to be lively with good departments. The next issue will be its second anniversary issue and will contain 16 pages. Published bi-monthly at 31 Bogert Pl., Westwood, N. J. Edited by Gerry de la Ree, Jr. and Roderick Gaetz; 10 cents a copy.

FANART: Edited by Harry Jenkins, at 2409 Santee Ave., Columbia, South Carolina. This second issue is a great improvement over the first issue. Drawings in this issue by Bell, Jones, Bronson, Hunt, Mary Rogers, Laire, Sayn and Fortier are good and well presented. The biography this issue is about Tom Wright. The magazine is now published quarterly at 10 cents an issue.

VOICE OF THE IMAGI-NATION: Now published legal size 8½" x 14" (to save stencils) every 6 weeks. Still containing interesting letters about the stf field both pro and fan. Cover this issue by Wiedenbeck, and a good one. This magazine celebrated its 4th anniversary last November. Coedited by 4e and Morojo at 6475 Metropolitan Station, Los Angeles. Calif. 10 cents a copy.

SPACEWAYS: This old standby of fandom still keeps coming about every 2 months with a collection of interesting articles, fiction and departments. Cover this month by Taurasi. "The Log Of The Foo-Foo Special" continues to be interesting. Articles in this magazine should be pepped up slightly and more inside illustrations should be used. Harry Warner, editor, 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Maryland.

CENSORED: From Canada, published

about quarterly. Breezy, humorous contents throughout. Mimeographing is good, as is the format. Editor is Fred Hurter, Jr., St. Andrew's College Aurora, Ontario, Canada. 10 cents a copy.

ULTRA: From Australia. Twenty pages of interesting fiction and articles from "down under" which are above average. Format is good and mimeographing is clear. This magazine features at least one photo in each issue. Eric F. Russell edits from 274 Edgecliff Rd., Woollahra, Sydney, NSW, Australia. Published bi-monthly; 10 cents a copy.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD: Still published weekly by Julius Unger of 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, New York. This newsweekly features a photo or two in each issue, usually a forecast of a future cover of a pro magazine. This fanmag is interesting and newsy. Over one year old and priced at 3 issue for 10 cents. Mimeographed, usually two pages.

FUTURIA: A first issue containing minutes and items on the Futurian Society of New York. Edited by Chester Cohen. (No price or address in issue) poor hectographing, but good silkscreen cover. Contents make good reading. Published irregularly.

FAN MAGS DROPPED:

THE DARN THING: Unfinished issue number 6 (8 pages) mailed out with Voice of The Imagi-nation. This small portion of the last issue is the best material this magazine has published. Clear mimeographing in blue ink. Sorry to see this mag go. The Devention article by Yerke is a classic.

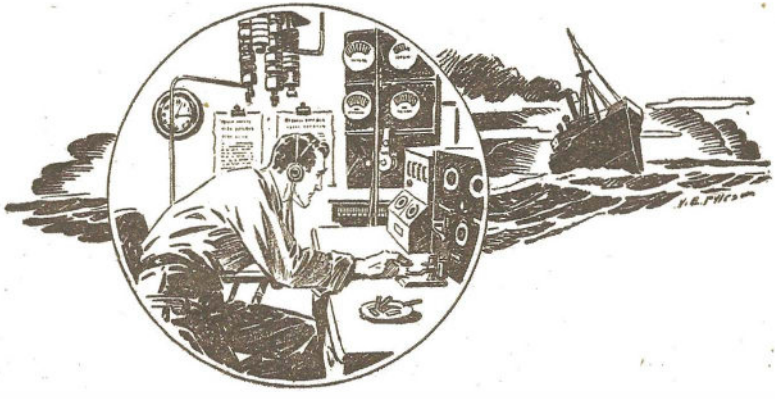
FMZ DIGEST: Word comes that this magazine has also been dropped. This magazine had a good idea and future. It reprinted the best articles published in the fan mags. A mag like this is a need for the fan who can't obtain all the fan mags. Would like to see someone else try this idea again.

CHANGES:

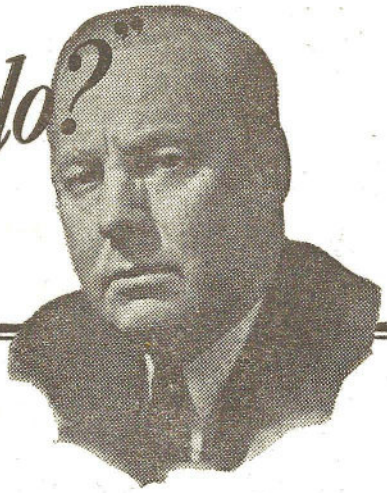
FANTASCIENCE DIGEST: Bob Madle of *Fantascience Digest* announces that with the next issue, his magazine will be printed.

FANTASY TIMES: Fantasy Times will change its name to Fantasy Magazine with its March-April issue.

It will reduce its size, but contain 16 pages.



"What can I do?"



"LIKE millions of other Americans, I've asked myself one question repeatedly ever since these fateful words popped out of my radio:

"'Japanese planes have bombed Hawaii!'

"Daily, nightly, I've turned this question over and over in my mind—with the reading of every news bulletin on the air and the appearance of every epic headline.

"What can I do—here at home?

"What can I do—while Americans are fighting and dying in the far reaches of the Pacific for freedom and for me?"

"What can I do?

"I've looked in my shaving mirror for an answer—and found none.

"I've seen only the perplexed face of a middle-aged man—a man too old to bear arms.

"I've glanced at my hands, too, a thousand times, only to learn a brutal truth.

"They are soft and white—strangers to the production line where only skilled hands are wanted now."

"What can I do?

"Only last night I found the answer as my eyes fell on my wife's knitting bag and my ears caught the click of her knitting needles.

"I could give to the Red Cross. I could answer its urgent call for funds, now so sorely needed.

"I could give to the limit of my means to aid and comfort those who are giving so much more.

"Yes—I could do something. Not much—but something.

"And I have—today."

Give and give generously—to your local chapter—to volunteer solicitors. Give when you can, where you can, as much as you can.

SEND CONTRIBUTIONS TO YOUR LOCAL CHAPTER

AMERICAN RED CROSS
WAR FUND CAMPAIGN

THIS PAGE CONTRIBUTED TO THE AMERICAN RED CROSS BY THE PUBLISHERS

THE MAIL BAG

Before getting to your letters, we would like to explain the circumstances under which the lead story in this issue came to be. "Out of the Sea," by Leigh Brackett, might seem to be in the nature of trying to mix science fiction with current war news. As a matter of fact, Miss Brackett is either a soothsayer of no mean calibre or the arm of coincidence is indeed long. In brief, we read and bought this manuscript a week before Pearl Harbor, and all references to war with Japan were at that time strictly the products of Miss Brackett's creative imagination.

An author would appreciate some help from science fiction fans:

Dear Mr. Norton:

This is somewhat in the nature of a long distance announcement, but I want to get this plea for information off my chest as early as possible. I am planning another book which is to deal with the history of science, as reflected in contemporary thought and contemporary literature.

While I have all the material I need (even more than I need) for the time prior to say, 1800, I have the feeling that my knowledge of English and American literature for the period after that date might be incomplete. I am sure that I know all the French and German novels of that period, but it is likely that I may have missed a number of American and British books.

For this reason I wish to ask those readers of science fiction who are willing to assist me to send me lists of *book titles* (not books) of science and science-fiction stories known to them. Thanking all contributors in advance, I remain,

Sincerely yours,
Willy Ley,
304 West 24th Street,
New York City

Sorry we can't find any way of combining these departments. As for the blurbs, your editor humbly bows his head and lets the blows fall as they may:

Dear Editor:

Here's my report on the March, 1942, ASTONISHING. First, the stories (rating system is 0-10):

First, "Pied Piper," 9.0. Very good. Not too new a plot—scientist stops war—but a very new way of handling it, and very good writing. Let's see more of Doctor Groot.

Second, "The Man Who Knew Roger Stanley," 8.9. This is one of the best written stories I've seen in either *Super Science* or *Astonishing*. Only its weak plot kept it from a 9.5.

Third, "The Message," 8.5. Wow, what an ending!

Fourth, "Tracks Across the Darkness," 8.0. Not too good. It was completely obvious that he was merely going to trick Thornton from the first sentence he uttered that sounded as though he were going over to Thornton's side. I don't like obvious plots. The only thing that saved this was the writing and the new idea of the blast trails.

Fifth, "Daughters of Eternity," 8.0. The plot is ancient, although it has a fairly new slight twist, and the writing was none too good.

Sixth, "Voice in the Void," 7.3. I don't quite get the point of this story. It was too vague.

Last—where his stories usually are—Cummings' "The Shadow People," 6.5. At first I thought this would be fairly good, would have a different plot from the usual Cummings story. Well, I thought, ghosts. Maybe for a miracle Cummings has a new plot. I read the first four pages and gave up. Oh, my God, an into-the-fourth-dimension story! If it had at least had a new twist I wouldn't have minded so much. But no, Cummings used precisely the same plot that he used in a thousand other stories—man goes into fourth-dimensional world, saves girl, kills evil inhabitants of said 4-d world, and wins girl's love. I repeat, oh my God!

Now the departments. You can't really assign definite ratings to departments, so I'll just offer a general comment on them. Why don't you combine Viewpoints, Fantasy Circle, and Fan Mags into one big fan department? Keep The Mailbag separate, and print answers and comments on the letters. Your departments are better than most other mags right now, but I think that if you follow these suggestions they will be even better.

The cover rates a lousy 7.0. *Mister Wesso*, I had no idea that you could do so badly. I always thought of you as a good illustrator. First, where, pray tell me, is that cover scene in *any* of the stories? Secondly, I thought you had matured beyond BEM's. Third, if it's out in space (it must be—the man has a space suit on) why doesn't the girl have a space suit? Of course, if you're trying to kill the heroine, and thereby eliminate love interest from the story, I am in whole-hearted agreement with you. However, I suspect that was not your original intention.

Interior illustrations: Morey is good unless he is drawing people; Bok should be strictly a fantasy artist; the fellow who illustrated "Tracks Across the Darkness" is pretty good—who is he?

I notice in the Mail Bag that a fellow says quarterly publications produce no hack. Then what in h—— is Cummings' latest brain wave?

I bet you'll get an angry letter from Isaac Asimov re the spelling of his name.

On the whole, not too perfect an issue—or perhaps I'm being influenced by thoughts of Cummings' "masterpiece." Why don't you try to make the blurbs above the stories a little more truthful? Four out of the eight blurbs on the contents page refer, directly or indirectly, to the saving of the world. One definitely, and

possibly two more, were not on that theme exactly.

Some wants: less Professor Jameson, more Lyle Monroe, more Joseph Gilbert, no Cummings, less Bok on science fiction stories. Sound like too much? Well, maybe you're right.

Apparently I left out "Slaves of the Unknown" in my list of the stories. It rates 7.9, making it sixth, and "Voice in the Void" seventh.

I guess I'll close on a cheerful note. Yours is just about the best mag on the market per penny spent.

Yours sincerely,

Victor Mayper, Jr.
Manlius School
Manlius, N. Y.

Some constructive comments and suggestions from a Dodgerville fan:

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on a really fine Wessoic BEM. To a layman (not that I mean you're one) that means I liked Wesso's cover depicting hero, heroine, globular thingamagig, and bug-eyed monster.

Too bad, though, the cover was not a scene from a story. I hear fans complaining about storyless covers day in and day out.

Before I wade into the issue in general, I have a few pet complaints to make.

Because *Astonishing* sells for ten cents, I can realize that you need to have, each issue, a total of seventeen pages of ads. But it is not at all right to have them scattered helter-skelter throughout the stories. I'm peacefully reading Cummings' novelette, when, on page 99, I come to that nutty ad, "Do We Have To Die?" Whatinheck, it interrupts interest, even though I never read it. You have ads in similar places all through the book. Have some at the beginning and some at the end. But, please, none scattered that way. It's boring.

Another pet peeve is that your stories are much too short. Have at least one short novel of about thirty or forty pages per issue.

And of course, as I said when I wrote in reference to SSS, you do not have enough variety of artists. Variety is the spice of life. And of magazines. I'm glad to hear that Finlay is coming plus some others. Get Paul, too.

Insofar as the introductions to stories, I have no complaints. They are both interesting and descriptive. So are the stories, by the way.

"Slaves of the Unknown," "The Message," and "The Shadow People," were numbers one, two, and three respectively. The first was not a lette, but rather a short, and one of the best of the Professor Jameson series yet. Have more of him, and Mr. Jones. Wilson's short-short was the best story of its length that I have seen all year. It also was an unusual climax that author presented. At first I didn't catch. But later I realized that the first "I" in the story was really another time entity or something of the "I" who made the record, and that said record "I" warned his other self back in '41 not

to go on the assignment, thus preventing himself from starving in the future world. Say, who's crazy? On second thought, forget it. Cummings' story was good, but it seems he used the same plot in his book-length novel, "Into the Fourth Dimension."

"Pied Piper," "Daughters of Eternity," and "Voice in the Void" were four, five, and six, respectively. All were good. Where did you get that nutty title for MacCreigh's story? Two stories by him in a row, both with muddy names. Tch tch!

The last two stories were fair. "The Man Who Knew Roger Stanley" was slightly better than "Tracks Across the Darkness."

Though a fan mag, I received info that you were going to have some new departments. They are fine. I like Fantasy Circle very much indeed. Viewpoints is oke too. As soon as something is devised, I will send some kind of thing into the circle. Mebbe you'll print it. I also have several short stories I have written. Perhaps I'll send them in just on general hopes. I can at least try, eh?

I couldn't find a thing wrong with Asimov's much-discussed "Neutron." Maybe he'll unveil the secret mistake. He has me where he wants me. In suspense.

In closing, I'd really like to compliment you, Mr. Norton, on a fine job of editorship.

Sincerely,
Milton Lesser
2302 Avenue O
Brooklyn, N. Y.

A Canadian fan looks us over:

Dear Ed:

It was with great joy that I saw your magazine on the newsstand. I had been wondering how long it would take for editions of American science fiction magazines to appear; but here it is, and at last, good science fiction is beginning to appear in Canada.

Although I have already read all the stories in the present issue of *Astonishing Stories* previously, it's all right with me, as my subscription to the American edition has run out, and I am looking forward with pleasure to future issues. I noticed, however, that the illustrations in the Canadian edition are different, and darn good at that, surpassing those of any other Canadian stf magazine, as well as those of the original American edition. They seem to resemble Bok, but aren't quite the same as his work. Whoever the artist is, he's good, and I hope to see more work by him in future issues.

It was a bit amusing to see American fan activities, and American fan matters, in "Viewpoints," but I suppose that you will change Viewpoints and The Mailbag to a Canadian version with the next issue, as it is rather ridiculous to review American fanmagazines, that Canadians are unable to purchase, and to speak of conventions that Canadians cannot attend.

To start the movement in that direction, I am sending under separate cover a copy of my fanmagazine for review in your column. To

date, it is the first and only fanmagazine published in Canada, so your review section of Viewpoints will be rather short. This, the present issue of "Censored," is not quite as good as it should be. However, with the next issue, out on January 1st, it will be twice the present size, and have plenty of material both by fans and pro authors, of which there was a shortage in the present issue. I can also give you other news for viewpoints, such as the little convention of Toronto fans that is coming up soon.

Well, wishing you lots of luck in your new magazine, I remain

Scientifically yours,
Fred Hurter, Jr.

He Likes Us—He Likes Us Not

Philadelphia, Pa.
January 20th, 1942

Dear Editor:

To begin with your March issue, let's begin on the cover. I don't like it for two reasons—most of it is not good Wesso, and it does not illustrate a story. There is a section down in the lower left corner that looks like some of Wesso's good work of past times, but that monstrosity taking up the rest of space is not worthy of the name of Wesso. Please give us story pics on the cover.

You are working up some very nice departments, but how about more letters? "Viewpoints" is fine—be sure not to use any material which is dated or it will be outdated when you hit the stands. Whoever is editing this department seems to know the fan field rather well. And the writer who works up "Fantasy Circle" obviously is an active fan to have access to the fan mag material used therein. This department can stand a more professional cut, but this is, after all, not the most important thing. Your fan magazine reviews are as good as most, but in three months, you surely get more of them for review purposes.

As for the March stories, "Pied Piper" pipes first place as far as I'm concerned, although I do not care at all for the pic. McCreigh's "Daughters of Eternity" (what gave it that name?) takes No. 2 spot, and Arthur can have third for "Tracks Across the Darkness" although fan Gilbert almost beat him out. The novelettes seem chopped off. Why not print 'em complete? All the shorts are better plotted and finished. NRJ can give us some good Jameson stories if he has space to work out the action. Cummings could quit writing and hurt no one. As a whole, the fiction in the issue is just fair, with the departments outclassing it.

Now—art work. Page 11—Morey's pic here is not bad, page 25 being almost good—page 43 I managed to keep my fingers away from my nose, but not when I saw 82. Bok—ugh on 54, the one on 66 does not belong in a straight science fiction mag, 86 is OK, and on going back to 77 I actually begin to feel good. This one is about the best in the issue. However, if you use Bok, make him do stf drawings rather than his fine fantasy work which should appear in other mags.

I close now with a request for more letters

and more fan mag reviews. Many, many more!

Sincerely,
zerO

Why the *nom de plume*, pal? We can take it.

December 30, 1941.

Editor of Fictioneers, Inc.,
210 East 43rd Street, New York City
Dear Editor:

Quite an issue. In fact . . . a very good issue. Of course when there is a Professor Jameson novelette the mag is bound to be good.

And that cover by Wesso. Wonderful. But as usual, Cummings has to come along with the quarterly tripe. 'Three plot Cummings' would be a swell name for that guy.

Bok's interior pics were well done. So were Morey's.

I've got a brickbat. The Mail Bag is not long enough. And as you probably know, the readers' opinions are the life of the magazines. Please remedy.

Another thing, why only four times a year? Bi-monthly would be better. Monthly better still.

Now for the stories themselves.

1) "Slaves of the Unknown"
2) "Tracks Across the Darkness"
3) "The Man Who Knew Roger Stanley"
4) Fantasy Circle
5) "Voice in the Void"

The Fantasy Circle was well received by me. That bit about Lovecraft's home was very interesting. I would have liked to have known that man.

Sincerely,
Bill Watson,
1299 California St.
San Francisco, California

More Professor Jameson coming up, Bill. Glad you liked the Wesso.

Dear Editor:

A cover by Wesso! What's going to happen? It wasn't one of Wesso's best, but much better than the putrid stuff you have been handing out. Please! Please! On bended knees I ask for Krupa, Paul, Finlay, and Rogers. They are artists, if you don't know. And stories by Wilcox, Binder, Williamson, Wellman, and a host of others. The only decent artist on your staff is Bok, and he isn't a scienti-fiction artist. Best story in this ish was "Slaves of the Unknown," worst story "The Shadow People." Won't you ever get rid of Cummings? In the mailbag I see that you only print letters that praise your rag—sorry, I meant mag—so I know this won't see print.

Regretfully,
Thomas Regan Jr.
138 Townsend Street
New Brunswick, N. J.

Surprise, Mr. Regan! Here it is in print.

Dear Editor:

Just got my copy of *Astonishing Stories* for

THE MAIL BAG

March, 1942, today, and have finished reading it from cover to cover. All stories were very good except "The Shadow People," by R. Cummings. That was the same old plot and story under a different name. True enough, several of the other stories have an old stand-by plot, but with a different slant or novel twist to make you enjoy reading the story again.

The following two stories tied for first place with me:

"Slaves of the Unknown," by Neil R. Jones
"Pied Piper," by Lyle Monroe

I must say that the stories are secondary with me, as I always read the departments in the magazine first, and The Mail Bag as quickly as I can find it in the magazine. Then I read the stories second, and finally I admire the artwork (???). The artwork in the March, 1942, or rather one full page picture in this issue, is the cause of this letter. I seldom ever write to the editors of SF or FF magazines, so when I do it means something unusual has caused me to pick up paper and pencil and start out, "Dear Editor." The cause this time is the full page pic on page 66 by Hannes Bok. Bok is one of my favorite artists, and I think his pics are always excellent. But this one is absolutely the tops. I don't see how he can draw a better one, but still I hope he will. You glance at this pic on page 66 and it doesn't seem to be so much. However, the longer you look at it the better you "see" it and like it. I like it so well I'm asking you, Mr. Editor, to sell, swap, or give me, if possible, the original of this drawing. If no can do, please let me know and I'll just buy another copy of *Astonishing Stories,* cut out page 66, and put it in a 9" x 6" frame so all my SF visitors can enjoy looking at it as well as myself. Here's hoping I can get the original.

I've pulled down my stack of *Astonishing Stories* out of the shelf to look 'em over, and I'm going to shoot the works, since I've started this little letter. Here's a complete report on your first eleven issues, stories, pics, covers and all. Best eleven stories are:

"Half-Breed"—Isaac Asimov
"Into the Darkness"—Ross Rocklynne
"The Cat-Men of Aemt"—Neil R. Jones
"Half-Breeds on Venus"—Isaac Asimov
"Cosmic Derelict"—Neil R. Jones
"Our Director"—John E. Harry
"Super-Neutron"—Isaac Asimov
"Daughter of Darkness"—Ross Rocklynne
"Slaves of the Unknown"—Neil R. Jones
"Pied Piper"—Lyle Monroe
"Joshua's Battering Ram"—Malcolm Jameson

Best front cover: December, 1940, issue
Best interior pic: page 66, March, 1942 issue
Best artist: Hannes Bok

Here's best wishes for a long life of publication, despite the war.

Sincerely yours,
K. Eugene Dixon
Elkhorn, West Virginia

Bok and more Bok, says this statistically minded gentleman from "Dixie."

Dear Sirs:

Here's another fan heard from! On Christ-

mas Day, 1941, I was walking the streets, looking for a good Science Fiction to read. I happened to see *Astonishing Stories* in a book store, and, fascinated really by the cover more than anything else (and partly because I couldn't find any American books around, to be frank) I purchased the January issue.

Let me compliment you on a swell magazine, first of all. Then let me criticise you.

First: where does James McCreigh get such good stories? I've read "Wings of the Lightning Land" at least five times, and the more I read it, the more I like it.

"Retreat to the Stars" was splendid. Comes next to McCreigh's masterpiece. But "Daughter of Darkness"—well, that one's out! What a horrible story! I tried to make some sense out of it, but to no avail.

Ray Cummings is tops! "The Girl in the Golden Atom," and the sequel to "The People of the Golden Atom" are his best, but "Machines of Destiny" and "Monster of the Moon" are swell.

To start the new month right, I stayed up until midnight reading the March edition of *Astonishing Stories.* I tell you, Ed, you're improving. Charles R. Tanner sure can write, and "Lost Legion" is good, but who ever thought of such a mess of junk as "The Biped, Reegan?" Alfred Bester may be a right guy, but this is a free country, so I'm telling you: it smells! But don't mind me, Ed, I'm just *one* of your readers, as well as a writer. All I've got so far is a pile of rejection slips.

I think however, that your good stories overwhelm the bad ones, so I'm not going to kick as long as you continue the same way. I'll be waiting for *Astonishing Stories* for May. Just as soon as it's out I'll have one.

Keep up the good work and get more stories by Cummings. I go for them.

Sincerely,
Ken Freedy
60 Pinehurst Avenue
Ottawa, Canada

Dear Sir:

I have never read your magazine before; I have always stuck to *Amazing Stories, Fantastic Adventures, Startling Stories, Captain Future,* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories,* and I was really surprised when I saw your magazine for the first time. Of course I always knew of it, but just never bought it. It has everything I like, short stories that are tops with me, which is something no other magazine seems to have. So carry on. I would not have bought the magazine at all, but I happened to see the Fan Magazine Review. So I bought it, and from now on you can count on my being a new reader.

I am an old hand at writing fantasy and science fiction. Do you use work from fans if it is any good? What are the rates per word for your stories? All of my work has appeared under the pen name of "James Thomas."

Yours very truly,
Tom Ludowitz
2310 Virginia,
Everett, Wash.

PREVIEWS

"BUT how can you possibly know that time traveling has never been done?" the chemist protested. "Someone from our future may have gone into the past many times."

"I should think they'd have created quite a commotion," the lawyer observed. "Wouldn't we have heard of it from our historical records?"

"Of course." The chemist was smiling now. "We probably have. History tells of many important occasions on which a 'vision' appeared. A miraculous presence, such as Joan of Arc, for instance, or the Angel of Mons."

"Or the appearance of the Sun God to the Aztecs. I get your point," one of the other men interjected. "You think that there might have been a time traveler who materialized just long enough to take a look—and the superstitious natives took him for a god. Why not? That's probably just what would happen."

Young Alan Dane sat in a corner of his grandfather's laboratory, listening to the argument of the group of men. He was well over six feet in height, a sun-bronzed, crisply blond young Viking. Beside him sat Ruth Vincent, his fiancée, a slim girl of twenty. Alan's heart was pounding. Somehow it seemed as though this bantering talk of time traveling were

something momentous to him, something requiring a great and irrevocable decision.

Then abruptly old Professor Dane held up his hand and, quite casually, said, "What you do not know, gentlemen, is that for half my life I have been working to discover the secret of time travel."

His audience was suddenly tense. Professor Dane was loved and respected by each of them, and his word on his chosen field of physics was final. If he said a thing could be done there was no mistake.

The chemist broke the silence. "You've succeeded?" he asked. "You've made experiments that show—"

The old man shook his head. "No, not yet. But I'm close to it. I know I am." He was staring at some infinitely distant thing beyond the room in which they were sitting. Staring as though he were trying to penetrate the grim curtain of the future, or the past.

Almost as though to himself, he went on, "I've often wondered what made me work on this thing all these years. It's been like an inner urge driving me, a preordained destiny that is making me accomplish something."

"Metaphysics!" the lawyer interrupted. "Do you believe in predestination? Or divine will?"

"I believe there is a plan," Professor Dane said simply. "But what it is, and what my part in it may be . . . I don't know. That's the queer part. I know instinctively that I must do something, s o m e t h i n g connected with traveling through time. Some task I must accomplish. But what it is, and how I am to do it . . . I don't know. Yet I feel that *if* the moment came, I would know what to do." He was gently smiling now at Alan and his fiancée. "But perhaps I am too old—I have thought that is true," he continued. "So I sent for my grandson. And he brought his fiancée here with him."

The old professor was staring at the startled Ruth now. "And, gentlemen," he added earnestly, "meeting her has somehow seemed to intensify that feeling. There is something to be accomplished, in the past or the future, and it concerns Ruth Vincent!"

Alan's hands were gripping the arms of his chair. These things which his grandfather had been feeling—he was feeling them now. This urge, this apprehension that something was left undone. . . .

"I'm going to ask Alan now to carry on for me," his grandfather finished abruptly. "He is young and strong, educated and able. I want him to feel the things I've been feeling—"

"Oh, I do!" Alan exclaimed. "I'll do what I can, grandfather. I'd have to do it, even if I didn't want to! Don't you see—I feel that same urge!"

THE gray moving shadows all around Alan Dane were blurred, formless. He was seated hunched on what had been the ground. It was the ground no longer, but now an undulant gray surface that was under him, supporting his weight, but imperceptible to his touch. He couldn't feel it; he couldn't feel anything but the racking strain of his headlong drive through the vast infinities of time.

Alan shifted restlessly and glanced at the little time-dial on his wrist.

Where should he stop? And what would he find?

How young Alan Dane made good his mission makes 20 pages of the most astonishing reading, a tale of the untamed cosmos and of a man from today who dared to go back through the pages of history to save his fiancée's ancestor.

"Miracle," a long time-travel story by Ray Cummings, will appear in the next issue of this magazine.

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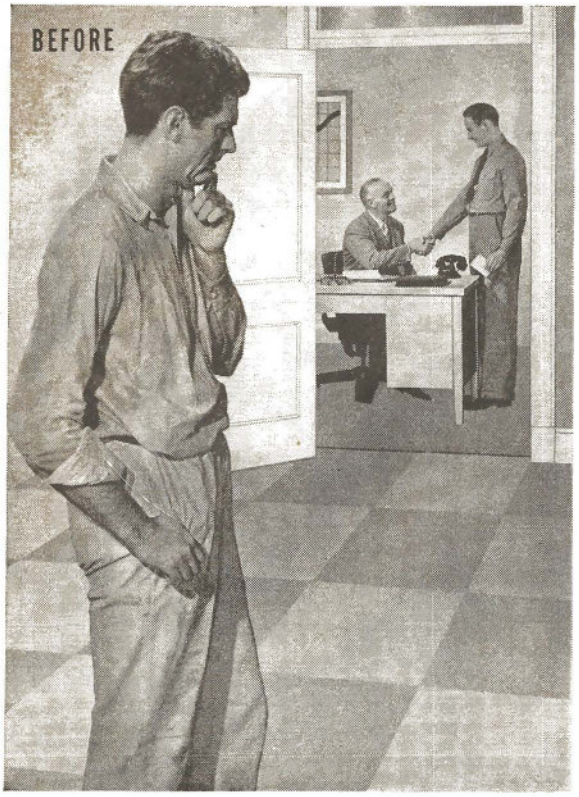

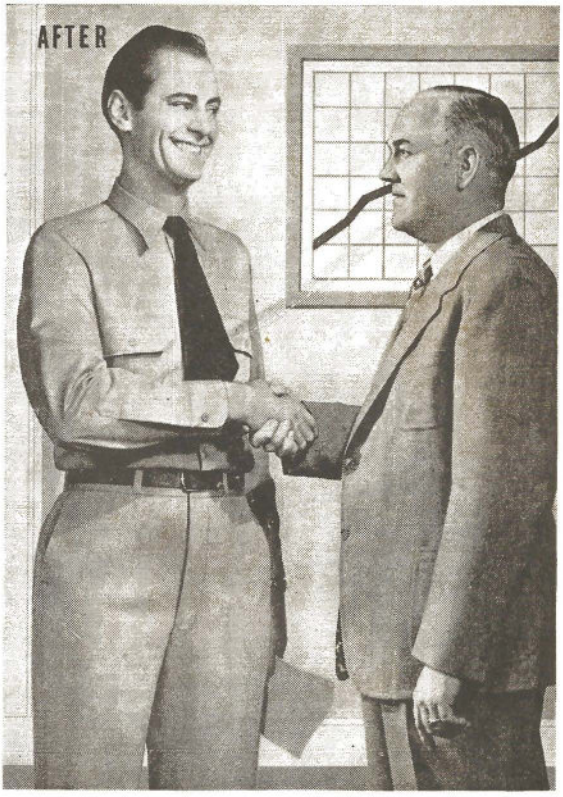

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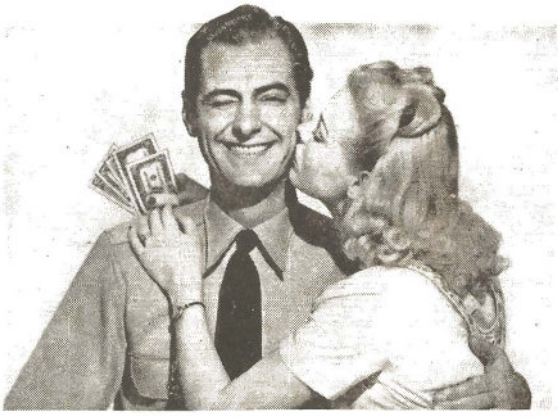

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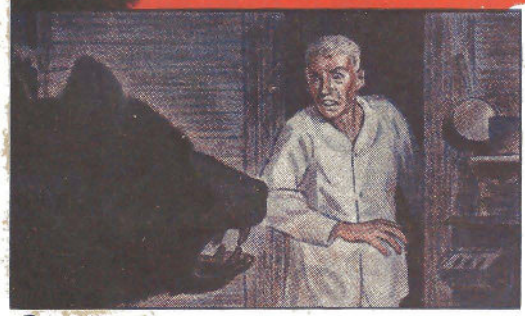
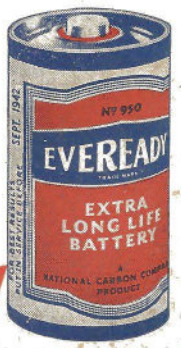


1 **"A TERRIFIC CRASH** startled me right out of bed one night as I slept in the cook house of the mining camp where I work," writes Mr. McIlwraith. "Half awake, I rushed into the kitchen to investigate—and found a huge bear had broken in and was tearing into our food supplies.

2 **"MADDENED** by my interruption and savage from hunger, the great creature started for me. My only thought was to get away from him—*and fast*—as these big cinnamons can be bad medicine in close quarters. I darted back into my room. Then to my horror I realized that the bedroom windows were too small for me to get through.

3 **"IN A NIGHTMARE** of panic, I broke out in a cold sweat. Then I remembered my flashlight. Desperately, I grabbed it from a shelf, whirled and flashed it full in the bear's face. He stopped short. Baffled growls came from his dripping jaws . . . and he turned and lumbered out of the shack. It's my hunch that I was one step from being mincemeat when I picked up that 'Eveready' flashlight with its dependable *fresh* DATED batteries.

(Signed) W. S. McIlwraith"



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